

‘At the third beep the time sponsored by Accurist will be three-twenty-five precisely... beep ... beep ...’

‘Yes we offer a fully comprehensive service. Let me tell you a little bit about it –’

‘... time sponsored by Accurist will be three- ...’

‘– and of course we provide a back-up cover which enables our clients to –’

‘... and ten seconds ... beep ...’

It was always the same. Phoebe Fredericks had been working in telesales for three weeks precisely ... beep ... beep ... beep ... and it was getting on her nerves. She generally started calling up the Speaking Clock after lunch. By that point she would have exhausted all the 0891 numbers she could find in the free magazines that had been handed to her at the tube station that morning: Tarotline, Recorded Horoscope, Dial-aDate. (Oh, those poor lonely hearts; little did they know she was trying to sell insurance over their mumbled descriptions of a caring D-cup blonde with a sense of humour.)

Phoebe found selling to the Speaking Clock annoying. She had to hold the phone very close to her ear to stop the beeps being audible to her manager, who was wont to prowl around behind the sales team whispering: ‘Good call, sweetheart!’ and ‘Ask for the business! Get the bastard to buy!’ Holding the earpiece so close gave Phoebe a headache and heated her earrings to Regulo 8. But anything was better than cold calling.

‘Yes, we do. That is available for very little extra cost and is inclusive of VAT. Would you like me to pencil you in for that option now?’

‘At the third beep ...’

‘Well, if you choose to buy it today we can offer you a special package.’

‘Good call!’

Phoebe’s shoulders were suddenly pulverised by the enthusiastically damp hands of her boss, Trev. One of his many motivational ploys was the team massage.

‘Close on him, sweetheart. Close!’ he hissed as his pudgy thumbs almost dislocated several of her joints. ‘Er ... tell me, sir, for what reason is that?’

‘... and forty seconds ...’

‘Yes!’ Phoebe could feel Trev’s hot, excited breath on the back of her neck. It made her spine try to hide in her stomach. The man must have marinaded overnight in Paco Rabanne. Her eyes were beginning to water.

Thank you, God! Phoebe smiled. Call Waiting was flashing on the LCD panel in her phone.

‘Of course, I fully understand. What a shame ...’

The fingers tightened on her shoulders; Paco Rabanne was joined by Chicken Tikka as Trev’s breath quickened. Phoebe’s back gave an uncontrollable shudder of revulsion.

‘... precisely.’

‘And you too. I certainly will. Take care and thank you for your time.’

‘... beeeep ...’

‘Why the fuck did you lose the sale?’ The pudgy fingers scrabbled for a cigarette.

‘Can’t speak now, Trev.’ She smiled, trying to get the feeling back in her shoulders. ‘I’ve got a call waiting. Good afternoon,

Phoebe Fredericks speaking.’

‘Hello, Freddy. It’s Virginia Seaton. Saskia’s mother.’

‘Good grief – Gin! How are you?’

‘Oh, not so bad. Look, I’m sorry to bother you at work like this – your mother gave me the number.’ She sounded odd somehow, tense and high-pitched, not her usual effervescent self.

‘Please don’t worry. I’m here to deal with these sorts of problems,’ Phoebe simpered, aware that Trev was still hovering, ears flapping like Dumbo taxiing around Heathrow.

‘What? How was New Zealand, Freddy? Or have I called at an awkward time?’

Trev started to move off, hoicking up the back of his pinstripe trousers with a pudgy hand.

‘Not at all.’ Phoebe swivelled round on her chair and pretended to be looking for a file. ‘New Zealand was terrific – I can’t believe it’s been a whole year. I’m so sorry I haven’t

been in touch since I got back, but what with getting a job and finding a new flat . . . I've tried calling Saskia, but I always get her machine. Is she away with this ravishing bloke she wrote to me about?'

'Er, no.' Gin cleared her throat awkwardly.

