

# The Reunion

It comes as no surprise that even after so many years, a small group has already knotted itself around her at the bar. She is saying little but laughing a lot as their amusing anecdotes and memories of college days are offered up for her affirmation and approval. I watch from a distance, ostensibly chatting to a woman I cannot place but who seems to remember me. I glance over. She is wearing a sophisticated grey linen dress and I wonder how many of us could get away with anything sleeveless these days. Her hair has been well cut and coloured, and hangs casually unbrushed around her face. Even from this distance I can see her forehead is smooth and lines around the mouth and eyes have been carefully concealed probably without the need of surgical intervention. As she bends her head to listen to a mousey girl we all despised simply because she belonged to The Christian Union, she catches my eye and straightens up, excusing herself with a light tap on the arm, and makes her way towards me.

We stand awkwardly in the middle of the room. Well, I stand awkwardly but she is at ease pressing me for information about my family, how I have been, whether my career in teaching and then writing has ever come to anything. Desperate by now, I mention her Head Teacher of the Year award which she airily dismisses although not before showing me a photo of the celebration party she keeps in her wallet.

'Ridiculous' she laughs it off. 'I can't imagine what they possibly saw in me. The staff just nominated me for a laugh.' A coquettish giggle. I want to hit her.

'Beautiful dress' I plough on stubbornly, spiralling back to my eighteen year old self when all I craved was her attention.

'This? I can hardly believe I can still get into it after producing two hefty boys!' Subconsciously she smooths her hand over a flat stomach. Though of course, I recall, she does nothing subconsciously. We talk for a while, at least I do, until I feel drained, realising that she has extracted from me almost my entire life story when all I have learned about her is the provenance of the linen dress and the two hefty boys. I feel a familiar vulnerability as if I have given away a bit of me with no return. Suddenly she frowns coyly and, with eyes wide and head on one side, she says gently 'I heard Steve left you.' She squeezes my sleeved arm and leans towards me with a glazed expression of false concern. 'I'm so sorry. How are you?'

I can barely speak. I know that her own marriage has also ended a great deal more acrimoniously than mine, but she does not mention it, not even to utter the meaningless but comforting words 'I know how you feel.' Of course I know she certainly does not, but just like forty years ago when everything happened, I have no idea how she feels about anything.

In September 1970 I arrived, dragging my dad's old suitcase up the drive of a fading, stone house called Fernlea. It was in a sedate avenue of similar dwellings for which no one family could possibly afford the upkeep any longer. The local teacher training college had purchased several and transformed them into students' halls of residences. The rooms at Fernlea were brown and lofty, but as this was the first time living away from home for most of us, they represented the epitome of freedom and independence. I shared my room with a dreamy girl who spent much of her time in bed or mooning over the boyfriend she had left at home. I was not sorry when she left at the end of the first term although we had rubbed along pretty well, but I was glad to have the room to myself.

There were about sixteen others lodging at Fernlea, and Jill had the only other single room. Her face could best be described as striking – it was not one easily forgotten and I found her casual manner and easy laugh enviable. She was studying art and already seemed to have made friends. She was

never in the communal lounge where the knitters and TV watchers huddled together round the inadequate gas fire, and I only saw her in the college itself at lectures or very occasionally in the library. She was often with other art students who, with flair and look-at-me self-confidence, wore paint-spattered velvet jackets, enormous woollen jumpers which flapped around their knees, and odd little hats with feathers and seashells pinned to them. Growing up in 60s London, I had accumulated what I considered to be a decent wardrobe, and yet in this tiny Devonshire seaside town, I always felt out of place, out of step, out of kilter. Very soon of course, I realised that this had nothing to do with what I was wearing.

Unlike Jill, I attended tutorials religiously and enjoyed them not least because they enabled me to make friends, something which had always caused me great anxiety. Steve was also from London and slightly older than the rest of us. He was deceptively mild-mannered but had a sense of humour which was cynical and clever so that we all wanted to laugh with him to show we understood the joke. He was physically a big man and wore colourful striped rugby shirts or thick cotton fishermen smocks which for some reason I found endearing. We became friends and ate in the canteen together, or worked together in the library or went for a walk on the beach. After a few weeks, it reached the point where one of us inevitably wanted a bit more. Unfortunately that one was me.

