

FIRE

1969

The boarding school Mary attended lay hidden in the Chiltern Hills, thirty miles to the north west of London. Like many well-to-do northerners, her parents wanted to give her the best possible education and not see her disadvantaged by the vagaries of the state school system. She was an outgoing girl and soon made friends with the rich offspring around her, but – in contrast to her brother George, who boarded at a boys' school nearby – had little time for the rules and regulations that were part and parcel of a privileged education. He conformed, she rebelled – he led, she led astray.

Adventurous girls in Mary's school earned their spurs – or suspenders – by going up to London for the night. This involved creeping out after lock-up, climbing over a wall with barbed wire on top and walking half a mile to the main London road to hitch a lift. Once in town you hit the high spots, though these were never defined in great detail, and then picked up a boy to drive you back before dawn. In her third year, after a number of lesser escapades, Mary felt ready for the London Run and asked an older girl called Rebecca to go with her. But Rebecca, who claimed to have a boyfriend in London and considered herself 'hip', was not into hitching. So Mary rang George – who, as a prefect, could sign out for several nights each term – and asked him to borrow a car and pick them up. He was not keen, but agreed to co-operate when she threatened to tell Mum about the time he had shown her his penis in the greenhouse.

On the appointed night the two girls crept from their dormitory, changed into holiday clothes in the linen room and left the house by way of an unlocked side door in the kitchen. When they reached the boundary wall, Mary, the

taller of the two, helped Rebecca up, but caught her own leg on the barbed wire as she clambered over.

"Damn!" she said, falling into the ditch on the far side.

"Perhaps we should go back," whispered Rebecca, dabbing at the wound above Mary's left knee.

"Don't be silly," hissed Mary, taking the handkerchief and tying it round her leg. "George'll be here in a minute."

"They'll see the cut at breakfast and ask questions," persisted Rebecca. "It's above sock level."

"I'll wear my woolly tights."

"Not allowed to."

"Are, if you've got the curse."

Rebecca was unconvinced, but just then headlights appeared along the wooded lane by the wall. A car slowed and stalled. The lights went out and a figure emerged.

"Psst!" it hissed.

Mary peered over the edge of the ditch. It was George. Even in moonlight she could recognise her brother's gangly form hovering by the car. She beckoned to Rebecca and crept across to the road. George was peering into the darkness behind the car and wheeled round when she tapped him on the shoulder.

"Who's that?"

"Me, silly," said Mary. "And this is Rebecca."

Rebecca and George shook hands and all three climbed into the mini that George had borrowed, at great expense, from a man in High Wycombe. It smelt of stale sweat and beer and the passenger door wouldn't open from the inside, but Mary didn't care. She was on her way to London.

George talked to Rebecca about economics and history, only turning to his sister in the back to ask if she was warm enough. Mary lay across the sagging seat watching the lights go by. George was three years older and still referred to her as his baby sister. He didn't have a girlfriend and was furious at parties if she dumped him for another boy. He would interrupt a kiss, or even a fumble, to say that it was time to leave and, if she refused to move, he would sit in a corner and get drunk.

"Where do you want to go?"

George addressed the remark to Mary. They had reached Marble Arch.

"I don't know. Some high spot."

"That's a lot of help."

"You're the man. You should know."

George circled the Arch for a second time.

"My friend Katie mentioned a place called the Marquee," said Rebecca.

"That's where it all happens, apparently."

"What about your boyfriend?" asked Mary. "Where are we meeting him?"

"He's not really a boyfriend. Just someone I met at a party last hols."

Rebecca glanced across at George – now circling the Arch for a third time – to check whether he had heard this last remark.

"Will someone please tell me where to go?"

"The Marquee," said Mary.

"Somewhere in Soho," added Rebecca.

"Where's Soho?" asked George

"George!"

Half an hour later they reached Wardour Street, only to find it was one way and they were at the wrong end.

"Come on, let's walk," said Mary.

"We can't park," moaned George.

"Never mind," said Rebecca, smiling.

"Let me out!" yelled Mary.

