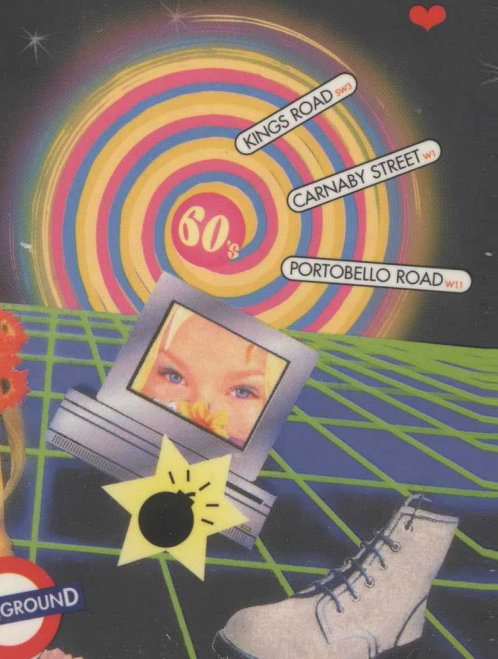


DEFINITIONS LOVE (lŭv) n. a feeling of desire, passion, yearning...

CHLOË RAYBAN

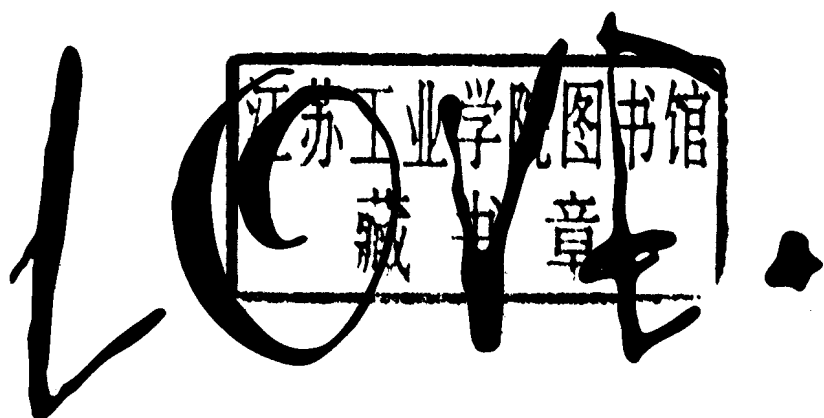
LOVE!

IN CYBERIA

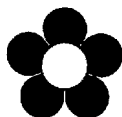


UNDERGROUND

CHLOË RAYBAN



IN CYBERIA



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I

I'd been seeing it a lot recently. Hidden among the balloon shapes of the graffiti, tucked in between words like PUNKS and WANDERERS, F.U. and PRUNES, accompanied by Peace signs and Swastikas – cropping up where fly-posters had been ripped off by park officials and alongside the standard willy-and-balls of the totally unimaginative graffiti-ist. Sometimes it was almost obliterated by black and white off-the-peg stencils – sometimes it stood there starkly, all on its own. A single word, written in four plain upright capitals:

LOVE.

with a big full stop after it.

Each time I saw it, I felt with a jolt, that this word was addressed exclusively to me.

I'd seen it on the way home from school that Monday. On a wall that I'd never seen graffiti on before. As if the unknown graffiti artist had left it there, knowing that I would be passing by . . .

LOVE.

I stood staring back at it for a moment. Four stark black

letters on a plain white wall. I considered all over again the questions that went through my mind each time I saw it. Who had written it? Why had they written it? And how the hell did they know that someone as gorgeous as me was going to be reading it? Then I shrugged, threw my school bag over my shoulder and headed for home.

That was the day before the day I grew up. No seriously. I'd always thought that growing up was a gradual process that kind of creeps up on you. That you can't actually tell it's happening – like watching the hands on a clock to see if they move. But that's rubbish. I can actually pinpoint the moment I grew up. I was on top of a number 22 bus heading west down the King's Road.

I was just sitting gazing through the murky window when I saw these tacky bunches of flowers propped up against the Fire Station.

'What are all those flowers doing there?' I asked the bus inspector, who just happened to be scrutinizing the smudge over the date on my now invalid under-16 bus pass.