College dances twice a term were a social highlight. We were predominantly a female student body and so an invitation to the dance would be sent to the local PE college to ensure there were enough males to balance things up a bit. They didn't take much persuading. The dances were loud, frenzied and raw affairs, where a forest of wild circling arms played air guitar in front of the band, and gossip and chitter chattering took place in the women's toilets. I went along to the first one with another girl from Fernlea who was pleasant enough but we had little in common and I suspected she attended Christian Union meetings. She didn't drink alcohol but, coming from a background where drinking was considered the devil's own work, I was determined to take advantage of the cut price spirits on sale at the bar.

It was while we were standing there (the noise made all conversation out of the question) that we saw Steve approach Jill and ask her to dance. They seemed to slide together, laughing and cavorting around with arms thrown in the air and bodies writhing seductively towards each other. Watching them I felt the disappointment experienced at so many other school dances, and soon afterwards when I had already drunk too much, we left and went home.

After that, lunch with Steve usually included Jill. I liked her though I had hoped I wouldn't. She was witty and generous, but always keen to offer advice which I stolidly ignored. The three of us got along well enough and I liked the fact that at last I was part of a clique, a recognised and accepted group in the college. Soon, Jill and I began to meet on our own for a coffee at the greasy spoon on the beach which sold watery hot chocolate and Wagon Wheels, a place that would eventually be fashionably retro. I remember thinking 'Is this my closest friend now then?' but strangely I was never able to answer that question.

At the beginning of our second year, we returned to college. Steve and Jill had been travelling around France but my holiday job temping in an office at the local hospital had been far less glamorous. I needed the money though, and had managed a brief unsatisfactory fling with a young medical student. Jill was tanned and yes, quite stunning but Steve was quiet and looked tired.

About two weeks into the term, there was a knock at the door. I was bored, lounging on my bed reading and was glad of the thought of some company. Steve stood there looking sheepish. 'Alright to come in?' he said, walking across the room. It was not unusual for him to call round but on this occasion I felt something wasn't right. He sat down heavily on the tatty old plastic armchair by the

window and looked up at me.

'Me and Jill have called it a day' he said. He fiddled with the zip on his rucksack, groaned and stretched, waiting for a response.

'Why? What happened?' I was keen to know and tried not to show it.

'Oh, I don't know. France was pretty shit. My wallet was nicked and we didn't have enough money to carry on. We ought to have come home. But she.....she....' He looked at his hands. 'She was such a cow.'

I wanted more details but could see he was upset so I sat down on the bed and waited. 'She met up with that Jack bloke – you know the one who makes those weird pots she really likes. They started mucking around and I felt right out of it. So she goes off to some bar with him but I was so pissed off with her I went back to the hostel. She came back at about 4 and for the rest of the time we were there, dear Jack was with us and he is such a prick. On the boat coming back she said 'I think we need to end this' and on the train from Southampton she didn't say a word. Then yesterday she comes at me, all smiles. I've had it with her.' He paused as if preparing for some kind of confession. 'It wasn't only that. She can be a real bitch....' He stopped as there was a knock at the door. I hoped it wouldn't be Jill but it was a student returning some notes. Steve got up to go and I was left wondering what the hell had gone on.

Despite this, I liked to be seen hanging around with Jill. She was popular with everyone and looking back, I have no idea why she decided I was the chosen one to be her friend. We enjoyed each other's company and I liked having someone to confide in about the many hang ups I had at that time - my weight, my self-confidence – oh, you know, all the things about which teenage girls have such angst. This was never reciprocated. I suppose I always assumed she didn't have any hang ups but I wasn't blind to her faults. She cheated in exams, somehow smuggling notes and quotes into the hall with little trouble, and she was forever asking others to write essays for her, looking at them with the doleful, moist eyes of a young puppy. At the end of a year when she had done very little work in the art studio, she borrowed other people's paintings and ceramics for her final exhibition. I laughed with her and marvelled at her audacity but felt uncomfortable and at times, secretly appalled.

I had never been the centre of attention, in fact I shunned it, but she thrived on the company of others, the larger the group the better. Seated in the centre, she exerted some kind of control, and could steer the conversation in any direction she chose with a lift of the eyebrow, a sigh or a grimace. Whispers and insults never left her lips but she joined in the laughter, in situations she had often initiated. Looking back, and even at the time, she never took responsibility for the hurt caused to her favourite targets - those with some kind of physical flaw. So perfect herself, she could not put herself in the shoes of someone with a speech defect, a skin condition, poor teeth. At one of the dances she suggested a group of us should see who could dance with the ugliest boy. I am ashamed to think of it now. We submitted our scores based on a point system Jill had devised, and at the end of the evening she placed a paper crown on the head of the unfortunate winner with a disingenuous smile.

