

"THE LAST PERSON IN THE WORLD"

A simple story

by

Matthew Tree

PART ONE: POINTING A FINGER

FIRST

I'd never have thought that me and Ralph Finns (his name at the time) would have got along well. Or at all. It's true that we were in the same year in the same school, but I was a day boy from a lower middle class background who had scholarshipped his way into that otherwise unaffordable hive of rich juveniles. And Ralph, a boarder, was the richest of them all, so much so that he made the rest of them look insolvent, and me downright derelict, what with his Rolex watch, his state-of-the-art Bang & Olafsen sound system on which he played Deep Purple and Blue Oyster Cult at full blast in his dorm room, his binging on vintage wines and his penchant for shoes so expensive that each pair - and he had not a few - would have kept a large African village in clover for a lustrum. And yet, to my surprise and possibly to his, we ended up becoming something a little less than friends and quite a bit more than acquaintances. Over the years, nodding terms became small talk became monthly, weekly, then (almost) daily conversations. I liked him because, despite his dour or even sour demeanour and his probable inability to score more than two out of five in an empathy test, he definitely wasn't an arsehole, unlike the other boys at that particular seat of learning, who were, as it turned out, obnoxious, self-assurance-oozing, top-hole arseholes, every last monied mother's son of them. If I have to be honest.

When I asked him why he blew so much dough on himself, an admirably candid answer came out of that slightly puffy, inexpressive, underage accountant's face of his:

"I'm taking everything I can now because maybe in the future I won't be able to have it."

He turned out to be right about that.

(His Dad had run a scrap metal business during the war years, selling tons of the stuff to a government that desperately needed it; if the man wasn't a millionaire, he couldn't have been more than a few hundred quid off; his name popped up in the papers occasionally, belonging as he did on the fringe of the great and the good).

Rolling in it though Ralph might have been, feckless he wasn't: he was a dab hand with electronic devices of all kinds. He could build radios, fix speakers, and was the go-to student for setting up the lighting for the school's theatre productions. Skills which turned out to be very handy in his future line of business. Essential, even.

As for me, I was trying to live up to my parents' expectations by doing well enough in my exams to get into university. Meanwhile, in my spare time, I was getting interested in the Real Workers' Party, an extra-parliamentary faction on the far left. I even went to a couple of its rallies, which at least made me feel I was doing something to make up for the privileged pigeonhole my scholarship had slotted me into.

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One day as we sat in the quad one afternoon, under grey sunlight, we got talking, Ralph and I, about our futures just days before the end of school. It turned out that Ralph wasn't going on to a university like myself, but then again I assumed he didn't need to because he probably had a well-paid, gift-wrapped position in some big company, all ready and waiting. When I asked him what his future held in store for him he shrugged and said:

“My old man’s got a summer residence in Dorset. I’m going to hang out there for a while. It’s pretty cool, as mansions go.”

Rich though I knew his family to be, I was impressed.

"A *mansion*?"

"I'll be there for the next couple of months. Why don't you drop in some time? Got a pen and paper?"

Clouds Manor, Bincombe, West Dorset.

"Turn up whenever's convenient, no need to call first."

Then he waved at the school buildings around us, and, quite out of the blue, declaimed:

“You know what this place’s function is and always will be? No more nor less than to groom its pupils for eventual inclusion in the upper ranks of the judiciary, the banks, the Civil Service, the three main political parties, the stock exchange, the country’s biggest corporations and - for the more creatively minded or simply restless souls among them - the media. All those people we’ve been studying with, they’re slated to be the country’s future movers and shakers: carbon copies, as it were, of the people currently pulling the strings. Together with other schools of its ilk, our ‘public school’ - a term, by the way, which should be banned under the Trade Descriptions Act - forms part of an immense societal scam. A fix that’s permanently in. And that’s just the tip of a very nasty iceberg.”

I was astonished. Never before had I heard him speak with such vehemence. Never before, for that matter, had I heard him talk politics and much less in this clear, concise way that, by contrast, made the speakers at the rallies I’d attended sound hackneyed and robotic.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, but I mean, aren’t you a candidate for being a bit of a future carbon copy yourself?”

“No. And neither are you.”

Never before, had he spoken to me in such a sincere, personal tone.

“How do you know? I haven’t got a clue as to what I’m going to do after uni. For all you know, I might end up as just another stockbroker. Or managing director. Or TV producer.”

“I doubt it. We’ve got more in common that you might think.”

I wondered how he’d come to that conclusion. I had also started to wonder about his tip-of-the-nasty-iceberg comment. What did he mean by *that*? He eased his bottom off the low wall we were sharing.

“I gotta go. Like I said, swing by the mansion when you feel like it. But don’t leave it much longer than a couple of months, ‘cos after that I’ll be moving on.”