George let her out and said he'd follow. Rebecca hovered by the car, torn between loyalty to her friend and a wish to keep in with George. The car revved and she opted for the man, worried she might not find another before dawn.

Mary set off down Wardour Street with one leg bandaged and her clothes – a denim skirt, striped T-shirt and Afghan waistcoat – covered in Buckinghamshire mud. Rebecca's interest in George had saved her from another lecture on economics and history, but she felt resentful at losing him.

"Hey, babe, want a free ticket?"

She looked up and found herself face to face with a young black man sporting a Jimi Hendrix hairstyle and an Afghan waistcoat identical to her own.

"What for?" said Mary in a superior tone.

"Hell," grinned the man.

Mary raised her eyebrows.

"It's a club," he added. "Just opened."

"I'm going to the Marquee, actually."

Her voice made it sound like Buckingham Palace.

"That's square, man. Hell's where it's at."

"Because it's round?" said Mary, but the boy didn't laugh. "I'm meeting a friend there."

"That's cool."

He handed Mary four tickets and, with a shake of his main and a big grin, disappeared down an alley.

Mary looked at the tickets – a devil with horns on one side and an address on the other: 15 Wardour Street. She felt in her pocket. She only had two pounds. She decided to wait for the others and suggest they go to Hell for free.

She found the Marquee club and stood reading a list of forthcoming attractions. Men asked if she wanted to come inside, but were all horrid and stared at her bum instead of her face. Only one boy, with shoulder length hair and a soft face, caught her attention. Unlike the others he didn't approach her but hung around on the pavement engrossed in a copy of Oz. Occasionally he glanced across, but as soon as she caught his eye, he returned to reading. At last he folded his paper, wandered over and stood examining the posters. He seemed shy and Mary didn't dare say anything in case she frightened him off.

"There you are. Sorry we took so long."

Mary turned. Rebecca was holding George's hand. George was staring in the opposite direction, pretending she wasn't. Mary felt excluded, but said nothing and doled out the free tickets.

"Let's go," said George moving off, Rebecca in tow.

The boy with the long hair stared at his watch, as if to say, 'I'm waiting for someone too', and started to whistle. Mary hesitated and then called after Rebecca.

"Hold on, I forgot to introduce you to..."

She turned to the boy.

"What's your name?"

"Matthew," he said, a smile lighting up his face.

"Matthew!" Mary shouted.

Rebecca and George stopped and glanced back.

"Hello, Matthew!"

"Hello, Matthew," whispered Mary, taking his hand as if at a children's party. "I'm Mary."

She gave him the fourth ticket, but at the door a man with 'Hell's Angel' tattooed across his chest put up an arm to block their path.

"Chicks free. Cats ten bob."

"That's a bit unfair," protested George.

Rebecca took out her purse and paid and after their hands had been stamped with a luminous logo they descended into Hell.

It was hot and crowded. An anorexic male with bedraggled hair was screaming 'Fire!' into a microphone, trying to make himself heard above the band behind. Mary wondered why no one was running to the exits.

"Fire!" he shouted again.

"Arthur Brown," said Matthew, putting his mouth close to her ear.

Mary looked puzzled. She thought he was called Matthew.

"He's new. I saw him at the Marquee last week."

His lips almost touched her skin.

"The man at the microphone, you mean?" said Mary, brushing her own lips against his hair, which was soft and smelt of medicated shampoo.

Matthew nodded.

"This is his latest. 'Fire!'"

His mention of the song's title coincided with the singer singing it again, and this chance synchronicity induced a head-shaking period of self-absorption in Matthew as the chorus repeated, crescendoed and merged into a distorted guitar solo.

"Where do you come from?" yelled Mary.

"The Bush."

"You live in the country?"

"No. Shepherd's Bush. West London. How about you?"

"Halifax."

"Ee by gum land, eh?"

