

## A DAY IN THE LIFE

After I dropped out of university, I had a minor breakdown.

Not the kind to write home about, mind. The strange, unassuming kind, where you catch your reflection in the dirty puddle of rainwater in the Aldi parking lot and your eyes look very strange. And you stare and stare until you wonder if you're tripping or if there's a neurological disease slowly eating away at your visual cortex, or if that fourth can of energy drink might've been one can too many judging by the way your heart is racing and your hands are shaking and your eyes in that puddle look weirdly like playdough and you can't feel your legs— oh that's a panic attack, isn't it? Anyway, what was I saying?

Yes, aforementioned breakdown.

There's really not that much to talk about. I failed to get my degree in engineering at 24 years of age. Too "mid-twenties" to be feeling anything other than depressed and far too unemployed, in debt, and aimless to be anything other than plagued by perpetual nervousness. I've never wanted to be an engineer; I've always been bad at maths. Pray tell, why'd I studied engineering, then?

My great uncle, in a feat that never remains unmentioned by my working-class mum, had escaped the council estates to become a physics professor. And much in the same way my parents, to this day, remain adamant that I am fond of rye bread, just because I'd baked a loaf of it in elementary school, they also think I'm great at maths, because I'd "enjoyed counting as a toddler". Thus, it had been decided that I, too, was destined to be a genius with a proclivity for anything STEM. And since I had always been a spineless wee bastard I'd thought "Yes, I will happily follow the path set out before me and disappoint my parents by my inevitable failure". Obviously, that's not what I'd hoped would happen. I had clung to the idea of some hidden talent that would blossom at uni. But I'd also sort of expected it to happen and when it did, I frankly wasn't really surprised. I'd always been a bit daft.

So essentially what I am saying is that if I had shut up about my "faywoit number" at age four, I might've been able to escape my fate and this crisis I was having.

There. Now you know me. My predicament. A fate shared by hundreds and thousands of other adolescents – I blame Thatcher, by the way – so I'm aware that my suffering is in no way interesting or cool.

And you know what boring people tend to do? They look for cool people they can idealise, and secretly hate a bit. My roommate Johnny was that guy. He was dead cool. He was proper cool. I resented him. I loved him. First off, he had a single dangly hoop earring hanging from his left ear. Two, his hair was dyed black and always styled into a quiff. Three, he played the

guitar in a band, and four, he studied art. The general air of danger and androgyny surrounding him, combined with the fact that he was ambitious and bloody eighteen made me feel geriatric and boring.

“Johnny,” I’d say, “would you like to smoke some of the green stuff with me? The weed?” Puff an invisible joint to really drive the point home. Johnny would look up at me blankly, gesture vaguely towards his bedroom door and leave without a word. Wow, even him rejecting me was so cool.

The danger that comes with anything we hold dear is that it is oh-so easily lost; a blink, a heartbeat, it’s gone. That is to say I was always a bit paranoid that Johnny would move out. It was always on my mind – had I mentioned there wasn’t much else going on in my life? Yeah. So, some Tuesday morning I was sat in our living room, looking out at the rain. I wasn’t thinking about what I’d get up to that day, I was long past that point. Time passed. I didn’t really care. Johnny stepped into view. He was wearing a black turtleneck sweater. He was the sort of guy who was able to pull off a turtleneck sweater without looking like a turtle (the name is quite misleading in that way) or an insidious mime. He was rummaging around his record collection when I thought it’d be best to say something fun and spontaneous.

“Here, how mad is it that rain doesn’t actually clean the windows, right? Just leaves behind streaks of dirt.”

Johnny’s back was still turned, but I was pretty sure I heard him sigh. He straightened up and looked at me.

“Listen, mate. We’ve been living together for how long, three months?”

“Yeah.”

“I haven’t really seen you leave the flat.”

“Right.”

“Yeah, so, maybe do that.”

“Right,” I mumbled, hastily adding, “this doesn’t mean you want to move out, right?”

“What? Why do you keep asking me – no. Just saying you should cool it with ... whatever it is you’re doing all day.”

“Right. Cool it. I can be cool.” Johnny glanced at me with a single raised eyebrow. I gave him two weak thumbs-up and forced my face into the semblance of a cheerful expression. It felt wrong, and considering how Johnny’s eyebrows climbed up to his hairline, it looked just as wrong on my face. He scratched his neck and grabbed his guitar case. “I’m off to band practice.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

There I was, left to my own devices again. The emptiness of the space around me grew, the air drowning me with its oppressive, yet familiar aroma of damp walls, stale chips and dirty laundry. A sudden jolt of energy ripped me out of the sofa cushions and I hastily stumbled through the labyrinth of discarded clothing, dirty dishes and books towards the living room window, ripping it open in one swift motion. A gust of rainy-cool air hit my face and I reflexively squeezed my eyes shut. Drops of water hit my cheeks and I drew in a long, long, long shuddering breath.