'He sounds divine. Whirlwind romance, weekends in Tuscany, diamond ring in a glass of vintage Dom Perignon by the Seine – I bet it'll be the wedding of the decade!' Phoebe sighed wistfully, staring at Giles, the office Romeo, and wondering how long it had been since she'd fallen in love. A year. Not since the Major, Never Spoken Of Disaster. Oh, to be whisked off her feet like lucky, beautiful Saskia. But she'd always got the men and Phoebe was forever stuck with their cheesy friends.

' . . . still there? Freddy?'

'What?' She snapped out of her daze. Giles was staring back at her wolfishly. Gulping, Phoebe swivelled into the filing cabinet again. 'Gosh, sorry, Gin. Is it my measurements you wanted? Saskia mentioned about the bridesmaids' dresses in her last letter. I was going to ask her if she'd mind re-thinking the orange and purple caftan idea. I mean, I know the seventies are back in fashion, but –'

'Oh, Freddy!' Gin let out an exasperated laugh. 'You haven't changed one bit, have you?'

'I'm sorry?'

Trev, fresh from a fumble with his secretary in the stationery cupboard, was closing fast, his tie askew under his four-ply chins. Giles, whizzing backwards on his swivel-chair as if he were reversing a Lamborghini out of an SW1 parking space, offered Phoebe a bite of his tuna and sweetcorn bun with a caddish leer. She shook her head.

'Look, Freddy,' Gin suddenly sounded urgent, 'what are you doing this weekend?'

'Well, Fliss and Stan have organised this sort of reunion barbecue,' she muttered, trying to ignore Trev mouthing 'Is that a personal call?' 'Why?'

'Would you like to come down to Berkshire?' Gin was almost pleading. 'Saskia's here.'

'She's with you?' Phoebe banged her head on the filing cabinet in surprise. Giles was draped seductively over the partition, offering her half his scotch egg now.

'Yes.' Gin coughed uneasily, as if afraid of being overheard.

'She's in a bit of a state.'

'But I . . .'

'Phoebe! A word in my office, if you can spare a moment.'

Phoebe froze, noticing Trev was clutching an itemised phone bill and something that looked suspiciously like her P45.

'Of course I'll come down,' she told Gin hurriedly. 'And you never know, I might even outstay my welcome.'

'You what?' Fliss turned around, a lump of clay dripping mud from one outstretched hand on to the worn carpet as Phoebe slunk guiltily around their shared Islington flat.

'I got the push,' she repeated nervously, flicking on the kettle.

'Already?' Fliss rubbed her forehead, streaking it with red clay which matched the titian corkscrews straying out from under her headscarf. 'Damn! I bet Stan you'd last at least a month.'

'That was generous.' Phoebe poured an inch of coffee granules straight from the jar into a mug then slopped kettle water on top, not bothering to stir. 'How much?'

'Ten quid. Stan got it right – he gave you a fortnight.' Fliss raised one ginger eyebrow as Phoebe scuttled past. 'And the electricity bill came today – I could have used the winnings.'

'Great.' Phoebe sank down on the sofa, bringing her knees up to chin level as yet another spring gave way. 'How about I pretend I kept the job longer?'

'No good. He knows someone you work – worked with. Miles something.' Fliss scrunched up her freckled face as she returned to her sculpture.

'Giles,' smiled Phoebe, blowing the froth from her coffee and watching Fliss work. It was one of her all-time pleasures. Fliss attacked fifty pounds of wet clay like a battered wife a pillow at a self-assertiveness course, but the end result was inevitably breathtaking.

'Yeah. Stan says he fancies you.'

'Stan's always fancied me.' Phoebe deliberately misinterpreted Fliss's words.

'No, this Giles character fancies you.' Fliss was already becoming lost in contouring the emerging shape of two clay thighs. 'Stan offered to set you up at the barbecue. We reckon you need a pretty man to help you get over The Corps. Stan thinks you're still infatuated...'

‘What’s wrong with the studio this time?’ Phoebe butted in quickly, then grinned to hide her discomfiture. ‘How many times have I told you about bringing your work home, darling?’