Mary nodded and began to move in time to the music. Out of the corner of her eye she saw George, still wearing his blue school overcoat, ordering a pint of beer at the bar. Rebecca was standing behind him. She saw Mary and waved. Mary turned towards Matthew and increased her rhythmic movements, hoping her partner would respond. But he had returned to head shaking. She closed her eyes and let the beat take over. She was determined to enjoy herself, determined to get high – with or without a man.

When, later on, somebody tapped her on the shoulder, she came down with a bump. Her leg was hurting, Matthew gone. She bent to inspect the wound. Blood had seeped out from under the handkerchief and run down a ladder in her tights. The hand tapped again, more insistently this time. She straightened up and found Rebecca mouthing at her. But the music was too loud.

"What?" she yelled.

Rebecca grabbed Mary's hand and pulled her through the sweating bodies into the Ladies – a single cubicle with a filthy WC and no toilet paper

"We've got to get George out of here. He's sozzled. Been drinking ever since we came and now he's picking fights with those Hell's Devils or whatever they're called."

"Where's Matthew?" said Mary.

"How should I know?"

Rebecca sounded cross, blaming Mary for having such a bore of a brother.

"What time is it?"

"Two o'clock," said Rebecca.

"Christ, we must go. Where is George?"

At that moment the door to the ladies flew open and George lurched in.

"There you are, Becky."

"This is the Ladies, George!"

Mary used her mother's voice.

"Sorry."

He started to back out, but then his face went white and his jaw began to tremble. He pushed past his sister and Rebecca, fell on to the toilet bowl and vomited.

"What a revolting man," said Rebecca, squeezing out of the door. "All yours."

Mary knelt down, wincing at the pain in her leg. Poor George. She shouldn't have forced him to come. He hated parties and was probably petrified of Rebecca. She rubbed his back as the body heaved and convulsed. Between emissions George muttered 'Sorry, Mary' and she, attempting not to breath through her nose, tried to console him.

He recovered enough to stand and she guided him out. Rebecca was by the bar talking to Matthew, her arms wrapped around his neck. He was still shaking his head.

"Give us a hand will you, Becky?" Mary yelled.

Rebecca broke contact, took George's free arm and turned back towards the bar.

"Night, Matthew. See you next hols."

Matthew misheard the message and came over to help. They stumbled up the stairs, out into the freezing cold of Wardour Street, across Oxford Street and on to the Post Office tower where the car was parked.

"Not much point having a bleedin' car if you park it in Scotland," gasped Matthew, as he lowered George into the driver's seat.

Mary patted her brother's face. She hoped the cold night air had revived him.

"Alright to drive, Georgie?"

George nodded.

"You lot going to Halifax, tonight?" said Matthew.

"Yes," said Mary, hoping Rebecca had not mentioned school.

"Blimey."

Mary climbed into the back seat.

"Couldn't give us a lift to the Bush, could you?"

"Be my guest," said George.

Matthew climbed in beside Mary. Rebecca scowled and slammed the passenger door. George set off in reverse, hit a van behind, corrected his mistake and roared out into Euston Road. Mary let Matthew kiss her. He was poky and tight lipped, but his breath smelt sweet after George's vomit. At Shepherd's Bush he climbed out and Rebecca repeated, 'See you next hols!' Mary watched his emaciated figure recede into the darkness then settled down on the sagging seat to sleep, secure in the knowledge she'd done all the things you were meant to do on a London Run.

Sometime later she was woken by a dull thud, a scream and a foul smell. A horn blared and George lay slumped over the steering wheel, snoring. Rebecca was trying to open the passenger door.

"What's happened?" said Mary.

"Your bloody brother's driven us into the ditch. I'm walking back."

Mary cleared the mist on the window. They were on the lane leading to school. George had misjudged a corner and ploughed into something on the side of the road.

"Shit!" screeched Rebecca who was now half in, half out of the car.
"How disgusting."

Mary leant forward. Rebecca's leg was thigh-high in cow dung.

"Well, do something, Mary!"

Mary did. She laughed, while George snored and Rebecca cursed. She laughed with relief. A few feet beyond the dung heap was a six bladed plough. They could have been in deeper shit. They could have been dead.