

ANIMAL PLANET by Max Blagg Photographer Cedric Buchet

Why is it acceptable for hairless old men to disport themselves with barely legal girls, when *an older woman stepping out with a younger man is liable to public denunciation*, as if she had committed a serious crime, instead of merely helping to educate an ignorant lad? A woman has the same right as a man to **rejuvenate herself** with regular injections of youth hormone. *It works for both parties*, as I can happily attest, having been the youthful prey of a couple of experienced vixens. I was a mere boy, studying in college and working part time as a bricklayer's slave on a building site in Maida Vale, when a cougar first set her teeth in my unprotesting hide.



► One Friday night, I was sipping my fourth pint in the Lord Fauntleroy, diluting the concrete dust of another harsh day on the job that was doing my head in while rapidly developing my upper body. Glancing into the mirror above the bar, I saw the kohl-ringed eyes of Daphne Foster gazing back at me, deep chemical pools glowing in the soft light reflecting off plush velvet banquettes, throwing off pheromones like sparks in the warm night air. She looked like a slightly older version of Nicole Kidman in *To Die For*. There was wire in her smile as I quickly moved to a spot next to her at the watering hole.

"As one speed freak to another, I'll have whatever you've already had." "Oh really, dear? Do you think you can handle it?" her voice was sharp, cultured and slightly vicious. Old enough to be my mother, but my mother never wore kohl, nor did she go drinking in pubs by herself. Daphne was sipping a glass of Gilbey's Gin. It was pay-day, so I ordered her another. With a vulpine grin that she probably thought was a coy smile,

she discreetly slipped a pill into my hand. Restraining the urge to simply gobble it down, sight unseen, I excused myself and made for the bathroom. In the urinal I studied the black and red capsule lying in my palm, potent as a wasp. My encyclopaedic knowledge of the Physicians' Desk Reference identified it as a capsule containing 20mg of Durophet M, a two-fisted combination of dexedrine and mandrax.

I gulped it down and returned to the bar. A pint or two of best bitter would nicely potentiate the methaqualone, while taking the edge off the speed. The night felt younger almost immediately, loaded with erotic promise, and Daphne looked younger, too. I was actually looking forward to last orders. But even though she lived in a garden flat just around the corner, it currently also contained a husband and two adolescent children. So we simply talked and talked, ranging over a wide variety of subjects, from vegetation ceremonies to the function of corsets, the ambiguous nature of juvenile male leads in both Shakespeare and pantomime. The world according to Durophet was a sparkling, intimate place, full of bright ideas and naughty hints.

At closing time we made a date for the following day and went our separate ways. I paused briefly in the square to inhale the warm London night, the speed gliding through the beer like a sword through silk.

When Daphne arrived in Kentish Town the following afternoon, exactly on time, she was wearing a long raincoat and carrying a suitcase. I had a brief flash of panic. Had I invited her to move in? But then she removed the raincoat to reveal a green school blazer that barely covered a tightly strapped ivory corset, on which depended a garter belt supporting fishnet stockings that disappeared into shiny, black, high-heeled boots (handmade at Gohils in Camden Town, I later discovered). What an accommodating woman! She had obviously gone to great lengths to cater for several of the fantasies we had touched on during our chat in the pub. The corset wasped her upper body into an X, an hourglass of whalebone and satin and delicate straps. I'd never seen anyone dressed this way before. The only other woman I had really seen in a corset was my mother, and hers were never so fancy, more practical, simple, barrel-shaped containers for an excess of flesh. It would be drastically inappropriate to think of my mum just now, so I didn't. The sculptural garment Daphne wore shaped her body into a classical silhouette. She pulled a school cap from the pocket of her blazer, placed it atop her hennaed curls and, from the other pocket, with the fluency of a magician, produced an entire bottle of Durophet.

She unscrewed the cap and poured a handful into my palm, as if she knew the way to my heart was through my bloodstream. I was utterly enchanted and instinctively realised I was approaching a major bend in my learning curve. I leaned into it, savouring the presence of this extraordinary person in my shabby flat, absorbing every detail of her preposterous yet highly stimulating outfit.