‘No water.’ Fliss shrugged, examining her maquette, which looked like something young mothers pick up from parks in pooper scoopers to prevent their toddlers catching toxicaria. ‘And Geraldine’s welding half a car to a shopping trolley, so the noise is deafening.’

Fliss was trying to forge a path as a sculptress, funding her chosen career with waitressing jobs, and occasional secretarial work for a party planner called Georgette Gregory. She worked from a communal grant-maintained artist’s studio in Camden Lock, sharing the damp converted archway with two ex-convict welders, a cockney artist called Stan MacGillivray, and a wouldbe Damien Hirst who was currently in the process of freezing his sperm daily to create an ice-sculpture taken from a mould of his private parts. Fliss’s broad Mancunian accent and tendency towards extreme bluntness often puzzled people who, taking in the luscious red curls, snub nose and red pepper freckles, assumed that as an artist she’d waft about in smocks drying flowers all day. Phoebe adored sharing a flat with her. Fliss could change a plug, build shelves and plumb in a dishwasher in less time than it took the average man to climb into a boiler suit. And she was always trying to set Phoebe up with her dishy mates.

‘There’s a couple of messages for you on the phone.’ She waved her hand vaguely at the clay-encrusted telephone.

Slopping coffee, Phoebe struggled out of the sofa and pressed the play button.

‘Hello, this is Phoebe’s mother, Poppy Fredericks, speaking . . .’

Phoebe groaned. Her mother always treated answer-machines as if they were secretaries.

Not listening to the message, she turned back to Fliss. ‘Anyway, I can’t go to the barbecue. Some old friends have asked me down for the weekend.’

‘What?’ Fliss was pummelling a couple of spare tyres out of the clay.

‘In Berkshire.’ Phoebe briefly listened as her mother moved on from the atrocious weather in Hong Kong to give a brief lecture about getting in contact with her sister.

‘. . . of course the idiotic girl is still dallying with The Thing, you know . . .’

The crackling message moved on to describe a dinner party which Chris Patten had attended. Phoebe ignored it again. Poppy refused to acknowledge her younger daughter Milly’s boyfriend as anything other than ‘The Thing’ – which, considering he was really called Goat and sharpened his teeth with a file to frighten people, wasn’t terribly insulting. For Poppy.

‘Who in Berkshire?’ Fliss turned around, her eyes narrowed. She even had freckles on her eyelids.

‘I said, some old friends of the family.’ Phoebe was dying to name-drop about Saskia Seaton’s fiancé, Felix Sylvian, but thought better of it. Fliss might try to muscle in on the invite too. It had been known.

‘Nothing to do with The Corps?’ she asked lightly.

‘No!’ Phoebe snapped, her cheeks draining of colour like a dishcloth in bleach. ‘And don’t fucking well call him that!’

Fliss shrugged, watching her friend’s face. ‘Stan’s right. You are still in love with him.’

‘I am not!’ Phoebe was prevented from launching into a spitting defence by the answer-machine giving a loud bleep to signal the end of her mother’s message. There was a brief pause and then another voice began – brittle with tears and venom but still ringing with hauteur.

‘Hello, Freddy. This is Saskia Seaton. Mummy tells me she’s invited you down for the weekend. Look, I – ’ there was a pause as the receiver was muffled for a few seconds ‘– please don’t come. That’s all. Just don’t come. I don’t want you here.’

Phoebe stared at the phone in silent amazement. She barely heard the message from Stan asking her to a private viewing the following week, or from her chum Claudia saying hello. One final message was brief and to the point.

‘Freddy, it’s Gin. Please ignore anything Saskia might have said to you on the phone. I gather she’s been in touch. We’re all dying to see you – just let me know what train you’ll be on. Sorry about Saskia. She got rather the wrong end of the stick about something. Tony sends his love. See you tomorrow.’

Fliss whistled excitedly. ‘She sounds like Penelope Keith. This is all very intriguing. Can I come too?’

‘No.’ Phoebe rubbed her temples in bewilderment.