For a few heady months at the beginning of our final year, before I ran out of money and was forced to return to Fernlea, Jill and I shared a flat. It was a dingy little place on a back street near the harbour which became the scene of many a raucous party, and many a visit from the local constabulary. Jill had the largest bedroom but my tiny box room became a haven for me. I felt I was living dangerously in that flat, with drugs and alcohol readily available, and the experience was both terrifying and enjoyable.

It was at one of our famous parties that we met Johnny Bertazzon, a mature student from Bologna who was Steve's new roommate. He was short and stocky with thick curly black hair and heavy brown rimmed glasses. He often appeared confused in this environment which was so alien to him

and for some reason, Jill was intrigued by him almost immediately. It wasn't long before she began treating him like her personal pet dog; she stroked his hair and made him eat chocolate from her hand. We were all embarrassed watching her do this, but at first Johnny went along with it with good humour. Gradually however he became more and more irritated but this had little impact on Jill's behaviour towards him.

'Good boy Johnny' she would cry as he approached and I half expected her to throw a stick for him to fetch. Steve was particularly angry about it and tried to persuade Johnny to spend his time as far away from Jill as possible, but to no avail. The trouble was, it was obvious to us all, that Johnny had become obsessed with Jill. He put up with her cruelty and bullying for far too long, and would do anything as long as he could be with her. He would steal the cheese and yoghurt she liked from the little supermarket in town, drive her around in his tatty little mini, even pick her up from dates with other men. From the side-lines, Steve and I watched and after one particularly excruciating evening he turned to me and said: 'See? Look at her. Look what she's doing. See what I mean now?'

On the penultimate night of our time at college, I went to the bar because I deserved a drink. I often deserved a drink these days. Because he had offered to transport it back to London, I had struggled up the road to Steve's digs with the bulk of my luggage. He was leaving early to go back for a job interview and I was disappointed he wouldn't be around on our last night though decided it was unwise to investigate my feelings about that too deeply. The bar was as crowded and as noisy as usual and a request to turn the music up was met with a sour refusal from the barman. It was a tiny little place but much loved, the location of many an alcohol-fuelled singalong or one night stand. I saw Johnny sitting on a radiator in the bay window and he called me over, moving up to make room for me to sit down.

'You look pleased with yourself.' I smiled at him. I had grown fond of him, and these days I always seemed to be trying to make amends for Jill's behaviour.

'I've been trying to pack. The room looks a tip. I was going to leave tonight but I'm going to go to the farewell dance now.' He looked into his drink then up at me. He seemed to be waiting for me to dissuade him, and I didn't know how to respond. So many of these dances had been scenes of humiliation, when Jill mocked or refused to dance with him. I couldn't understand why he would want to put himself through that yet again.

'Jill just called round. She asked me to go with her.' Through the thick lens of his glasses, I couldn't read his expression though there was a certain sadness in the set of his mouth. He laughed in a self deprecating way. 'So at least I can die a happy man.'

Despite it being the final one, there was nothing exceptional about the farewell dance except perhaps its poignancy – this was an event we would never experience again. There was a good deal of ostentatious weeping amongst some of the girls who had drunk too much and who hugged each other with loud promises of lifelong friendship, always an unreliable proposition I thought. Afterwards, ten of us managed to squeeze into two cars (one, a shabby red Beetle, barely roadworthy, which Jill had recently acquired), and we drove over to West Bay. The moon was high but we didn't feel the chill as we set about collecting driftwood for a fire. This took ages. Apart from Jill, all of us were fairly drunk, and we were relieved to collapse on to the rugs she had brought from the car and laid under an outcrop of rocks on the beach.

At first the atmosphere was good, celebratory even – a group of friends enjoying their last night together. But soon some of the group began to disappear into the dunes, and finally only Jill, Johnny and I were left by the fire. I looked at them both and thought, why not let Johnny have a final attempt at winning Jill's heart even if it was just for tonight? Their body language did not look promising. Jill was smoking a cigarette and looking around her as if she had lost something. Johnny was prodding a stick into the fire. I decided to go for a walk down by the shoreline and leave them to it.

