



IN THE DAYS BEFORE THE REVOLUTION HP Tinker

The days before the revolution washed over me like cruel drizzle, my twenties sinking into effortless bourbon-soaked oblivion. I'd wake, eyes bloodied, breath reeking of stale melancholy, limbs infused with the lost faith and shattered master plans of a humbled violin prodigy.

Increasingly my life resembled a work of bargain bin airport fiction, the plot unravelling in my hands, the narrative slipping round my ankles. Looking out of my skull, down at my body, I could never quite recognise the clothes I was wearing...

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Years ago, long before the subject of a revolution was even politely broached, Jodie sent me a postcard from Melbourne:

Life's a fake. Everyone lies. Everything is shit. I want to get back to the good old days. JC

It was meant to cheer me up, but failed, quite spectacularly, on so many different levels. Soon after, during the experimental middle-eight section of 1995, Ellis and Elise finally did it: sacrificed themselves at the altar, signed a piece of paper that told them they had to stay together for life, or else. Dropping out of martial arts college, Elise worked nights as a chat line girl while Ellis played bass in the band, now re-named The Believers. The band split, of course — bands always do: Edwin, Alvin and Ivor joining local post-grunge sub-poppers Drill, Ellis joining the ranks of the suburbanised middle-classes. Back in the 80s, he'd listened religiously to The Smiths and The Pixies years before anyone else and had been the first one to steal a copy of Generation X from the library. But when he blagged his way into lecturing law, scatter-gunning the interviewer with a blanket of blatant lies, a new life in a new town called to him: a quasi-fashionable life of twelve course dinner parties, over-expanding waistlines, middle-aged neighbours and wild DIY shopping expeditions at weekends. This consumed him. Totally. And when I first saw Elise in the street without any dye in her hair... well, I knew then they'd lost it...

The others? Richard OD'd. A tragic waste, everybody said, after he recovered and got that job working for the tax office. Steven and Patrick? I heard nothing from them. They had fallen into that dark chasm of the previously well acquainted.

Likewise, Nicole. She didn't write me long distance anymore.

It seemed my once impenetrable garrison of friends had disintegrated for good. I should have held on harder, but I let them all go one by one.

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As for poor Susan, 1996 was the year her father was found in a multi-storey car park with multiple-stab wounds; another dead drunk. The

police arrested some potential young offenders for it, then let them go again because they hadn't done anything wrong. Susan flew straight back from Florence, her Film Studies now in shreds of tatters, any career lying smashed, just fragments. To myself from then on, I saw her like this: trapped in a sepia photograph, the person least likely to, her face fading, a grainy industrial town blurred in the background, the edges torn and turning up.

Strange news of Bernard also came to light around then.

According to various sources, he was either frequenting ethnic eateries around Brick Lane. Or back on the drugs in Charlotte Street. Or posing as someone important in publishing. Or selling himself in New Cross. Or selling lightbulbs in Southwark. 'What difference does it make?' Ellis scoffed from behind his ever-expanding midriff. He'd always claimed that Bernard had been abducted by caring-sharing 90s aliens for a greater purpose beyond our earth-bound philosophy.

'That joke isn't funny anymore, Ellis,' I said pointedly. Who knows? Maybe he was right. But I didn't believe these spurious stories. Because I never believe anything anyone tells me.

I remember I was visiting Ellis and Elise in the sticks at the time, a thin excuse on my part to decimate their formidable reserve of near-vintage red wines. 'I wonder what Jodie's doing with herself?' I remember pondering out loud. Neither seemed very interested in my idle thought. Elise never had much time for Jodie (jealousy?) and I always suspected Ellis harboured (barely) repressed feelings for her. 'Why are you so interested in Jodie Cavendish anyway?' Elise asked while Ellis was out in the bathroom, cleaning up his act. I shrugged. I said: nothing. I just simmered on the couch: wearied by them both, their lack of interest in anything important these days, the way they talked now, and the horrible high street clothes they had started to wear.

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Time crawled on...

And time refused to stop crawling...

And around mid-1997, mad Martha rang unexpectedly.