He peered through the grime and said: 'Oh that. That's for Tom Peterson. Died the other day, he did.'

'But he can't have.' I craned out of the window searching along the pavement. Tom was nowhere to be seen.

The inspector shrugged and continued making his way along the upper deck of the bus.

Tom couldn't have died. I'd checked on him only last Saturday and he'd been fine. He'd even been awake.

Perhaps I ought to explain. Tom Peterson was my own personal good cause. I'd normally see him twice a day from the bus. Once on the way to school and then again on my

way back home. Tom was my one little bit of reassurance that there was a life outside school and work – reality beyond that whole treadmill thing that we're all caught up in – commonly known as day-to-day life. I'd be in the bus with all these tied-to-the-treadmill people. They'd all be heads down, destined for offices and interviews, dentists and exams and God knows what. And there would be Tom, waving and grinning, set nicely aside from it all. Tom had lived in the sheltered bit under the Fire Station for as long as I could remember. He was comparatively well off by tramp standards, fully kitted out with a jumbo-sized supermarket trolley stacked with army blankets and newspapers and Sainsbury bags bulging with all those peculiar tramp possessions that don't bear too much investigation.

My visit to Tom had been a ritual I'd secretly and religiously observed every Saturday – when I wasn't hauled away to grandparents or on holiday or something. I don't want to sound as if I want credit for this or anything, but part of the ritual was that each Saturday, I'd give Tom a share of my pocket money. Giving hard earned money away like that isn't as easy as it sounds. You have no idea the agonies of soul-searching I went through when Daddy gave me a raise and I had to work out what would be a fair percentage to hand over to Tom.

I'm not absolutely sure if Tom actually noticed my donations or recognised me or anything. Sometimes he'd kind of wave his dreadlocks or raise a bottle at me, but mostly he'd just continue contentedly muttering to himself. But it wasn't gratitude I was after. No, those small ritual contributions were my kind of insurance. If I missed a week, I'd feel really ghastly, as if something terrible was almost bound to happen. These donations were a defence against the great threatening walls of indifference that I could feel towering around me. I don't

want to get heavy here, but you know all the stuff I mean – like Bosnian refugees and wars in Rwanda and holes in the ozone layer and your cat getting run over. Handing over to Tom his Saturday money was my way of fighting back against the awful powerlessness I felt against the weight of all of the bad things that might be about to happen. Somehow, if I could see Tom was all right, I felt the world was all right, rotating round and round just as it should do, with me on it – not about to fly off because gravity had suddenly failed, or freeze to death because the sun had forgotten to rise or anything.

Anyway, all this came to an end that afternoon on the number 22 bus. As the last glimpse of the dusty bunches of wilting flowers slipped from my view, I had to accept the fact that Tom was dead. And all those Saturdays of dedicated financial investment on my part had to be seen for what they were – totally ineffectual against the harsh realities of life.

I hadn't felt so disillusioned since I discovered that the Tag Heuer Daddy brought me back from Singapore was a fake.

So it was an older, thoughtful, more mature, in fact, a 'grown up' me that the 22 bus carried over the transition where the King's Road became, in a quite eerily symbolic way – the *New King's Road*.

Once back at 122 Cheyne Walk, otherwise known as 'home', I hurried up to my room to check in the mirror as to whether my new adult status had actually registered itself physically in the way I looked.

I tried to judge myself objectively. The mirror reflected back: blonde streaked hair, shaggy at the ends where Franz had hacked off the bit we'd over-Sun-Inned – and beneath it, a face the pure unsullied oval of a grade A egg. I sucked

my cheeks in so that mature hollows appeared, and scrutinized my collar-bones for the beginnings of salt-cellars. I tried a Kate Moss slump-and-glower.

'You feeling all right?' My mother had thrust open the door and was leaning in looking concerned.

'I do wish you'd knock.'

She swept up a pile of underwear and a couple of coffee mugs from the floor and backed out saying: 'Honestly, Justine. I am your mother.'

'That's what I mean.'

