

BREAKDOWN

1969

Joe strode across Hyde Park. He was late for a seminar at Queen Mary's College in the East End. He was studying for a history degree and had six months to go until finals. He was confident of passing, but not at all sure what to do once he had. Special knowledge of the Entente Cordiale between August 1904 and April 1905 didn't really qualify you for anything in particular and his aim of being a rock star seemed as far off as ever – imitation Dylan in the University folk club wasn't exactly making it.

He was twenty-one and had come to University straight from a public school near Leicester. He'd been keen to hide his background, but his voice and tendency to take control gave him away. He had revived the folk club, started and starred in a University Revue Society and resurrected a moribund film unit that had one 8mm camera with the lens falling off and a projector with no motor. Other students (male) tended to look up to him, or resent him; other students (female) tended to befriend him, but go no further. One student (female) said she couldn't have a relationship with him, because of their differing backgrounds – 'How can the daughter of a fisherman from Fleetwood ever hope to be equal partners with the son of a landowner from Leicester?' But, she'd added, he was 'Alright', which according to her meant, in Lancastrian, that he was a pretty fine bloke. So they'd gone on being friends and sharing the vocals on Peter, Paul and Mary songs. The only woman he had slept with was Kate, a former debutante studying French, and because sleeping with a girl meant having to go steady with her in order to sanctify the original sin, they were still together

The only woman he really fancied was the president of the student's union. For several weeks he watched her and fantasised about doing it together. Then one night he found himself at the same party as his pin-up. She was standing surrounded by admirers, statuesque in her black boots and mini-skirt. He didn't want to join the hangers-on so involved himself in a conversation about the Battle of El Alamein (1643 not 1942) with Paul, a pasty faced fascist obsessed with military manoeuvres. He kept a sideways eye on the boots and learnt more and more useless information about the battle harness of Bedouin camels and the scything power of scimitars, until eventually – just as the camels were about to lock humps – the president came over and asked if she could make a guest appearance in his revue. 'Of course!' said Joe, and left Paul with his scimitar unsheathed. He danced with the president, even put his hand down the back of her trousers – though only after she had put hers down the front of his – and then they went back to her place. But he couldn't make it. She was everything he'd imagined, but coping with the reality was too much. He lay on his back trying to fuse his fantasy with her flesh, while she sat on top trying to fuse his flesh with her fanny – all to no avail. After that Joe lost faith in his libido and worried he had been masturbating too much. Only after sleeping with Kate did he feel reassured. She said it was super and made no great demands on him sexually. He entered her and fantasised about the president while she smiled and stroked his brow. He felt guilty, but she said she was happy as long as he was.

Well, he wasn't happy today. He reached Marble Arch and wondered whether to run across the stream of cars. He decided against it and entered the underpass. He hated London. He hated the traffic, the smell, the number of people and the distances he had to travel. He'd much rather have been at a provincial university with a proper campus – like his friend Charlie in Leeds.

He saw a man emerge from the toilets with bucket and mop, and felt jealous. This man didn't have to think, didn't have to worry about achieving and climbing the next rung on the ladder; he didn't have to live up to other people's expectations because they didn't have any of him. So why did Joe have to be different? Stand out from the crowd, be in charge? Was it because his older brothers had taken all the easy roles, leaving him the difficult soul-searching parts? Leaving him to climb the stairs alone?

He flashed a pass at the ticket collector and ran for the escalator. But on reaching the stairs, he felt dizzy. He leant against the banister and gulped down breaths of stale air. The adverts slipped by – suntan lotion, bikinis, insurance firms and underwear. Smooth men, proportioned women, legs in boots, bottoms in jeans; Marlboro man and Pretty Polly tights – be tough if you're in Y-fronts, soft if you're in bras. He reached the platform as a blast of warm air heralded a train. He took a step back, the faintness returned. He always felt uneasy in the underground but today something worse was welling up.

The train rattled in, the doors opened and he followed a man in denims into the nearest carriage and sat down. The doors closed, the train moved off. The man lit a cigarette, stretched out his legs and stared at a woman smelling of incense seated next to Joe. Joe stared at his own image in the window opposite – long hair, flower-patterned shirt, moustache and John Lennon glasses – then shifted his gaze to the mini-ads. Say it with flowers and learn to type fast, be a man on the move or a temp sec with class. Be anything you like, but not what you are.

