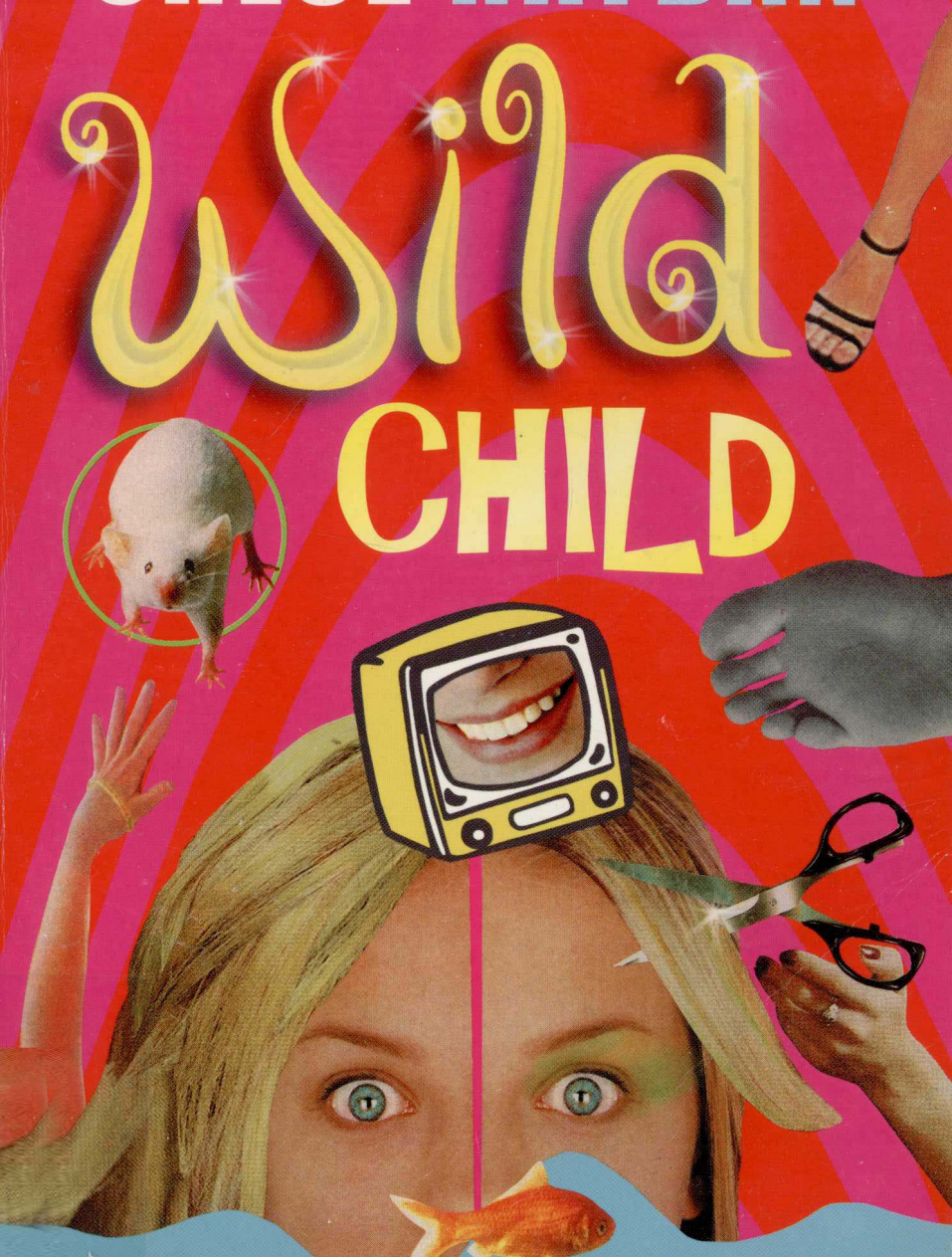


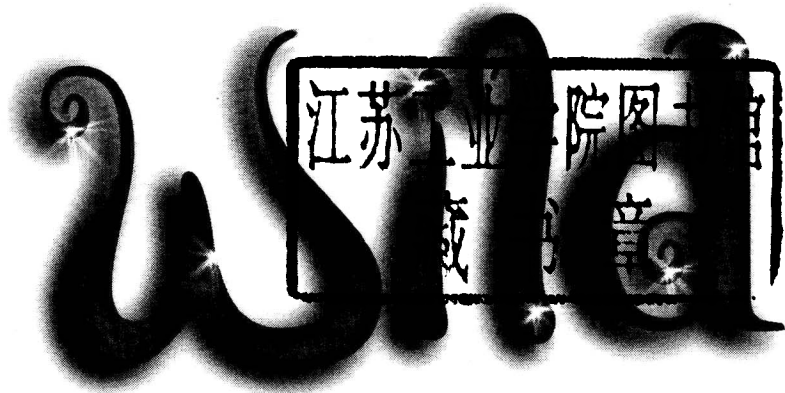
DEFINITIONS WILD (wild) a. wayward, reckless, loose or disorderly.

CHLOË RAYBAN

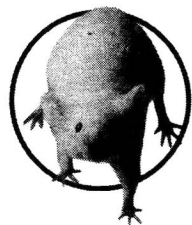
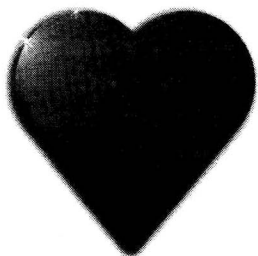
Wild  
CHILD



# CHLOË RAYBAN



## CHILD



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## I

I suppose the thought first came to me on the sunbed. Franz's mother had enrolled Franz into this Health and Leisure Club with the idea that she would use it for work-outs in the gym. We used to go there every Friday when we got off early from school. We soon discovered it did a whole lot more for our bodily welfare lazing in the sauna or spending an illicit extra half hour on a sunbed.

On this particular Friday afternoon, Franz and I had managed to get two sunbeds side by side and were having this sort of loud, muffled conversation through their closed lids.

'The only thing is,' said Franz, 'they say if you spend too much time on a sunbed you get all dehydrated and wrinkly—like being over-microwaved and you've dried out the gravy.'

'Gross,' I said. 'Like being middle-aged.'

'Some people are born middle-aged,' observed Franz.

'Like Fiona Ponsonby-Haugh? Hard case,' I agreed.

'Personally, I'm going to end it all long before then,' said Franz.

The echoing sunbed added somewhat to her tone of melodrama.

'Where do you draw the line?' I pointed out. 'Once you're over twenty you might as well resign yourself to the fact

you're going to spend *the rest of your life* Grown-Up-and-Past-It.'

The conversation had spread a kind of gloom in the hot enclosed space of the sunbed.

'If it's OK with you I think I'll just take a shower and make for home,' I said.

Franz opened the lid of her sunbed and leaned out. She raised her goggles and stared at me. She had white rings round her eyes where the goggles had been, like a panda in negative.

'But you've only had forty minutes,' she said.

On the way home in the Tube I studied the other people in my carriage. Most of them seemed to be surviving those grey featureless years between youth and oblivion with amazing strength of character. I examined their faces, one by one, as they rocked in patient unison to the rhythm of the train.

There were a couple of the usual secretaries with their velvet Alice-bands and mock Cartier earrings taking home Safeway bags full of sun-dried tomato pesto and rocket salad to feed their current boyfriends. There was the standard tube-train mad person — a lady with cropped lilac hair muttering to herself and underlining things in strong red Biro in what looked like a library book. There was a not wildly attractive couple who kept putting their arms round each other and nuzzling etc in a valiant effort to reassure themselves they could be classified as lovable. There were a few yuppie executives of both sexes. And there was a phased-out looking dyed blonde holding a sleeping baby and accompanying her Walkman with a tuneless hum. The thing was, they all had the same look on their faces — an expression of blankness, of drabness, of deep suffocating greyness.

