

How to fall off a soapbox

Back then, I wanted to kiss Margaret Thatcher. I knew she'd done for Jeff's lot like she did for the miners and I wanted to pucker up and press my mouth to that powdered, adamantine face.

Didn't of course; knew my lips would have stuck to her like Gail Holden's tongue stuck to the ice cube tray that time she licked it during Double Cookery.

All the same, I would have liked to have thanked Margaret somehow because I thought she'd started the beginning of the end. One day soon I would watch that posturing bloke with his own loudhailer turn back into Jeff and maybe he would stop fighting everyone else's battles and start putting in some time on the home front.

Or even my front.

Of course, it wasn't like that at the start – it never is, is it? Otherwise no one would start anything.

In the beginning, we stood united, indivisible, as one. I'd spotted Jeff on his soapbox down by the park when I was twenty, a crowd nodding their heads every time he punched the air to underline a point and the guys selling *The Socialist Worker* looking hacked off that he was making more progress with the proletariat than they were.

Soapbox? Funny how the old words stick. Upturned beer crate with a piece of wood on doesn't have the same pull, does it?

Anyway, whatever he was standing on, he lodged in my eye. He lodged in my ear too. I came from a family of monosyllabic males and a mother devoted to silent martyrdom. I had never heard words used so persuasively.

Although, to be honest, I didn't know whether I was more aroused by the way he got his tongue around 'the unfair practices employed when setting shift rates', or the muscles moving in his arm.

All that passion. I set about diverting it my way, but it wasn't easy. His heart belonged to Marx, and I wasn't the only woman after him. At first, I was at a disadvantage. Too posh, with my cosy job in the council (flexi-time and 20 days Annual Leave), but soon I was talking differently, dressing differently, trying 'arder and 'arder.

Jeez how I tried; how I worked to be working class enough, handing out leaflets, putting up posters, nod, nod, nodding at Jeff's point-making and scoring. I fetched the beer, washed the plates. I picketed his house, subtly.

If I felt myself faltering, I imagined him stripped to the waist at work and it spurred me on.

The day that the factory had its first walk-out, Jeff addressed the men outside. It was hands-in-pockets bitter, getting dark, and they stood, silently, looking up at him. I could see their breath rising into the night. As he talked, it seemed that they were smouldering; set alight by the righteousness of their cause.

'My' Jeff fanning them into flame.

Whenever I think of that scene now, those men remind me of cattle waiting in dumb ignorance for the truck to the abattoir.

It was that night that Jeff and I finally got together, him miles high from his own rhetoric and me far beneath him, as mute and adoring as the men had been.

The men. They were out for weeks and I joined them, packing in my job to stand in front of the factory, stamping my feet against the cold and the unfairness of the management. There I was again - proving I was more committed than anyone

else who might be tempted to put in a bid for Jeff's attention. It makes me sick to think back on it. How many pans of soup did I stir? How many slogans did I write in Magic Marker on bits of cardboard? Was that really me addressing the 'Wimmin's Groups', showing solidarity though nut loaves and knitted clichés?

Yes, yes, all me - because I thought he was worth the struggle. Because I was winning the fight when Jeff planted his kisses on me in public like official stamps of approval.

So what if some of the women, the ones my mother would have called 'coarse', looked at me as if I was a do-gooder in a poke bonnet?

When the strike officially ended with an agreement brokered by Jeff, he proposed to me. I accepted, imagining us marching together into a fairer future.

At our wedding reception in the local Club - my mother perched on the edge of her seat as though sitting any further back would give her piles - Jeff said he was looking forward to marriage; after all, he was a Union man.

Oh, how we laughed.

'Behind every good man...' his mother said as she zipped me into my 'going away' dress. It was only later I saw what a trite sop that was - an acceptance of inequality tricked out in a pretty compliment.

I expect, at the time, I just nodded.

Home was a small flat, stacked with Union paraphernalia, but we were hardly ever there. Jeff's success had got him noticed and we spent most weekends travelling to TUC events. He would disappear into rooms for 'a word' and I would scuff my heels with the other women until the door opened again and Jeff would emerge trailing smoke and promises.

Those were our best of times. Even in corridors, scrummed about by people debating and disagreeing, Jeff would put an arm around my shoulders or my waist. He had rough hands then.

I could say that I slipped through those fingers of his gradually, for no single reason, but that's the public version. We both knew everything changed when I *failed* to get pregnant. When I kept on not getting pregnant.

How could this be? I was Woman. I was meant to labour. My role was to labour, squat and deliver; possibly to get up afterwards and do a full nightshift too.

Soon our lovemaking felt more and more desperate, a form of work without perks or benefits. I grew to hate every peak and dip of that Artex ceiling in our bedroom.

Jeff said all the right things, but there was something about his delivery that suggested a mirror and a rehearsal had been involved. Happier providing support and consolation on a grand scale, he couldn't cope with despair as it stood weeping in his own bathroom every month. I would reach out expecting solid comfort and end up with two hands full of shirt. The best he could offer was a wispy patting that fell between my shoulder blades and reminded me of a baby being burped.

Around that time was when I first saw Jeff's 'look'. It was a facial shorthand suggesting I was the one with the body that wasn't co-operating. When that was confirmed and we learned that the inconceivable was non-negotiable, I caught something more distasteful coming off that 'look'. It spoke not only of me being unproductive, but also – a hop, skippety, synapse-jump forward - disenfranchised.

When I needed him most, another stoppage at the factory took him away. When he returned with his disciples, I could not be in the same room with all that

noise and life. Sitting on plastic, sweat-inducing chairs at meetings, I would feel the weight of an un-dandled baby on my lap.

But times they were a-changing. The long-drawn out death rattle of the miners; an end to secondary action; restricted picketing, injunctions. Suddenly the unions were losing the old battles again.

They lost them big time when the company shut the factory and transferred production abroad. The town began to look blank and closed in on itself. It smelled of standing water.

Yes, that was the point when I thought Jeff would step down off that bloody soapbox and concentrate on us. Perhaps even have time to think about adopting a child, god knew there were plenty in that town that needed looking after.

Two days into his 'retirement' the phone rang and he turned away from me as he lifted the receiver. I pieced together the betrayal in his replies. The Union was sending him a life raft in the form of a promotion to Headquarters. He was joining the 'soft hands' doing policy work.

Turned out it was a life raft for one. 'Best make a clean break, love,' he said.

It was hard to look at people in the street after that, although the consensus seemed to be that I'd been shafted as much as the town.

Finally, I shrugged off that poke bonnet. With an un-blinkered view, I could see I had sold myself something made from teenage infatuation with DH Lawrence and shame at being middle-class.

I went back to my old job and let the management walk all over me. Alistair his name was – good looking in a collar and tie kind of way. Clean fingernails. He had a

breath-taking understanding of the rules of supply and demand, but which one of us was doing the demanding I couldn't honestly say.

I still see him around town, he always gives me a wave from his Jag.

And Jeff? The only time I see him is if I don't hit the TV remote quick enough. There he is, puffed up and puffed out, mouthing the new employment mantras. You can almost see the gravy on his snout.

I'm sure if I looked hard enough, I'd see another woman standing behind him, nodding. Poke bonnet firmly in place.

THE END