Virginia and Anthony Seaton, known to friends as Gin and Tonic, were very close chums of Phoebe’s parents, Ralph and Poppy Fredericks. Friends since the pendulum-swinging and rune-reading sixties, the foursome shared an off-beat sense of humour, capacity to drink all night and a leaky canal barge into which they’d once all piled at weekends. And amongst their respective children were two girls who shared exactly the same birthday. It stood to reason that they should become cronies.

But 12 August was the only thing Saskia Seaton and Phoebe Fredericks had in common. For most of their childhood, they had loathed one another. Curvy, snubnosed Saskia was the youngest and prettiest of four sisters; bright, wildly precocious, utterly spoiled and very, very charming. Phoebe had two gorgeous, scruffy elder brothers, a natty line in hand-me-down dungarees, a demon little sister and the social graces of the Dulux puppy fresh from a slurry pit: friendly, scatty, enthusiastic, but hopelessly ungroomed.

When Saskia and Phoebe were sent to the same boarding school in Chester they’d formed rival cliques. Yet each term they’d travelled up together, their trunks nestling companionably in the boot of either Phoebe’s parents’ rusty Landrover (known as the Dinosaur), or the Seatons’ latest flashy Mercedes. And every holiday they’d suffer the humiliation of being invited to one another’s houses, where one or several of the rival clique would inevitably be in situ to make life hell. Saskia’s visits were slightly easier because both Phoebe’s brothers were madly in love with her, dispensing hospitality and Pimms in abundance. Saskia’s three elder sisters, however, were completely indifferent to Phoebe. On the few occasions they registered her presence, they treated her with the same bored irritation they would a school hamster that it was their turn to look after during half term. Saskia, however, took great pleasure in making Phoebe’s visit as hellish as possible, bullying the gangly, timid little girl into terrified submission.

Then Ralph Fredericks – a six-foot six industrial architect and devout rugby buff – accepted a long contract overseas, the first of many. He and his elegant wife Poppy became virtual expatriates as they moved between time-zones with little more than a crackling intercontinental call to the school to pass on their new address. Occasionally Phoebe sat on fifteen-hour flights with her younger sister, Milly, to join them for holidays. Mostly, she spent the yawning gaps between school terms with the Seatons, to the horror of Saskia and her sisters. Saskia merely redoubled her efforts to make Phoebe’s stays unpleasant. Jealous of Phoebe’s close relationship with her mother, Gin, Saskia enlisted her sisters’ help in the ritual goading and teasing which the adults never witnessed.

Phoebe grew to dread her birthday each year, when she and Saskia would share a party. If it weren’t for the fact that she adored Gin and Tonic Seaton, Phoebe would have kicked up a stink long before they shared their appalling eighteenth, when Saskia spent all night plugged to the lips of the local Sandhurst stud – on whom Phoebe had shed tears, wasted her best poems and for whom she’d forked out for a Valentine for over a decade. The next day Saskia had phoned him and told him that she had suddenly found out her best friend, Freddy ‘Krueger’ Fredericks, had a honking great crush on him so she couldn’t possibly see him again, finally adding that he kissed like a slug trapped in a vacuum nozzle.

After school, with considerable relief, they went their separate ways. Saskia spent a bomb at Pineapple, had collagen injected into her lips and, installed in a plush Battersea flat by her parents, went to a London drama school. Phoebe took a place to read English at Exeter, fell in love with every be-ponytailed drop out, partied furiously, achieved a lousy degree and, moving back to London and into a shared house in West Hampstead, worked her way through six jobs in as many months, dreaming of becoming the next Edna O’Brien but writing nothing more than the odd rubbery cheque. Temping at the headquarters of a tabloid newspaper for a week, she met and fell in love with Dan – a funny, charming and utterly addictive renegade whom all her friends referred to as The Corps because he was a corporate lawyer and far older, wiser and more married than her. He pursued her mercilessly, told her his marriage was a wreck, and then dropped her like a used condom when Private Eye devoted three lines to the story, naming Phoebe as the ‘alleged leggy and libidinous new love-interest for celebrated Street of Shame “Libel Detector”’. He was convinced his wife would find out. The storm blew over in less than a week with The Corps sidling daily through his old front door, chocolates and flowers held up like shields and his amazed wife emerging to kiss him on his two faces, blithely unaware of the scandal.