And I knew, with a sinking feeling in my stomach and

with the kind of inevitability I simply couldn't ignore, that somewhere—way out there ahead in the future—I was going to be ONE OF THEM.

I also recognised that every one of these people had once been, like me, pure untapped star material—all their lives ahead of them with virtually anything possible. And yet, somehow, they had all Got It Wrong.

All these poor deprived grey people had forgotten what living was like. It made me want to stand up and shout 'WAKE UP'. But luckily I generally have the self-control to resist most of my wilder impulses.

Instead, I started to think about that distant, future me. Did she realize what lay ahead? Did she know that she was in grave danger of the very worst thing that can happen in anyone's life—ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. I mean, just imagine waking up one morning and finding you've allowed yourself to get dull, grey and ordinary and *not having done anything about it!*

I decided I had to warn that future person I was going to become before it was too late. I puzzled over how to do this all the way to Sloane Square. And eventually came up with the only solution I could think of. It was to write myself a letter.

I wrote it as soon as I got home.

It went:

*Dear Me,*

*How I wish that I could actually talk to you face to face. But since I can't I'm writing to you instead.*

*I want you here and now to solemnly swear that you are never, never going to let yourself get middle-aged and ordinary. (Please be on the watch for the first telltale signs like the urge to wear flesh-coloured tights or feeling lost without a handbag, or starting to cut recipes out of magazines and store*

them in a ring-binder.)

Whatever happens, I want you to do everything in your power to become famous, someone who gets noticed and gets in the papers. So that one day you'll have written up on the front of the house 'Justine Duval lives here', like Whistler and all the other celebs who've lived in Cheyne Walk.

Somehow, you've got to find a way of making simply pots and pots of money with the minimum of effort, so that you can buy absolutely stunning clothes that even people like the stuck-up preppy Sixth Formers who don't acknowledge you exist would kill for.

And you've got to make a serious effort to be painfully beautiful, even if it means you have to live on vegetables, like Garbo. (As a first gesture I'll consider flossing between my teeth every night.)

You've got to promise, when you fall in love, it'll be with someone stunningly attractive and you'll not simply settle for just anyone, like Mummy did.

But most important of all—I want you to swear, whatever happens, you're not going to be anything like *Jemima*.

Don't let me down.

*Justine Duval*

(I folded the page and stuffed it into an envelope, sealed it and wrote on the outside.)

Justine Duval:

NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL AFTER 2010 AD

Then I wondered where on earth to put it, safe enough not to be discovered, memorable enough not to be forgotten. First of all I rolled it up and put it in a Hooch bottle I had been saving as a memento of a party, and corked it tight. Then I hid the bottle on the top of the wardrobe. I considered

for a moment the likelihood of this being undisturbed for the requisite number of years and decided it wasn't very likely at all. Then I wondered about throwing it into the Thames and trusting on someone eventually finding the bottle and sending the note back — this was even less likely. In the end I took the bottle and buried it at the end of the garden.

I felt a real fruitcake doing it, but afterwards I was seriously pleased with myself, if not mildly euphoric. I tried to picture that future me rediscovering it. The bottle with the envelope in it would come bobbing up over the years, riding time, with its message intact from today's Justine, marooned here in the present, to that mysterious unknown Justine of the future.

I made my way back into the house thinking deep fundamental thoughts about the meaning of life . . . whether it has a purpose . . . or whether having an un-cool star sign can really cramp your style . . .

My father says the most important thing in life is to work hard at school — and manage your bank account without getting overdrawn. These two things achieved, everything else will apparently miraculously fall into place.

Actually, my father couldn't be more wrong. People who work hard at school invariably get spots or overweight, or both. And people who stay in credit are generally considered unsociably tight-fisted.

My mother seems to think that success comes to those who look presentable: *'It is possible to be smartly casual, Justine.'* She believes the key to instant popularity is to walk straight from the hips and to keep your hair out of your eyes . . . and to be nice to practically everyone. What my mother simply doesn't understand is that popularity isn't a matter of being nice to people, it's a matter of people being nice to you.