The suitcase contained a large selection of films, a black latex mask with the mouth reinforced in pink rubber, various titillating items of lingerie and non-functional footwear, and incongruously, a folder of Daphne's press clippings. I pored over these as she set up a small movie projector on a bedside table, its nozzle aimed at the bare, white wall. According to her notices, she had done quite well in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of West End appearances, but apparently had not transcended her ingénue period, and now she was entering a certain age. A beauty in her youth, but never more than a mediocre actress, Daphne was approaching that cruel artistic limbo that befalls such creatures as they decline into age. But for me, now, she was in her prime, a glorious specimen of adulterous femininity.

Daphne carried my education in that battered suitcase, instilling in me a permanent yen for unwholesome films and

absurd costumes, a preference for age as well as beauty. She seemed to freely accept that her true talent lay in the seduction and corruption of ignorant youths, and I was soon to discover that she was happy to share them with her close friends.

One Saturday night, shortly after we had met, she persuaded me to leave London for the evening and venture north, to Birmingham. Daphne's close friend, the actress Veronica Lasky, was essaying, apparently for the last time, the role of Masha in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Although I was unfamiliar with Chekhov, I felt a slight frisson of excitement at the idea of meeting Veronica, a potent, sexual image from my provincial youth. For several years she had portrayed a sexy divorcee on a popular television soap opera, and her saucy independence and pouty mouth had often stayed with me long after bedtime. As we arrived in Birmingham I had a brief attack of paranoia at the idea of running into my older, married sister, who was living there with her family. How would I explain Daphne? She was hard to explain. I was too young to understand her fractured beauty. Even when she was wearing the mask I was forced to concentrate mightily on the still-brilliant contours of her dancer's legs and the smutty stimulation of the films.

Numerous bouquets of flowers and several bottles of champagne enlivened the drab provincial dressing room. The two actresses chatted gaily, denouncing various friends with their clever, gossipy barbs. I wanted to cross-examine Veronica about the private lives of her co-stars on the soap opera, but was wary of compromising my sullen rent-boy attitude with the star-struck brown-nosing of a rabid fan. The two women completely ignored my presence, dissecting in pithy detail the appalling social behaviour of numerous people they referred to only by their first names. They might as well have been speaking in a foreign language.

Finally, Daphne turned to me as I sat sulking on a threadbare couch and said, "Darling, there's a tradition in the theatre on a first night. We call it, rather crudely, a suck for luck. The leading lady oils her throat on the equipment of a stagehand or extra or whatever cute chap is available. It originated at the Milanese opera. The great tenors swore they couldn't hit their high notes without a nice coating on the larynx, and naturally, the firemen always stationed in the wings... Well, it was almost part of their job description!" Daphne had a way of making the filthiest remarks seem like interesting facts that I couldn't possibly know, but that would benefit me greatly. I suddenly wanted to be with idiots of my own age. What did I know about the customs of the opera, first nights at the theatre? I was completely outclassed by these sophisticated felines. We had absolutely nothing in common but a powerful sexual hunger. I suddenly understood Oscar Wilde's remark about "feasting with panthers", referring to the rough trade he often brought back to his place, never quite sure whether they would let him stroke their glossy fur or turn on him and tear his throat out. The two predators sat smiling on the couch. They were panthers, or cougars, or some other highly attractive but very wild animal, and I was a little springbok, caught sipping water at the river. If one had to be devoured, this wasn't such a bad way to go. Veronica obviously didn't think so as she padded towards me with criminal intent.

"Come here, then, little fellow, let's see what you're made of," she said in that smoke and honeyed voice. Her incisors seemed to lengthen as she smiled. I followed the instructions John Lennon was warbling in my head, turned off my mind, relaxed and began to float downstream. It was not dying, it was beginning, my future laid out in corsets, not coffee spoons. These two big cats would bat me back and forth to each other for months, an express course in intercourse I still remember with a visceral jolt. Veronica seized me with her front paws. She sipped, tentatively at first, and then her hunger got the best of me. ◀