But the Fredericks family, finding out the full story from a hand-me-down Private Eye in Hong Kong, had been appalled by Phoebe's behaviour, issuing instructions to one of her brothers to invite her for a year in a different hemisphere to hush up for good the affair. When Phoebe refused to go, Poppy Fredericks had cut all links until she caved in.

Phoebe had only seen Saskia Seaton once before setting off to spend a year with her elder brother, Dominic, who lived in New Zealand.

At the time, Phoebe had a new, very dishy boyfriend called Stan – Fliss's artist friend – who was giving her second thoughts about going to the opposite end of the globe to live in an Antipodean vineyard. Stan was wildly romantic: a starving artist with a mane of lion blond hair. He virtually lived at the ICA, drank vodka for breakfast and talked about Existential Chaos Theory in reverent tones while taking Phoebe for jellied eels on the Isle of Dogs. He was also the complete opposite of The Corps and consequently as comforting to rebound on as a padded trampoline.

Desperate to impress him, Phoebe booked tickets for a very dingy fringe play called *Mort et Misère*, advertised as 'avant garde, polemic performance art that will redefine your spiritual boundaries'.

It took place in a tiny, darkened room above a pub in deepest suburban Putney. Apart from a couple of lesbian drama professors and a stray drunk from downstairs, Stan and Phoebe were the only audience.

To the accompaniment of a greasy-haired anorexic banging a tambourine against her bony hip, eight hunch-backed figures wearing plastic bin-liners, with paper bags on their heads, shuffled on stage and started moaning incoherently.

Meanwhile the juke box downstairs worked through AC/DC's full repertoire of hits. Or it could have been one song played over and over again, Phoebe found it hard to tell.

After about ten minutes, the drunk got up and, groping noisily in the gloom, staggered to the door. The lesbians paused from taking notes, looked over their John Lennon specs at each other and tutted. Stan started snoring loudly. Phoebe got the giggles.

About two hours later, the play ended with all the actors taking their bin liners off and, stark naked apart from their paper bag helmets, hitting each other with raw mackerel while the anorexic almost broke her tambourine in Bacchic ecstasy. Phoebe prodded Stan in the ribs and he woke up, yawned loudly and squinted at the fishy flagellation on stage.

'Nice tits.' He nodded in the direction of an actress with a much smarter paper bag than anyone else. In fact, on close inspection it turned out to come from Harvey Nichols Food Hall. She also had a very familiar birthmark, shaped like a sea horse, on her left leg.

'My God,' Phoebe muttered, almost falling off her chair in amazement. 'It's Saskia.'

Afterwards, trying to prize Stan away from his fourth pint of London Pride in the bar downstairs, Phoebe felt five ringed claws clutch her shoulder.

'Freddy Krueger!' shrieked a voice.

Phoebe spun around, ready to express total surprise so as not to embarrass Saskia by admitting she'd seen the bin bag orgy. Then her jaw dropped.

Saskia had always been beautiful. She had the sort of cheek bones women in America remove most of their teeth to achieve, the glossiest mane of slippery blonde hair and huge, cobalt blue eyes like the priciest chips on a roulette table. Built in the Joely Richardson English Rose mould, she had a perfect, elongated size-twelve figure that would have made Laura Ashley weep with joy – just the right height for the hem of a chintz smock to finish at the ankle. Her pink and white complexion made Princess Diana look like a Greek goat herder in comparison.

But instead, smiling at Phoebe was a glorious raven-haired siren with hypnotic eyes the colour of Parma violets. She wore an all-in-one Marlboro-red hot-pants catsuit and enormous fashionable clod hoppers at the end of her endless tanned legs.

'Saskia!' Phoebe gasped in awe. 'You look sensational. You've changed –'

'Whatever you do, don't let on my hair's not natural,' she hissed into Phoebe's ear, casting a wary eye over her shoulder to where a gaggle of actors were kissing each other's cheeks and holding hands.