Was there no such thing as privacy in this world? It was going to take some in-depth re-education to make her realise *I wasn't a child any more.*

I cast a glance around my room. Fred Bear stood propped up on my pillow proclaiming the fact that she'd made my bed for me. She'd tidied my dressing table too and put all the caps back on my make-up. I thrust open the wardrobe. She'd even hung my jeans on a hanger. And she'd . . . no she couldn't have . . . yes she had . . . Geesus!

'MU-UM!'

'Don't shout from a distance, darling. And please don't call me by that awful name. Come on down.'

'What have you done to my jeans?'

She tried to look innocent.

'I thought they could do with a wash . . .'

'And?'

'Well, the legs were practically hanging off.'

Two absolutely unspeakable Peter Jones iron-on *new* denim patches defaced the backside of my new perfectly-faded, ripped original US 501's.

'You just don't understand anything, do you?'

'I thought you'd be pleased.'

'Pleased!'

'Those jeans were positively indecent.'

'Everyone wears them like that.'

'Well, if you want to go around with your underwear in full view of the world . . .'

'I always wear a "body" underneath.'

'They're nothing more than rags . . .'

'They cost a bomb.'

'And I was coming to that . . .'

'Mummy . . .'

'Quite frankly, Justine . . .'

With those words, I recognised the opening notes of a classic parental tirade. I switched off while it raged. I'll just mention a few trigger phrases to give you the gist of it. 'In my day' . . . 'Saving our pocket money for something worthwhile' . . . 'Not slouching in front of the television' . . . 'When did you last read a book?' . . . 'Taking an interest in current affairs' . . . 'And all those frightful violent films' . . . 'Tennis or swimming or . . . or . . . well outdoor anyway' . . .

Meanwhile, I had put on the kettle, made toast, found a clean plate and knife in the dishwasher and spread two slices of toast with Nutella.

She was in full throttle now. 'And tidy up around the house occasionally and not leave your stuff lying everywhere' . . . 'Or do some of your own ironing' . . . 'Not taking everyone and everything for granted' . . . 'And . . .'

'Do you want tea, Mummy?' I asked as she ran out of steam.

'No, quite frankly Justine, I think I could do with a G&T.'

Sad case, I thought as she disappeared upstairs. I bit into the toast, hot Nutella mixed with butter dribbled deliciously out of the corners of my mouth. Actually, I'm not sure if I totally

believed all that stuff about her idealised youth. No one could have been that damn perfect, not even Mummy. And in the Sixties too. How did all that 'sex-drugs-and-bad-behaviour' pass her by? Or had it?

The phone rang.

'Hi . . .'

It was Franz. (Francesca to the uninitiated.)

'You sound a bit off, what's up?'

'Having a domestic.'

'Oh yeah? 'Bout what?'

'Mum's inflicted GBH on my most treasured 501's. They're positively mutilated.'

'Chryst man. How?'

'Obscene patches right across the bum. New denim iron-ons. I tried to rip them off and they left these great gungy black marks. I'm going to have to trash them.'

'Jeez! Poor baby,' Franz sympathised. (Franz is my bestest-bestest friend – she understood the true depths of despair such an event would cause.) 'That mother of yours . . . seriously, you're letting her get totally out of hand.'

'And another thing. I just discovered Tom's dead.'

There was a pause.

'Tom who?'

'Tom Peterson.'

'Oh yeah. Who's he?'

'You know, that homeless guy we used to pass on the way to school.'

'The old wino?'

'The one who lived under the Fire Station.'

'So?'

'He's dead and nobody cares.'

'How do you know he's dead?'

'All these bunches of flowers had been left out for him.'

‘So, somebody must care.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘You care.’

‘I know but . . .’

‘Justine?’

‘Mmm?’

‘What’s all this got to do with anything else?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘I think maybe I’d better ring back when you’re in a saner mood.’

Franz rang off. She didn’t understand. She was my best friend and she had no idea what I was going on about.

I turned this thought over in my mind. I mean usually Franz and I saw eye to eye on everything. We could even go shopping separately and then meet up and find we’d bought exactly the same clothes – freaky. But recently there’d been quite a few things we’d disagreed about.

At this point I had some pretty deep thoughts about the essential separateness of the human condition. OK, don’t panic, I’m not going to go all intense on you or anything. I’m just trying to give you the flavour of what it is like to grow up, all of a sudden, just like that – without any warning whatsoever.