“Anywhere in particular?”

I was guessing Gstaad or Biarritz or Nice or Marbella.

“No. Just *on*.”

*

I felt like it sooner than I thought. At a loose end once school was over and done with, I went to more RWP lectures, at which various books were recommended to the audience: Marx, Engels, Trotsky, Lukács, and so forth, so I got hold of those and ploughed my way through (some of) them. I had two months to kill before I started university, and this was the best death blow I could come up with. And the more I read, the more I thought about Ralph’s diaphanous speech that day in the quad. By the time my last pre-university week rolled around, I’d spent most of my time in my

parents' flat and they were hinting that I should show some gumption. (Sometimes it surprised me that after all these years, they hadn't observed that gumption, together with its cousins acumen, resolve, initiative and drive, were simply not in my make-up: that my temperament, for better or worse, was, in general, bereft of oomph).

Ralph's standing invitation was as good an excuse as any to get away from home for a couple of days. Besides, I was curious to see what Ralph – having made it clear that he had some political ideas of his own - would make of the ones I'd picked up from my recent reading.

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I caught a train to Dorchester, and a bus from there to Bincombe, from where I walked to Clouds Manor, or rather to within spitting distance of it because when it hove into sight I stopped in my tracks, took a deep breath, and gawped. It had more wings than three braces of grouse. Once I'd passed through the iron gates I found myself walking up a gravel drive that led, after a while, to a front door.

When I was barely a yard away from the entrance, Ralph appeared in it, grinning.

"Smile, you're on candid camera!"

He pointed up. Two closed-circuit TV cameras were leering from the upper eaves. Ralph stood aside to let me pass.

"Can't be too careful, what with all the stuff my folks have got in here."

The place smelt of leather, waxed wood and old dog.

“Let's go to the drawing room. We've got the run of the house, by the way: Mum and Dad are on a holiday break in Tuscany.”

“No brothers or sisters around?”

“I'm an only child.”

His parents certainly did have plenty of 'stuff'. I spotted a couple of Canalettos, a Stubbs and a Hockney on the walls we passed. Some of the knick-knacks on the tables and in the display cupboards looked pretty valuable too. Once we had ensconced ourselves in the drawing room, which gave onto a garden large enough to be public, a dark-haired woman in her twenties came in and asked Ralph if we needed anything. She wasn't dressed as a maid: no black dress or white pinafore or lace headpiece, just jeans and a check shirt. She didn't sound like a maid, either, and he didn't sound as if he were addressing one.

“Hi, Sarah. If you could bring over a jug of Pimm's that'd be great.”

“One Pimm's, coming up!”

She smiled and left. For some reason, I felt the need to whisper.

“Is that the -?”

“That's the butler. Mum and Dad didn't want a stiff-necked man in funereal get-up, they preferred someone informal but efficient. And she's as competent as they get.”

As indeed she proved by bringing the Pimm's, garnished with mint and cucumber, just minutes later.

“There you go, Ralph”, she said, “as you've got a guest, I made up a Royal Cup.”

“Wow, that's perfect, Sarah. Many thanks.”

And she was off again.

"I'm obviously not very well up on the ways of the other half, Ralph. What's a Royal -?"

"Pimm's topped up with champagne," Ralph said, pouring some of the stuff into a glass for me. "Beats mother's milk into a cocked hat."

I sipped, several times, and started to relax.

"This being my first time in a mansion," I said, "Can I ask if Sarah is the only servant or do you have -?"

"Dear God, no. There's a cook, two cleaning ladies, a team of gardeners and a handyman to service the central heating and change the light bulbs and whatnot. But Sarah's the only live-in retainer. The others come in from Bincombe or Dorchester. They're on a rota."

I found myself whispering again.

"Sarah's kind of attractive. Have you ever -?"

He cut me short, a touch severely.

"No way! She's twenty-six. We eighteen year olds don't interest her."

We eighteen year olds drank some more Pimm's. I mentioned I'd been getting more or less involved with the RWP, and reeled off a list of the authors I'd been discovering. Ralph made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

"Politics", he proclaimed, "is crap."

Taken aback, I muttered:

"But you certainly had some ideas of your own about that school we've just been released from. All that stuff you said about people being slated for success or 'success', and carbon copies and so on. 'An immense societal scam': your exact words. Sounded pretty political to me."

He shook his head so vehemently that his silky brown hair flopped over half his face. Once he'd stroked it back into place, he said:

"That was and is common sense, pure and simple. I mean, look where I come from," he gestured at the drawing room by way of indicating the entire country house, "I know exactly how the so-called Establishment works. I've grown up in it. And as far as I'm concerned, political parties like the one you seem to be getting involved in are never going to change anything. They're flogging a dead horse. Pissing in the wind. Labouring under a delusion. Whatever. No offence meant."

