It has been a great pleasure to come to Clydebank today and once again to launch a ship in John Brown’s yard. This time it means more to me than ever before because the Britannia, which is now floating in the waters of the Clyde, is not only the most modern addition to a long line of Royal Yachts which goes back to the reign of King Charles II, but it is to beat times the home of my husband and myself and of our family.

*I am sure all of you who are present here realise how much* *the building of this ship meant to the late King, my father. For* *he felt most strongly, as I do, that a yacht was a necessity not* *a luxury for the head of our great British Commonwealth,* *between whose countries the sea is no barrier but the natural* *and indestructible highway. With the wise advice of the* *Admiralty and of your firm, he laid the plans of a vessel which* *should wear the Royal Standard in times of peace and which,* *in the event of war, should serve the cause of humanity as a* *hospital ship. Had he been in Clydebank today, he would* *have been as delighted as I am to see what a fine ship our* *yacht promises to be.*

It was unmistakeably provocative. It was not just the way they were placed – casually, almost as if they had been slipped off and simply discarded where they lay – it was the twists of violet, turquoise and white tissue paper with which the window had been scattered, reminiscent of confetti. Without it being in any way overt, the whole arrangement somehow said wedding night as clearly as if it had been given a caption. For three days the display stayed there. It felt as if the town were holding its breath – or perhaps it was just me: I found myself going past the little shop more often than before, just to see if anything happened. And then, after the fourth day, I spotted Antonia coming out of Gavuzzo & Morelli with two brown carrier bags in her arms. Seeing me, she gave me a smile that was both furtive and radiant as she hurried away. I paid rather more attention to the displays after that. That generously-sized peach-coloured bustier surrounded by silver forks; that was directed, surely, at the rather overweight lady who ran the restaurant at the top of the town, dispensing grappa on the house to a crowd of men; flirted with by many, courted by none. The red silk 13 plunge bra and matching red knickers, sprinkled with wood shavings as if they had been left on a workbench – that was intended for the wife of the young carpenter, who everyone knew was chasing other girls since she gave birth to their first child. The chiffon nightdress – that was for someone older, someone like Signora Passarello, widowed last Easter but not, surely, too old to have another chance... And sure enough, there was the lady in question now, coming out of the shop with a defiant look on her face and a white paper carrier bag tucked under her arm. It amused me that Francesca and Stefano, despite being incomers, had somehow read between the lines of our little town so quickly and so well.

But they were not gone by Christmas. When I returned to Monforte after my first semester at university Gavusso & Morelli was still open. In fact, it was starting to look quite prosperous. Some very modern spotlights – modern for the time, at any rate – now illuminated the tiny shelves that had once held wine and which now held brassieres, slips and panties. The brilliant light seemed to bounce off the pearls and tiny pieces of glass that were sown into the more elaborate pieces as if off shards of ice. Even the window display seemed to have grown in confidence. Hanging by threads from the ceiling, so that they seemed to float at different heights, was a parade of voluptuous bustiers, frothy muslin peignoirs and pretty floral brassieres; the overall effect as extravagant as Christmas decorations on a tree, or a host of underwear-clad angels ascending into the air. If anything, though, I was even less interested in the shop now than I had been before I went away. Things had changed for me. At that 10 time, in the early seventies, Italian students couldn’t decide if they wanted to be American flower-children or German anarchists, and usually ended up being an uneasy mixture of both. I was no exception. In that first semester I had smoked my first joint and been to my first sit-in. I had had relationships with boys who were almost, but not quite, boyfriends. I had not actually slept with any of them, being as yet unable to reconcile the tantalising notion of sexual freedom with the practicalities of an actual relationship – that is to say, I was terrified that the moment I did succumb to a boy’s pleas, he would lose all interest in me, a possibility that seemed not to have been addressed by the radical feminists whose books I was now defiantly carrying around – but I confidently expected that it was only a matter of time. I had joined the Communist Society and protested against the Vietnam war by dancing around an American flag as it burned. I had been to a concert by The Grateful Dead in Milan, and a reading by a Beat poet in Venice. I expressed my new loyalties by wearing at all times a khaki combat jacket, its lapels decorated with badges representing marijuana leaves, and a black felt hat that had one of my male friends’ coloured handkerchiefs tied jauntily around the brim. Secretly, I thought of myself as a cross between Edith Piaf, Bob Dylan, and Ulrike Meinhof, the founder of the Red Army Faction.