She was fine; almost sane – almost. Some way into the conversation she casually mentioned she'd seen Jodie again. 'Where?' I asked, frazzled; a born-again agnostic, I was gagging on my knee-jerk tendency toward disbelief. Martha laughingly instructed me to turn on the TV. So I did, scrambling for the remote underneath some magazines: and click! there she was; Jodie: eerie and ephemeral, flickering on the screen like she had just died and her ghost was being beamed straight into my room from the MTV Afterlife. She was pointing at colourful symbols in a cerise trouser suit, telling me about the local weather. And so we met again on a flaming Summer's day, the air burning with promise, Jodie waltzing back into my life hair now cropped close, a successful TV career waiting to happen – but (I wondered as we hugged hello) would this re-appearance be a leading role or merely a cameo slot? We drank coffee copiously. She didn't mention Kenny once. We went shopping for nothing in particular and came back with identical beige v-neck sweaters. Along Kensington High Street, we tripped and fell, a tangle of human flesh. I heard her head cracking hard against the bright pavement. 'Is anything broken?' I asked anxiously. 'No,' said Jodie. 'Only my brain...'

That afternoon we were playing pool in a shabby bar, Jodie slinking cat-like around the table, feigning ineptitude, winning every game. She was ex-gymnast with a social drug habit and a variety of eating disorders and I had to confess it suited her. Her body, beautifully dressed, flaunted all the superficial sensuality, childlike immorality, artful grace, effortless

impetuosity, and lack of any practical long term commitment that held me totally spellbound. I remembered the day years before when we came down by the beach and lay on the sand, side by side, watching the waves wash in. She pulled her t-shirt up high, revealing her flat, bare stomach, and it caught the sun and glimmered while I gazed on, wide-eyed, awe-struck. Did she remember this too? I forgot to ask. By the middle of the day we were viciously drunk and talking about other things.

‘Tell me everything I’ve missed,’ she said.

I told her.

‘Shit,’ she said and sneezed in my face. It was high summer and she had a cold and ectoplasm kept exploding from her nose at regular intervals. I had filled her in regarding 1993 and 1994. Then 1995 and 1996...then 1997...there were other things too, but I couldn’t tell her the half of them... my life was suffocating me like a Mediterranean hotel room without a decent air conditioning system...

‘Do you mind me talking about it?’

‘No,’ I lied. ‘Not at all.’ But there was so little discernible malice inside Jodie, I didn’t mind too much. We laughed the conversation away and stumbled into some late bar off the Tottenham Court Road. Drugged-up and rhythmically challenged, we invaded the dance floor: publicly demonstrating our crudely limited repertoire of basic clubland moves. ‘I get so lonely by myself,’ she said. ‘Don’t you?’ ‘No,’ I lied. ‘I never do.’ She was now propping herself up unsteadily against the gaudy neon bar. ‘So how are Ellis and Elise these days?’ she hollered over the infernal disco racket. I told her everything was great as far as I could see. ‘Relationships are like shoes,’ she slurred knowingly. ‘They always wear out in the end.’

Outside, Jodie watched the stars.

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Days later, by a simple twist of fate, she ran into Ellis in the metaphysical romance section of the Dillons bookstore on Oxford Street. Literally. The two of them picked themselves off the carpet and spent the rest of the day together, reminiscing wildly, eyes blazing with the past. Later, they ate Indonesian near Leicester Square. Jodie swiftly became a familiar guest at the ranch, much to the chagrin of Elise. One weekend, after Elise got violently drunk and crashed out cold on the bathroom tiles, Ellis made a fumbled attempt to slither his way inside Jodie's shorts. He told her he loved her, had done for years and years, etc. But his lines were so see through, Jodie saw through them. She exited like a shot, Elise found out and Ellis departed with a small over-night bag, never to return. I saw him soon after, looking shit-like, his heart shattered in at least one or two places. 'Damn my hormones,' he raged, but the next thing I knew, he was running away to Sheffield with Donna, an elf-like ex-student of his, and the ranch was up for sale.

Elise and Jodie legally adopted each other as sisters after that.