"None taken," I replied, dishonestly. No sooner had he finished talking than a phone rang somewhere in the house. Then stopped. Sarah called out:

"Ralph! It's for you."

He got up.

"Excuse me a minute."

"Sure."

But it wasn't a minute. When ten had gone by, I got tired of waiting about and strolled around the room, then out of it. I stopped by a door that was ajar, opened it and found myself peeking into a well-stocked library. I went in, curious to see what the really well-heeled read. There was an entire wall devoted to first-edition hardbacks of thrillers and detective stories by well-known writers in the genre. Another section held biographies of or autobiographies by significant British politicians, going back to Neville Chamberlain. There was also a Folio Society collection of classics - Dickens, Melville, Austen, Trollope, Conrad and all the rest of them - that looked pretty much untouched. Then my eye ceased to rove, because not far from the classics, there were several

shelves full of left-wing literature. Not just Marxist writing - although there was plenty of that too, some of which I was more or less familiar with - but also Bakunin, along with Kropotkin, Proudhon, Godwin, Stirner, Rocker, Malatesta, Goldman, Bookchin and Chomsky. And Debord and Vaneigem and Jorn. I plucked out a copy of 'The Society of the Spectacle'; it was well-thumbed. I removed Bookchin's 'Post-Scarcity Anarchism', gave it a quick flick-through, and found certain passages had been underlined. I tried Marcuse's 'Counterrevolution and Revolt' and was surprised to find copious notes in the margins and even more surprised when I recognised the handwriting.

Then I heard Ralph calling my name.

"Where you've got to?"

I went out of the library and found Ralph when I was wandering along the corridor with all the nonchalance I could muster.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, "something came up."

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I spent two more days at Cloud Manor. We limited our conversations to minor mutual interests such as Led Zeppelin and brands of bitter though there were times, at the local pub, or during one long country walk, when I could barely refrain from asking him about all those well-thumbed radical titles in the library. I was pretty sure that his parents' reading material was limited to the thrillers and detective stories, and that Ralph was the only person in the place who could have bought and read Gramsci, Kropotkin and company.

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The way Ralph and Sarah talked to each other surprised me more and more. They would josh each other, occasionally with the odd expletive.

“Hop to it, Sarah, you slacker.”

“You watch your mouth, little Lord Muck.”

“No, seriously, you’re a bit slow on the uptake today.”

“Like fuck I am, your honour.”

All said with tongues in cheek.

“You two seem to get on well together, for a master and servant.”

He shrugged.

“Oh, Sarah’s been here for years. She was hired back when my first pubic hairs appeared. And I was an early starter.”

On day two, as we lounged about on big leather armchairs in the drawing room, a mite bored, he asked me if I’d like to go hunting. I’d never hunted a thing in my life. Indeed, I’d more or less forgotten there were still people who did.

“Hunting! Hunting *what*, for God’s sake?”

A touch of a smile.

“Anything that moves.”

“What?”

“Just kidding. We could start with some target practise and take things from there. Up for it?”

Not really, but I didn’t want to look chicken.

“Sure.”

“Great. Let’s choose our weapons.”

He took me down to the basement, past the (huge) kitchen, to a room with a metal door for which he needed a key. When it

swung open, I gasped. Inside was a chamber of about thirty square metres, its back and side walls lined with guns on racks.

"They let you have *access* to all this stuff?"

"I've taken classes. It's my hobby. Dad's too."

He moved ahead of me over to the far wall, unhooked a single barrel shotgun from its stand, and held it out to me.

"Try this for size. For a novice, this is probably your best bet. Finnish and light as a feather. Gentle recoil, too. A beautiful piece."

Gingerly, I took the thing, supporting the barrel with my left hand and closing my right hand around the space where the butt met the trigger guard.

"Is it loaded?"

"Fuck no."

He pointed to a metal chest sitting in one corner.

"All the ammo's in there. Now let's see..."

He looked around for a moment, then unhooked a gun that looked longer and heavier than mine.

"This is a Blaser twelve gauge. Thirty inch barrel. My favourite."

He laid it on the floor, took out a second key and unlocked the chest. Lying on the top of its contents were two sleeveless hunting jackets. He handed one to me.

"Best to wear one of these. They've got useful pockets."

The next thing I knew, he was giving me a small box that rattled. I shucked on the jacket and put the box in one of the side pouches. Ralph slung his rifle over his arm, barrel downwards.

"I'll get some bottles."

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We walked into the garden and along a long strip of lawn to a weather-beaten wooden table. Ralph opened the plastic bag he'd been carrying and placed six empty wine bottles on the table, about six inches apart. As we backed off to take potshots at them, I glanced at the dates on the labels. 1961. 1953. 1945.