'I think you'll have to shave your minge to make people believe that,' grinned Stan, laid-back as ever, eyeing her birthmark with lazy interest.

It was Stan's rude directness that Phoebe liked, but he did have a tendency to go a bit far. And Saskia could be absurdly sensitive. Bracing herself for a flurry of bitchy crushing

remarks, Phoebe was amazed when Saskia merely shrieked with laughter. She had loosened up.

They talked for hours. Or rather, Saskia did. Phoebe yawned, ate the lemon in her Coke and ground her teeth on the pips as Stan observed Saskia in much the same way as he would gaze at a mesmerising, incomprehensible Miro in the Tate.

By half-past eleven, he was on to his eighth pint and glazing over.

We would find ourselves in a pub with extended licensing hours, Phoebe thought glumly. But even she had to admit she was fascinated.

Saskia had changed more than just her hair colour and contact lenses. She'd picked up that thespian tendency to touch the person she was speaking to. Phoebe's fingers turned blue as Saskia gushed on about their 'crazy' schooldays, with all those 'fabulously bizarre' parties. Yet, despite this new-found chumminess, Phoebe realised you could slice steel on her ambition.

'I had a test with Ken Russell last week,' she enthused, speaking loudly enough to cause whirlpools in most of the pints in the pub. Phoebe charitably assumed it was her drama training which made her project her voice so much.

'Really?' Stan grinned lazily. He never lost his cool.

'Yeah.' Saskia lit another cigarette. She'd got through almost half a packet. 'He's doing a screen adaptation of Eliot's Waste Land.'

'Fucking antiquated crap,' Stan yawned, impassively watching Saskia's cleavage deepen as she leant forward to tap her ash.

'No one gives a shit about twenties neo-sacrilegious symbolic subversion any more.' His eyelids batted in boredom, although Phoebe knew he was relishing the wind up.

To do her credit, Saskia didn't flinch. Phoebe was impressed. She just smiled and started telling them a story about being chased across London by an enraptured RSC director.

'He wanted me to audition for a Coward revival – Tom Conti's going to be in it. But I'm not willing to channel myself into mainstream West End yet. I find experimental theatre far more broadening.'

It was only after the bell for last orders had rung that Saskia asked what Phoebe was up to.

'New Zealand!' she shrieked when Phoebe told her, her purple lenses nearly rotating as she widened her eyes. 'Oh, how awful, darling. I mean, I've only just found you again, Freddy, and you're scooting off to shear a lot of flea-infested ewes.'

'Dominic's a wine-grower.'

In the end, Saskia insisted on swapping addresses.

'It says Hounslow, but it's much closer to Richmond, actually,' she said, thrusting a beer mat covered in her illegible scrawl under Phoebe's nose. 'Promise you'll write and let me know everything. And give my love to that gorgeous brother of yours.'

Phoebe didn't expect to hear from her again. No doubt Poppy would soon write with news of Saskia's impending stardom, relayed via Gin Seaton.

In the taxi on their way back to Stan's grotty Brixton flat, Phoebe braced herself for jealous demons and asked him what he thought of Saskia.

'Fucking screwed-up toff.' He shrugged indifferently. 'Decent legs, but I preferred her with the paper bag on. At least you couldn't see her mouth moving.'

Oh God, she loved him for that.

But it didn't really come as much of a surprise when the first letter Phoebe received from Saskia was a gushing apology for the fact that she was now dating Stan. What surprised Phoebe more was that she'd bothered to write at all. And then keep on writing.

Sporadic letters, sometimes no more than a postcard, sometimes eight leaves thick, and always postmarked from a different part of London, wound their way to Dominic and Vicky Fredericks's isolated farm, often months late.

Until then Phoebe had never believed distance makes the heart grow fonder. She liked regular gossips, lots of chummy meals and two-hour phone conversations. Saskia's letters were a revelation.