When the paperwork first went through, I was pleased for them. But I soon realised that as far as Jodie was concerned, this meant I was right out of the bigger picture. Now they only had time for themselves. The more she ignored me, the drunker I got. A nasty thought bugged me too: was this thing sexual between them? She had told me about her tendencies before and now other people were talking too. Basically I didn't believe these spurious stories. (Because I never believe anything anyone tells me.)

But, even so, I kept wondering...

And my heart was so full of bad shit now it was eating me up from the inside out. Still, I managed to put on my shiny happy public facade and

travel over to see Jodie and Elise in their new Islington flat where we sat up all night drinking cheap white wine. Two bottles. Then three. Then four. Then five. Then six. I lost count after six. The good things? Elise had dyed her hair red again and Jodie was almost too much fun, back at last, with her tales of minor celebrity boyfriends and multitudinous media sex. The bad? I realised I had yet to say half the things I wanted to say to Jodie. And I guessed now I never would. They did seem strangely symbiotic also, the two of them cooking Chinese noodles, joined at the hip. If this thing wasn't sexual, then what was it? Worse still, the entire class of 89 finally seemed to be sorting themselves out, every one of them moving on to the next chapter of their lives. Everyone, that was, except me. Somehow I was still frozen inside, frozen by the past, frozen in the present. Unable to move on. Everybody seemed to be advancing in some sense. Except for me.

And except for Susan.

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Mind-fuck.

Around Christmas 1997, like a phone call out of the blue, Susan telephoned. Poor Susan. She told me about Bruce, this man she had met on the internet, another duff significant other. They were magically engaged now. 'A new year; a new life,' she said. A cute epitaph, but I had major league doubts. Still, I kept my mouth buttoned. 'I'm actually happy,' she gushed. It was the first time I had heard her say this in five years.

'What about Bernard?' my mouth blurted suddenly.

I felt white-faced, embarrassed.

I had mentioned the unmentionable.

‘What about Bernard?’ Susan spat back unapologetically.

What indeed? One bright autumn day back in 1993, without saying a word to his boss, his mother, his father, Susan, or even me, he had packed up his desk at the Sentinel and simply disappeared. They found his bottle green Beetle abandoned, parked haphazardly by a remote train station. It turned out, a few weeks after he’d vanished into the ether, that he’d conveniently left behind: a strapping overdraft, numerous credit card debts, and a horde of people including his bank manager who were rather keen to catch up with him concerning his whereabouts. As the years passed, I invariably pictured him backpacking, experimenting with facial hair, searching for enlightenment in Tibet like he always said he would. But he never wrote. He never got in touch.

And every time the telephone didn’t ring, I knew it wasn’t him.

Deep down, I realised the chance of his ever coming back diminished with every passing moment, faded with every fleeting dawn. Yet his face still shone in vivid Polaroid: a screen print on my soul, romantically airbrushed: fixed, unchanged; like the modern world with the edges taken off, a long gone golden age before it’s innocence and charm were brutally obliterated. ‘What about Bernard?’ His car still sat in the same driveway, even now — forever untouched, untainted by life’s ironic emplotments. So why wasn’t he dead to me? Dead: deceased: dissipated: departed: depleted: deleted: expired: expunged: excised: erased?

Why?

Why?

Why?

Why?

Somewhere I mislaid a decade. Carelessness, you might call it. And like a third rate Brazilian cabaret singer I had secretly given up on any shot at making a comeback. Suddenly everything I ever wanted had passed me by. But something was happening. I could sense it. A quiet revolution was in the air. I heard talk of new media and other potentially life-changing issues: 'You're one of those people with a really interesting past, aren't you?' Jodie said, another day, another bar. She and Elise were planning to wed: New Year's Eve, Honolulu, or so they told everyone...

'Well, perhaps,' I muttered, tired hand slapped round a beer. 'But, to be honest, I'd rather not be.'

'Why?' she asked.

She was wearing dark blue 501s and carrying a copy of Country Life.

Why? I unbuttoned my shirt, pulled it open, revealed the yawning cavity in my chest, the hollow of broken bones where my heart used to beat once, years ago, before the internet and other associated social revolutions. Her expression widened, crawled puzzled across her face. She peered inside, took a closer look.

FIRST PUBLISHED ONLINE BY PULP.NET at
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/06/in-the-days-before-the-revolution.html>

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