I then asked myself, what was the point of being an adult if people didn’t treat you as one? Take Mummy for instance, I couldn’t even go out of the house without her wanting to know precisely where I was going, when I was coming back, if I had my bus pass/library card/fitness club card/thermal underwear on me, whether I was appropriately dressed for encounters with smart friends of hers/bad weather/potential child-molesters/rogue buses, whether I should consider taking an umbrella/rape alarm/chastity belt . . . etc etc etc. Ugghhrrr!

That evening not just my mother, but the whole world seemed callously unaffected by my shift to adult status. Here I was – same house – same parents – same cat – and the same old TV pages revealing that there was still nothing worthwhile on tonight. I mean boy – I might well have changed but *absolutely nothing else had*. Something had to be done to register my new *mature* identity.

With the kind of grim-faced determination that one sees on the face of a climber about to scale Everest, or lone round-the-world yachtswomen heading out from Chichester Harbour, I went to the utility room and took a large roll of black rubbish bags and headed upstairs. I was about to show the world that I was a different person.

As I passed the sitting room I said to my mother, ‘I’m going upstairs. I may be quite some time.’

My mother looked up vaguely from her Harper’s & Queen. ‘Good idea darling. Get it over with before supper. You’ll feel much better. I’ve put yours on a tray, by the way. Daddy and I have some tedious business do to go to.’

She was obviously under the misapprehension that I was about to tackle my homework.

The task took hours. I literally had to try everything on to prove how inappropriate it was. Here I was, a mature female with a cupboard that seemed suddenly-mysteriously-and-inexplicably full of a child’s clothing. In a dumping area in the centre of the room tartan mini-kilts met Benetton separates, Lolita Lempicka designerwear clashed with luminous Lycra Pineapple dancewear – all piling up in an ever-growing graveyard of bulging body bags destined for Oxfam. I wasn’t satisfied until the wardrobe had been stripped bare. At last, there was just one pristine set of Calvin Klein underwear left in one drawer and an anonymous pair of black jeans and a black polo-necked sweater in another.

Then I attacked the decor, my Madonna calendar, Take That and Blur posters and my collection of street furniture came down off the walls – even my much-prized ‘Danger Men at Work’ sign. Shelves were swept clean of their shrines of ornaments, tangled webs of necklaces, dusty cling-ons, sequinned scrunchies, coins, sea-shells, the piece of rock with the glittery bit that might or might not be gold, my almost-complete Smurf collection and a straggling village of miniature Olde Englysh plaster houses. Lastly, the ghastly sun and moon motif sheets and curtains which I’d taken hours deliberating over with Mummy, went into the bags.

By two in the morning I sat in the cleansed and purified room and looked with satisfaction at the walls, bare apart from their little tell-tale bits of Blu-tac. With a sigh, I added the newly unpatched 501’s regretfully to the last bag and thrust Fred Bear in after them. Then I re-arranged the only decent item in the room – my stereo with its two speakers set on either side. God the room looked bare. Tomorrow, I thought, real life would begin. Perhaps I should begin by painting my room black . . . or purple.

Downstairs a key turned in the lock. I switched the light off. Footsteps could be heard on the stairs below. There was a muffled giggle and my parents’ bedroom door clicked shut.

With any luck Mummy would have a frightful hangover tomorrow morning and I’d be able to get out of the house, complete with bags, without being spotted. I curled up under my coverless duvet and then climbed out again, rescued Fred, climbed back into bed with him and fell contentedly to sleep.

The lady in the King’s Road Oxfam Shop must have thought it was Christmas. The shop wasn’t actually open when I

arrived at 8.30 am weighed down like a bag lady, but I hammered on the door until one of those wizened little smiley people that seem to belong in Oxfam shops popped up from behind a vacuum cleaner and opened it for me.

She staggered away beneath the weight of the bags, and then came back and stuck a 'Save the Children' sticker on my lapel and said I was a kind, thoughtful girl. So I went on my way to school feeling like a positive 'saint'. So-oo virtuous! The feeling lasted all through the day right up until I arrived back home.