The sea was flat but uninviting and I felt no enthusiasm for a midnight swim. I walked over the damp, shingly sand working hard to drum up a feeling of melancholy but all I really felt was slightly nauseous. In some ways the three years had gone by quickly, but in other ways I couldn't explain, I felt scarred by them.

I had wandered a good way off by now and felt cold and miserable. I turned to see not one bonfire under the rocks but two, one smaller than the other and turning around like ignited tumbleweed. I made my way back and could just make out Jill staring at the fire, still smoking, and drawing a rug around her shoulders. As I got closer, I heard it. Wailing, loud cries, followed by shouts as the rest of the group emerged from the dunes and ran back down to where both fires continued to burn brightly.

For a few seconds we stopped and stood in shocked silence. Johnny lay on his back, the flames engulfing the right hand side of his body. The flimsy red silk shirt which we had watched him prance around in only a few hours earlier, lay in tattered strips across his chest like ragged streams of black blood. The frames of his glasses had partially melted on to his face distorting his features into a grotesque mask, and just a few singed curls of black hair could be seen on top of his head. His trousers were still burning around his legs and in fact that fire seemed to be gaining momentum as he crawled along the sand, no energy left to scream any longer, just a low moan coming from his cracked and swollen lips. I noticed his beloved black suede boots, now covered in wet sand and ash.

By then the others had begun to run around Johnny's body shouting to each other and crying, too stoned and too hysterical to do anything very constructive. Someone threw a bottle of cider over him which did not help, and blankets, tossed towards him rather than over him, quickly started to smoulder as the fire took hold. We jabbed at him ineffectively with bits of driftwood trying to separate the burning cloth from his darkening flesh. Gradually his movements became slower and slower until finally he lay down exhausted and rolled over into a small rockpool. We heard the final flames hiss as small clouds of grey smoke swirled around his body.

I took off my sweater and laid it over him, then stood alongside him, frozen. Someone screamed at Jill to go and get help, and she looked up with a slightly bemused expression. She stood and carefully brushed sand from her trousers before strolling across the sand to the place where the road met the beach. I watched as she disappeared over the hill. She did not look back.

We stood in a circle, too late to protect him.

With sobs and with whimpers, laid more clothes upon him.

A group of young kids with no clue what to do.

It was almost an hour before an ambulance and police car arrived. Johnny was now quite still and I could not bear to look at his face although Jill, having returned at last, did stare down at him a few times. For one terrible moment, I thought she was going to lean down and pat him. 'Good dog.'

After the police and the ambulance had finally gone, driving in fits and starts over the unforgiving sand hillocks, I walked back to Fernlea in a dreamlike daze. The sun was already struggling to lighten a stubbornly grey sky as I climbed in through the lower window, always kept ajar for us late night revellers – hah! - and climbed the stairs to my room. Laying on my bed, sleep would not come and so at about seven, I showered away the sand and the smell of burning embers before slowly packing up the rest of my things in the same little battered suitcase I had arrived with three years before.

Jill was collecting me in the car at 11 so that we could drive back to London together. Without thinking about it too much, I crept down the drive in front of Fernlea for the final time and walked

the mile or so to the railway station. The ticket to London cost almost three times more than the amount I planned to give Jill for petrol but I could still afford a few pence for a coffee from the machine on the platform. It was barely that – bitter hot water with an apologetic froth. I tried to read my book so as not to meet the eye of other students making an early getaway, and on the train I couldn't sleep but sat in glum silence as I tried and failed to leave the night behind.

I did not contact Jill and she did not contact me. In fact, although I received snippets of news from college friends over the years and spotted the photo of her winning Head Teacher of the Year in the Evening Standard, I never saw her again. Until. Until a grim little college reunion I bitterly regret attending where inevitably we met up with each other. She was almost unchanged: her beauty and spite were undiminished and yet both appeared now to have a bitter edge. She wanted to share some cruel college reminiscences which still amused her, but even as I was talking in that irritating manner I always used when speaking to her, I was making the decision to leave, get away from her as fast as I could.

Neither of us mention the one thing which for me at least, has shaped and twisted my memories of college, obliterating any happy ones I may have had. What really happened that night? Why didn't you help him? Do you ever think of him and grieve? I want to ask her but of course I don't. As I gather my things together, she turns to go and saunters back to the bar. She does not look back.