My sister, Jemima, has a more realistic view of life. She has found out that what actually counts is to have legs up to your



armpits, be lean as a French bean and to have enough invitations to go all the way round your bedroom mirror. Only then can you afford to do well at school (or be nice to people for that matter). That's as long as you don't appear to work, of course. The merest hint of swotting is guaranteed social suicide.

So much for philosophy. Back to the harsh reality of the present. On returning to the house, I settled down in our personal, private sitting room. It used to be the playroom but Jemima covered up the Winnie-the-Pooh frieze with pictures she tore out of a Joseph Tricot catalogue. (Tigger's tail is still visible—a small, comforting, striped reminder of our youth, appearing at regular intervals around the room.) I switched on the television, stretched out full length on the sofa and tried to feel Friday-ish. After simply ages it occurred to me what was so emphatically wrong—the phone hadn't rung for a good half hour. This was seriously tragic! I had my weekend social diary to fill. I hauled the telephone over to the sofa in order to remedy the situation.

My third call found someone in.

'Three-five-eight-four-three-double-chew-hello.'

It was the voice of Jason (Franz's half brother). Jason's got to the designer-stubble age and really fancies he's stud-rated. He likes to throw his weight around with Franz's friends. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of recognising his voice. So I simply said:

'Is Franz in?'

There was a slight pause while Jason relocated the Hollywood in his mouth.

'Sure thing, who's calling?'

'Justine.'

'Oh, right.' He didn't have to sound so obviously disappointed.

There followed a lot of distant shouting. Eventually the

wait was rewarded by Franz's familiar scream.

'Baby! Have you recovered from the sunbed blues?'

'Oh that. Forget it. What's all that noise?'

'Only the taps running. I'm in the bath with the portable. Hey, did you know that the hot and the cold sound different?'

'Rubbish.'

'They do, honestly. Just you listen.'

Mid-way through the experiment, I interrupted.

'Hold on a minute.'

'What is it?'

'Sebastian Symington-Smythe's just come out of his house.'

'Who's he, for God's sake?'

Sebastian Symington-Smythe is a boy who's lived in our street for as long as I can remember. I had been vaguely aware of him last summer riding up and down on his mountain bike. But, boy, they must have been putting something into his school dinners over the past term or so.

'Quel mega-hunk. He's all dressed for tennis. Baby, you should see those golden tanned hairy legs.'

'But who is he?'

'He's lived down the road for yonks but he used to be away at boarding school. I think he's been given the boot, but no-one will say why—it must be for something really dire. Mummy positively oozes hostility every time she sets eyes on him.'

'It'll either be drugs or homosexuality,' said Franz knowledgeably.

I peered through the curtains savouring the last heart-wrenching glimpse of Sebastian's receding form as he turned the corner towards the tennis courts.

'He looks pretty straight to me.'

'You can't always tell,' said Franz darkly.

‘What if it’s drugs. He might be battling against some terrible addiction.’ I resolved to add him to my list of people to pray for.

‘Either way, Baby, no French kissing, he’s probably got Aids,’ said Franz.

‘You can’t catch it from kissing, dumbbo. Anyway, he looks incredibly healthy to me.’

‘They do, for years and years, and then it hits them. It says so in the ads.’

‘With friends like you, Franz, no-one’s going to die of ignorance. Why don’t you drop by tonight and check him over?’

‘Can’t. Daddy’s in town and he’s going to take me out for a meal somewhere swanky.’

‘Lucky you.’

‘Yes, but I’ve half a mind to order a side salad and ask for the money instead. I still owe Henry for that Kenzo suit she couldn’t squeeze her backside into.’

‘Bet your father will bale you out if you ask him. Baby, you don’t know how lucky you are to have a father like that. You have no idea how tight mine is.’

There was a muffled scream.

‘Hey, I nearly dropped the phone. Do you think you get electrocuted if you drop a portable in the bath?’

‘Don’t know, but I never dare wear my Walkman, just in case.’