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Clad in my remaining clean clothes I stepped out onto the damp pavement, almost slipping to my death on a brightly coloured plastic bag, nearly falling at the first line of defence of the outside world. Wow, I thought, that's the thrill of being alive! And a granny gave me a worried once-over! Now, where to next? A few friends came to mind, but the act of asking them to grab coffee seemed tedious. So, I made my way in the general direction of the city centre, a faint memory of market stalls, fruits and veggies beckoning me. Vitamins, my body seemed to remember, were important. I wondered if it was possible to get scurvy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to a diet based around Chilli Heatwave Doritos and oats. Never mind, I pushed on, and all clear thought was replaced by the humdrum noise of traffic and passers-by.

The passing of time and the change of space escaped my notice completely and suddenly the market square came into existence around me. My scuffed leather shoes carried me to the closest stall, where a grim looking woman cried "Bananas!" over and over again in a seemingly endless loop. I didn't really know what to do with myself now that I'd reached my destination, so I just stared down at her display stiffly. And then the mist of surrealism that'd mantled my short excursion lifted with a suddenness that left me whiplashed.

Johnny had been right. I'd really lost the plot stuck in our flat.

And now I was just stood there.

"Son, you want to buy something or not?", the woman asked gruffly, chewing on a piece of gum.

I swallowed. I hadn't accounted for interacting with other human beings and the challenges that came with that. I couldn't just turn around and leave, right? I just pointed a shaky finger at the vegetables in front of me.

She followed my line of sight and raised a single, white, carrot like thing I'd never seen in my life before. I frankly thought it looked like something someone found while uprooting their garden and figured they could sell on eBay for a laugh.

"You want parsnips?"

She probably thought I was deaf or mute or something, because she wiggled the white carrot thingy in front of my face, and I, in my infinite capacity to make my life harder, just nodded.

“How many?”

I raised five fingers. Damnit.

She rapidly procured a bottle green plastic bag, placed it on her scale and added one parsnip.

And another.

And another.

And another.

And another.

Etc. You get the gist.

Remember that I was a competent counter? Well, even if I hadn't been quite as gifted in that particular area, I would've been able to tell that the number of parsnips had quickly exceeded five and had now reached approximately ten or so.

Now, again, I was pretty dazed at that point, so I simply paid, grabbed my two bags of parsnips and left without really questioning this behaviour. I have since formed a theory. I think she'd assumed I'd wanted five pounds worth of parsnips – her eagerness to get rid of them is very understandable. Either way, the sheer debauchery of this number of exotic vegetables left me breathless and eager to return to the safety of my flat. I couldn't be bothered to walk back and decided to take the bus home.

I wasn't let off the hook that easily, however, because as soon as I took a seat, I was met with the unblinking stare of an old man with a very Marxist looking beard. His eyes were lit up by an eager twinkle that scared me. The only thing I knew about Marx was something about expropriation. I hugged my parsnips protectively.

“Son,” Was my appearance particularly inviting of familial terms?

“you're looking blue.” Mister Marx didn't elaborate on that statement any further and took my silence for assent; he nodded.

“This society,” and he made a wide sweeping gesture, “tires us out ceaselessly. Look at you!” He clapped his hands enthusiastically.

“No older than eighteen, -“

“-uh, well, actually.”

“- and already depressed and tired of everything.” I opened and shut my mouth several times, shifted, and prayed for this bus ride to be over soon. He scratched his beard and frowned thoughtfully. Then he procured a tattered *Communist Manifesto* from his long black coat and held it like a conductor's baton.

“You need to understand the arbitrariness of that pressure to perform you feel, son. Never give it your all, son. Earn money to live, not for its own sake! No more than 80 % performance for any given task, you understand? Laziness is nothing to be frowned upon! No, praise laziness in this day and age of aimless efficiency, you understand?”

“The thing that drives us mad nowadays is loneliness. The fear to show solidarity with the working class. The lack of charity! If Jesus came back today, he’d be gunned down cold by the CIA, son.” Marx clasped his hands underneath his chin, looking very pleased with himself, like he’d said something very clever. I was getting anxious and was really looking for an out. This day had gone on for far too long.

“Listen Mister Marx, I don’t know all that much about Communism, but I’d be willing to give you half of the parsnips I’ve got here. Would that be a political act in support of your movement?”, I asked and held out one of the bags, praying he’d be materialistic enough to forget about his speech for a minute.

Mister Marx grabbed the bag tentatively.

“Comrade.”, was all that left his chapped lips.

He looked genuinely touched. I took that as my cue to leave and as I stood, he saluted me, a bit misty eyed. I almost felt bad that I really couldn’t care less about the parsnips when they evidently brought him so much joy.

As I watched the bus take off again with a diesel-huff, I wondered if there was something poetic to be found in this short encounter between two lonely souls, and if Mister Marx had spoken to me because he’d recognised some part of himself. The parsnips seemed to me to be a marker of my victory. Over what exactly, I didn’t know. I made my way back to our flat, but not without accidentally stepping into a muddy puddle.

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“Johnny, what exactly can you cook with 2.5 pounds of parsnips?”

Johnny looked up from where he was sat with his guitar, a considering expression on his face.

“You’re a strange cunt, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. That’s a fair assessment.

“I suppose.”

He sighed. “I don’t know the first thing about cooking, but there’s hardly ever a time you need 2.5 pounds of anything, really. Least of all parsnips.”

Another very insightful and fair assessment. Bloody Johnny.

“But I’m sure we’ll be able to think of something, mate. I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

The End.