Mummy didn't actually see things in the same light. Quite honestly, I wonder about her sometimes. She spends the majority of her life 'Staunchly-Supporting-Causes' and 'Doing-her-bit-for-Charity' but when it comes to acts of pure unselfishness like 'Giving-Away-All-Your-Clothes', that charitable spirit seems totally to desert her.

Even when I pointed out that 'I wouldn't be seen dead in any of those old things again anyway', she continued to rant on about extravagance and selfishness and all those clichés adults tend to fall back on when they're rendered helpless by rage.

'You'll just have to go to the shop and ask for them back,' she insisted.

'I can't. It's nearly five, they close at half-past.' I didn't add that it would mean I would miss *Neighbours*.

'Right!' she said. 'That's not a problem. I'll drive you there.'

'But Mummy . . .'

'No buts . . . get in the car.' Her face was turning a threatening shade of puce.

I climbed in beside her and sat glumly staring through the window as she crashed through the gears until we screeched to a halt outside Oxfam.

I don't generally believe in Divine Intervention. But it seemed that maybe that afternoon 'Someone' must have been looking down from above and helping my possessions along on their way to providing a pump or a bag of seed-corn, or a couple of hundred hoes or whatever, somewhere far away in some sun-baked land with a name made mainly of consonants.

'Caroline! What a surprise! It is Caroline Morton isn't it? How are you? And is this, no it can't be. Is this your daughter?'

The wizened little smiley lady had been replaced by a large-boned woman who was wearing a smart linen suit. She was kissing Mummy on both cheeks.

'Muriel. Well I never. What are you doing here?'

A long dialogue ensued about farmhouses in Shropshire and problems at Lloyds with a bit about rough shooting in Scotland thrown in for good measure.

I wasn't really attending. I was casting a wary eye over the rows of hangers and spotting, here and there, familiar garments now accessorized with little Oxfam price labels. My Pineapple dancewear was even stretched in an uncomfortable knicker-up-the-crack way over the dummy in the window.

A girl about my age with a ring through one nostril came out from behind a curtained-off area that acted as a changing-room, dressed in a pair of my Pucci stretch luminous leggings. She was wearing them with a sequinned cocktail top and an angora cardigan. They looked fantastic.

'I'll have them,' she said to Muriel.

'That'll be three pounds. Do you need a bag?'

'No sweat. I'll wear them.'

Mummy and I glowered at each other.

'So ...' said Muriel to Mummy. 'What brings you in here?'

Mummy's eyes rested on a large poster from which a group of wide-eyed and very hungry-looking people stared back at her.

There was a pause.

I held my breath while a rare expression of moral conflict passed across Mummy's face.

'Place mats!' she said, grasping a raffia set decorated with wonky brown storks. 'Such fun. Give the guests a talking point.'

'And for such a good cause,' agreed Muriel.

Five minutes later we were back in the car with the raffia mats in a crushed Tesco bag.

'OK, so why didn't you simply ask her to give us my stuff back?' I asked.

'I just couldn't bring myself,' said Mummy. 'It would have been just too, too humiliating.'

It seems that Muriel had been Head Girl at Mummy's old boarding school. The sight of Muriel must have resurrected something of her flagging fair-play and the 'honour of the dorm' mentality. Or as Mummy put it in a quite weird reversion to dated schoolgirl slang: 'Once one had handed over one's togs, a chap couldn't simply go and demand them back.'

Have you noticed all those ads in the media for things with names like Cybacrom and Tecnoc? They promise to revolutionise your life and give you instant access to all those things you never knew you couldn't get at. They look innocent enough, but in actual fact they're part of a great underground movement that is trying to take us all over.

They're 'spearheaded' by these guys who go around trying to look really anonymous wearing grey business suits and hi-tec trainers. Daddy was holed up with one of these in his study for hours on Saturday. He called himself an 'Infotec Advisor' and arrived with a huge briefcase bulging with glossy brochures. I had been to tennis coaching, been coached, showered, changed, and was coming back by the time he left. They shook hands on the front step and Daddy said:

'Well, I dare say you know best. No point in stinting and spoiling the whole show, eh?'

And the guy passed me with an expression on his face like a cat that's just finished licking double Jersey cream off its whiskers.

Three days later this van arrived with 'COMPU-MINE' written on the side and a group of men dressed in white coats