Joe closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on history.

The train stopped at Bond Street and Marlboro man stepped off. The rolling movement of hard masculine buttocks disturbed Joe and converted his analysis of the Entente into concern that he might be homosexual. He had held

a boy's willy at school, fancied a thirteen-year old dressed up as a girl in the school play and, as a new boy, enjoyed being fancied by others – he had got to number two on the house ‘pash’ list, graced prefects’ studies with his presence and looked pretty when seniors came to call. Later, when a prefect himself, he had enjoyed new boys fluttering eyelashes at him, adopting provocative poses and pouting as he passed their dormitory partitions or ‘tishes’ – daring each other to say: ‘Goodnight, Joe’, instead of ‘Goodnight, Travis’. And when he had shouted ‘Lights out!’, drawn the curtain to his own partition and climbed into bed, he had often imagined his hand pulling at a new boy’s jock strap, his head squeezed between buttocks in the heat and smell of a rugby scrum. He had hated rugby for its violence, loved it for the touching – wanted the touching to divert the violence, to soften hearts for kissing not harden them for control. But did that make him queer?

The doors shut. The train jolted but failed to move. The doors opened, closed again. The train rolled forward.

Joe returned to the Entente, but history could not compete with hang-ups. His head felt faint; his pulse raced. He deep breathed; his chest constricted. He put a hand to his mouth and saw sweat on his palm. He closed his eyes, but the darkness moved. He looked for a map. Two, four, six, eight, ten – ten stops to go. Could he make that? A sensation swept over his body – a cold, clammy surge. He had experienced it twice over the last month, but managed to push it away. Just panic, the doctor said, nothing to worry about. But why not an impending heart attack or brain tumour about to turn terminal?

He lowered his eyes in search of his reflection – an external image to settle the inner turmoil. But it wasn't there. Somebody had replaced it. He tried to shift his gaze but the person opposite was too striking to ignore: knee-high boots, tight trousers, red lips and made-up eyes – black and blue and staring at

him. Forbidden images programmed to arouse response. He should smile, give a glance of appreciation – like Marlboro man; combat feminine wile with male cool – Marlboro man beats Eliot boots. Should do this, should do that; conform to the norm, play your part. But he was tired of following the ‘oughts’ and as his heart raced and his breath caught he wanted to cry, to turn her sex appeal into sympathy, the come-on into kindness. His eyes swam. He coughed; reasserting his presence, reasserting his identity against the one arranged for him and plastered on the hoardings. The train stopped. The woman departed, her buttocks full and vulnerable, not blocked and silted like the man's.

Joe waited for calm to return.

But his heart still drummed and reality continued to unravel. Now there was only a vague definition between where he began and the world ended, between what he saw and what saw him. He stood, the doors shut. He clutched at a strap – legs shaking, heart pounding, ears deafened by the noise from a window that he couldn't shut because the woman of incense sat in the way. The train must reach a station in ten seconds or he'd die. He closed his eyes and counted. One, two, three, four, five... The train stopped – in the tunnel. He cleared his throat, pulled his earlobe – dug nails into his palms. But the panic swept up to his head, down to his heart. He fought it, but knew he was losing. He *was* going to die.

Then the train moved on.

At the next station he ran to the escalator, lurched past the ticket collector and emerged into the sunlight of a street he had never seen before. He hailed a taxi and said: ‘Take me to hospital – I'm dieing.’ The driver offered him a choice of two. In casualty, Joe repeated, ‘I'm dieing!’ and was told to fill in a form. When a doctor arrived, he was asked if he'd been running. ‘No’, he said, ‘I'm dieing!’

He was given an electro-cardiogram and shown to be in good health. He didn't believe it, but the attention centred him and gave him food for thought: if he wasn't going to die but could no longer take the dark clouds of normality for granted, he must learn to live with the light and create his own shadow for protection. Or else end up on a funny farm, where the sun never set.