‘How much do you bet me I won’t do it?’

‘A fiver?’

‘Listen Justine, at this very moment you could be absolutely the last person to speak to me alive.’

‘Franz, don’t.’

The phone went dead.

‘Three-five-eight-four-three-double-chew-hello.’ The voice was oily with charm.

'Jason.'

'Oh, it's you again,' he said flatly.

'I think Franz has just done herself in with a portable phone.'

'Sounds a novel way to go.'

'Do you think you could see if she's all right?'

There was more distant shouting up the stairwell.

'She says she'll call you tomorrow. Now do you think you two could stop hogging the phone, I'm expecting a very important call.'

I put down the phone and gazed at the television hoping to be entertained. The late afternoon sun reflected back off the screen. After switching channels umpteen times, I came up with what looked like the kind of suspense movie that demanded concentration, so I drew the curtains, turned up the volume and settled down to dial Henrietta's number.

'Hi, Henry. Looks like you might get the akkers for the Kenzo suit. Daddy mega-bucks is back in town.'

'How do you know?'

'Just spoke to Franz, he's taking her out for a slap-up tonight.'

'Some people get all the luck.'

'Her parents are so generous.'

'Well you know why, don't you?'

'No, why? Tell me.'

'Because they're divorced, stupid,' said Henry with the voice of experience.

'What difference does that make?'

Henry delivered the following facts with the level tone of one who has read the book, seen the movie, bought the T-shirt—in short, is stating the blindingly obvious:

'It's simple. When your parents get divorced you can just kind of play one off against the other. Each is scared rigid they're going to be seen as the stingy one. You only have to

exaggerate a tincy-wincy bit about what one of them has given you and the other one is falling over themself to match it. It helps, of course, if they don't communicate.'

'My parents look as if they are all set to stay monotonously married for ever,' I said resignedly.

'Tough. However, look on the bright side.'

'What's that?'

'No step-brothers and sisters to mess up your room.'

With that piece of wisdom she hung up.

Possibly because of my involvement in the conversation, possibly because of the decibels emitted by the television, I hadn't heard the key turn in the front door lock.

A lightning glimpse of pinstripes and briefcase momentarily eclipsed the television screen.

'Justine,' exclaimed my father as he extricated himself from the telephone cable.

I dutifully turned the sound down with the remote control.

'Justine,' he started again, as he flung open the curtains. 'What I can't understand is why you have to sit in the dark when it's broad daylight?'

As the cold light of day flooded into the room, the scene of controlled disarray came to light. He gazed in disgust at the comforting collection of lipstick-stained teacups, half-full glasses of Diet Coke, back-pack, puffy jacket, Pumas, Walkman, roller blades, CDs and assorted magazines with which I liked to surround myself, in order to block out the hideous barrenness of my life.

'Hello Daddy. Give us a smacker.'

'Feet off the sofa,' commanded my father, offering a rough cheek.

'Had a good day?' I asked without interest.

'And tidy up a bit, can't you,' he replied without conviction.

I leaned off the sofa and stacked one cassette on top of

another. This gesture of intent seemed to satisfy him and he headed off in search of his slippers and G-and-T.

That maddening sunlight was reflecting off the dust on the screen again. I pulled the curtains to a close so that the room resumed its comforting gloom and once more flopped down in front of the TV. I'd missed the gory bit of the suspense movie. But after switching channels for some minutes, I found the credits coming up on 'Home and Away' — the antipodean alternative to Eastenders. Could I be permitted the time to give it my full attention? No such luck. I was interrupted by a hysterical ringing on the front doorbell.

The view through the spyhole revealed Jemima.

Even distorted by its enlarging glass, Jemima was disgustingly good-looking. With nature's callous disregard for fairness, it had given her the high cheekbones, the perfect nose and a fall of silky natural blonde hair that she had done absolutely nothing to deserve. Standing there on the doorstep, hot and cross from the rush-hour Tube, she looked only mildly and flatteringly flushed.

Jemima must have known I was looking because she put her tongue out and grimaced at the spyhole. Then she leant on the bell again.

