

Home. The most poignant word of all



I was 18 when I idly first picked up a copy of *Breakfast At Tiffany's*. I was sitting in Corfu airport waiting for a long delayed plane, sunburnt, cross, and accompanied by a raging bore of a boyfriend. Two hours later I didn't need a plane, I was already in a different place. I was in New York, drinking Martinis at the Stork Club, shopping at Tiffany's, a beautiful orphaned waif, surrounded by admirers, and Johnny Mercer was singing *Moonriver* to me. I fell in love that day, with Holly Golightly, with Truman Capote, and with the knowledge that books can transport you more reliably than any heap of old metal.

It's a slight book, a novella of only a hundred pages, but perfect from the first dreamy words on: 'I am always drawn back to places where I have lived.', surely the modern equivalent of 'once upon a time...' And the heroine, Holly Golightly, is a kind of fairy princess, albeit one with a rather contemporary and ambiguous moral take. She has reinvented herself from a hillbilly into an Upper East side sophisticate. She is, as a character in the book suggests, a phony but a real phony. For years after I read this, I sub-divided all the people I met into phonys and real phonys. It's an effective distinction.

When I was in my twenties, I thought the process of self-invention was the point of the book, that the story encapsulated the uniquely American notion that you can

become whoever you want to be. In my thirties, I took the idea one stage further and went to live in New York where I had only one friend (who left before I arrived), nowhere to live, and no letters of accreditation. I had cards printed with my name on them and underneath the word Travelling, the same as Holly's. I bought the sheet music to *Moonriver*. I wandered around Tiffany's when I had the 'the mean reds', an emotional condition far worse than the blues. "The mean reds are horrible" Holly says. "You're afraid and you sweat like hell, but you don't know what you're afraid of". The only cure is to go to Tiffany's because "nothing very bad could happen to you there." This works up to a point.

Holly Golightly is remembered from the past, she has long since disappeared. In classic Hollywood style, the movie version inverts this most salient fact and makes this enigmatic woman, this 'wild thing', this rootless, shiftless character, stay. My own attempts to be a woman of mystery failed miserably. Within weeks of moving to Manhattan I had a beautiful apartment (no kitchen, natch), life-long friends, and rodents (Holly's word for men.) I may have had my cards printed but I wasn't travelling, I had arrived.

I even acquired a cat, like Holly, but my cat was no sad no-name slob. In the novel she says "I haven't any right to give him a name: he'll have to wait until he belongs to somebody. We just sort of took up by the river one day, we don't belong to each other: he's an independent, and so am I." "Well, 'my' cat turned out to have another mummy - who called him Chobo while I called him Fatboy. We became friends and by mutual consent

shared the cat who now had not only two names but two homes.

And so I made all the kinds of connections that our heroine evades. The ephemeral Holly Golightly wasn't me at all. Perhaps that is what had attracted me to her in the first place, not the similarities I had flattered myself into perceiving, but the differences. Finally, after 25 years of reading this little jewel of a book, I realised what it is actually about: it's about having a home, of belonging to people and to places that belong to you. Tiffany's is a metaphor for home, a safe place. When Holly escapes from New York she throws her no-name cat out on the street and instantly regrets it. "I'm very scared" she says "yes, at last. Because it could go on for ever. Not knowing what's yours until you've thrown it away." The narrator promises to find the cat and one day, months later, he does. "Flanked by potted plants and framed by clean lace curtains, he was seated in the window of a warm-looking room: I wondered what his name was, for I was certain he had one now, certain he'd arrived somewhere he belonged." Home. The most poignant word of all.