She took life on the chin at a reckless, whistle-stop pace. Her stories often appalled Phoebe. She could be totally amoral, utterly unforgiving, and very, very kinky. But her unending enthusiasm, ambition and humour kept Phoebe alive through the tiring, back-breaking months she spent with her brother. She supposed Saskia treated her as a sort of

confessional – a listener on the other side of the globe, safe from prying flatmates and jealous lovers.

Any news Phoebe gave in return was pathetically scant. How could telling Saskia that they'd repaired twenty miles of ring fence and found a new recipe for roast lamb compare to her writing that she'd met and fallen in love with one of the most successful, lusted-after and oh-so-eligible heart-throbs in London – the some-time playboy, some-time model Felix Sylvian? And what's more, he was utterly obsessed with her, had thrown in a well-chronicled relationship with his MTA partner and was planning to marry Saskia a month after Phoebe was due back from New Zealand.

Her delirious, infectious happiness made Phoebe tingle. She simply lived for the next letter. Saskia was wildly indiscreet about their sex-life, repeating kiss for slap every sizzling detail about his penchant for knotted silk scarves, voyeurism, *cre`me frai`che*, exhibitionism and dressing up. But it was the romance that made Phoebe shiver. She didn't believe other men ever did things as totally unexpected, imaginative and bohemian as Felix Sylvian.

*

Rattling on a slow train through leafy Berkshire stations with their red painted lamp posts, lurid Quick Snacks and modern glass waiting rooms, Phoebe was not at her merriest. Now jobless and broke, she had no way of paying her part of the rent on the shared flat. She'd fobbed Fliss off with a vague excuse about still transferring dollars from Wellington, but with red phone, electricity and gas bills pinned pointedly to Phoebe's empty food cupboard, things were getting desperate. To cheer herself up she'd booked a haircut and emerged from the ultra-trendy Covent Garden salon with a very light head and cold neck vowing never again to say 'I want something different'. She looked like a schoolboy; her sleek brown hair cut to an urchin's three inches. Fine for petite, curvy women with pretty faces; Phoebe was almost six foot, very gangly and, although her eyes were the same green as the inside of a kiwi fruit and her mouth had once been compared to Julia Roberts's by a drunk on the tube, she had a nose like a falcon's beak and a long, scrawny neck that either had to be buried in a polo neck or surrounded by a flattering cloud of hair.

It was Wimbledon week, mid-summer and the train – a modern electric-door type with eye-watering upholstery and no windows – was stifling. Phoebe's polo neck already felt like a woolly noose. Beside her, a teenage girl was chewing gum with squelchy salival squeaks and listening to the men's semi-finals full-blast on her Walkman.

Plink . . . plop . . . plink . . . thwack . . . grunt . . . plop . . . audience gasps as the lob goes up . . . smash . . . OUT! . . . groan.

Phoebe shot the girl a grouchy look, noticing that she had a stud shaped like a clenched fist through her nose. Phoebe hoped she didn't have hay fever; she could puncture an innocent member of the public if she sneezed.

She edged closer to the window just as they whooshed into a tunnel. Her face stared back, naked without its veil of hair. Next to Saskia's slender curves, slithering mane and glorious chest, Phoebe reflected, she'd look like a Dickens character wandering into a Jackie Collins sex scene by mistake. She prayed Felix

Sylvian wasn't down for the weekend, then told herself off for being so vain.

The tannoy gurgled into life with a baffling submarine-toHQ coded message.

Translating 'Hssskkbereich' as Hexbury, Phoebe pulled her featherweight hat-box from the overhead luggage shelf. She had virtually no clothes with her. Returning in high sulk over her shaved head, she'd bunged her overdue laundry into the machine without noticing that Fliss had left the dial at boil wash after shrinking her new Levis. Now Phoebe had a dozen Sindy-sized knickers, several toddler-fit shirts and two skirts which, given a frame, would make terrific lampshades.

Anyway, she told herself, if the drought continued, it would be too hot for more than shorts and a sun-top. And she already had a reputation in the Seaton house for being an utter slob.

But, just in case, she'd vengefully nicked two outrageously sexy dresses from Fliss's wardrobe.