Her entrance coincided with our father's lightning flight down the stairs.

'What on earth's going on?' he roared just as Jemima stormed in.

'Why the hell can't you open the door, Bratfeatures?' she addressed me with sisterly affection.

Jemima was clasping a bursting bag of school files, a bunch of roses, *Vogue*, *NME* and a squashed swiss roll.

'And who are the roses from?' I enquired.

'Me, actually,' replied Jemima with dignity.

'How much were they?' demanded Father.

'Special offer, two quid,' said Jemima.

And so the fireworks started.

'I don't give you an allowance to squander on flowers . . .  
And incidentally . . .'

Jemima swept past and threw herself down in my place in front of the television.

'Yes, Daddy?' She eyed him with her practised 'beguiling' gaze.

'Next time you borrow my D J without asking me, could you refrain from dousing it in Chanel?'

'Yes, Daddy.'

'And it's about time you tidied this place up a bit . . . look at it.'

At which point our mother appeared in the doorway.

'Would you like a nice cup of tea, darling?' she asked Jemima, and then paused, vaguely aware that something-was-going-on.

'No she would not like a nice cup of tea. If she wants tea, nice or stewed, she can get it herself. Look at the mess . . .' he continued.

It took a good half hour before I regained my seat in front of the television. By that time the sound of bath water and loud music from upstairs indicated that Jemima had started her evening ritual. The scent of bubble bath was wafting down the stairs.

The last rumblings of the storm could be heard at intervals from the kitchen.

' . . . And it wasn't just the flowers . . .'

'No, dear,' I heard my mother agree.

'It was flowers and magazines, *and* a swiss roll.'

'Well it could be worse, you know. Imagine what she could be buying at her age.'

The kitchen door closed.

I imagined.

Peace reigned. The smell of bubble bath was soothingly

familiar. *My* bubble bath, I realized. By the time I reached the landing I had discovered that Jemima also had *my* new bathrobe, *my* Walkman and *my* new Jungle tape, AND *my* brand new pristine copy of *J17*.

After a minute or two of fruitless shouting at the locked bathroom door, I went into her room casting round for suitable ammunition for a counter-attack. Her shoulder bag was lying on the bed. It yielded a few gems. I doused myself liberally with her Coco, lit up a Gitane *filtre* and put on her Prodigy tape, full volume.

On inaudible slippers, my father entered the room and mouthed at me furiously. Then he turned off the tape. He wouldn't calm down enough for me to explain that Jemima had started it all. And I wasn't actually smoking the cigarette, I had just lit it to irritate her. So I simply weathered the tirade and then made my way back downstairs vowing that when I grew up, if not long before, I was going to find some dark and irrevocable way of wreaking revenge on Jemima.

I sat on the sofa fuming, all hope of feeling Friday-ish had by now well and truly been abandoned.

It was an hour or two later that this most seriously megabizarre thing happened. As I mentioned earlier, I'd been a trifle concerned about my ultimate destiny. But this was something so out of the blue, so drastic, it was to change the course of my entire social life, my entire sex life and all the boring bits of life in between . . .



You're not going to believe this, but what happened was . . . I was sitting watching television. It was a pretty bad night—nothing but low-budget chat shows and documentaries about the Middle East—when the television started playing up. First of all there was a lot of white fuzzy interference and then a picture of this woman kept appearing. I tried changing channels but it didn't make any difference. No sooner had I switched to another programme than the same thing happened.

I was just getting desperate and about to phone Radio Rentals when 'this woman' looked straight through the screen at me and said:

'Justine? . . .'

As you can imagine, I nearly slid off the sofa with shock.

'Justine . . . are you there?' She shaded her eyes and peered out of the screen.

'Yes . . .' I tried to say. It came out as a sort of croak.

*She appeared to hear my attempt at a reply!*

'Thank God for that. I've spent hours trying to get through.'

I stared at the screen in disbelief. My tummy did a sort of double-somersault. I was rapidly coming to the conclusion