"You must have enjoyed drinking those."

"Yep. Take the last one on the left."

I pointed at the vintage empty he'd indicated and got it on my fourth shot. I winced.

"They wouldn't have me in the army."

"Nonsense. That wasn't at all bad for a first try."

He shouldered his own gun. He fired both barrels - with barely a second's difference between shots - and shattered the first two bottles on the right. As he reloaded, a couple of magpies fluttered out of a nearby tree. He slammed the gun shut, pulled back the bolt, aimed high and sent the two of them flopping down to earth. His face smothered in satisfaction, he muttered:

"Gotcha."

I shook my head.

"Jesus, Ralph, you're a crack shot. I never realised."

"Practise makes perfect. And here I can get all the practise I need."

I looked, not happily, at where the two birds lay skewed, just a few yards away.

"You can't eat magpies, right?"

He laughed.

"You can't eat most of the things I shoot around here. Killing them's the thing."

That slightly puffy, inexpressive, underage accountant's face of his had not moved a muscle.

SECOND

Just under a week later, I went up - as they used to say - to Golding, one of England's three oldest universities, which was much like the other two, with its ancient edifices, and drafty, bicycle infected streets, its hot dog vans whose steam smelt of uncleaned swimming pools, its bescarved and overcoated students who slouched along the pavements, head down and eyes ditto as if expecting to be punched. The only thing that distinguished Golding from the two other venerable institutions it was usually associated with - often referred to together as Oxgoldbridge - was that unlike them, it was very close to London: less than twenty minutes by train.

As for me, I was at an even looser end than before thanks to both a torpor and a certain mental discomfort caused by the university itself: its buildings, to my eyes, had something creepy about them, as if in the interstices of their centuries-old brickwork there lurked an evil presence as invisible as gas.

Realising that my social life was going to be on the threadbare side if I didn't plump for some extra-curricular activity, I made myself, albeit with some misgivings, a member of the university branch of the RWP.

I'd chosen to study English literature, with a vague idea that this would somehow complement my Marxist fare. Bored and restless in the evenings, I started to gravitate towards the pubs in which students were welcome (in the other ones, we got slow service or the wrong change, or both). Back then it wasn't normal for pubs to have TV, but there was just one that did, The Bird in Hand, which was student friendly, but without being for students only. The telly aside, it was much like any other pub: the bar and

walls clad with artificially aged wood; whiffs of dregs and stranded tobacco smoke; new mirrors with old Coca Cola ads printed on the silvering.

I didn't have any friends yet, but felt sure that if the RWP's student section finally got around to organising an event, I could strike up an attachment with a few fellow members. During those first solitary days, I found myself repairing nightly to the Bird In Hand where I would down a quiet pint or two, watch some TV and then leave, feeling peckish, after the news.

On evening three and pint two, the newsreader mentioned a place I knew. Bincombe. The talking head gave way to a façade I knew even better. Clouds Manor.

I shot to my feet and went to the bar. The barmaid looked up. Wistful flaxen hair, a roundish face, a bored expression. I pointed to the screen.

"Could you put the volume up please?"

The pub was all but empty. She shrugged.

"Why not?"

As I hurried back to my chair, the newsreader said:

"Police have placed Ralph Finns, the son of industrialist Jeffrey Finns, on their missing persons list."

Up came, to my astonishment, a colour shot of Ralph.

"...also missing is the family's retainer, Sarah Jane Olsen. Police are asking the public to come forward..."

a picture of the butleress was flashed up in black and white

"Mr Finns reported his son's disappearance to the police after several days spent trying to locate him on his own."

footage of a thin-faced, middle-aged man was shown, with the manor in the background.

“My son didn’t tell me he was going anywhere and neither did Ms Olsen. However, the police have assured me that there is no immediate cause for alarm, and I personally hope and believe that this matter will be cleared up in the very near future. Ralph, if you’re watching, please get in touch as soon as possible. Your mother is extremely upset.”

Ralph’s Dad, I was surprised to hear, had a working-class London accent, very different from his son’s upmarket tones.

the talking head came back

“A police spokesman said they were investigating all available leads...”

a balding man in police uniform addressed the camera from behind a desk

“Nothing was removed from the house, including the personal effects of Ms Olsen and Ralph Finns themselves. We are following several lines of investigation.”

the talking head again

“Mrs Finns was unavailable for comment. And now, in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge...”

I stood up and headed to the bar. The barmaid took my jar.

“Funny business, ay?” she said, as she filled it up. She was some six or seven years older than me and had the offhand manner townspeople often used with students. I nodded at the screen.

“It was about a friend of mine.”

She stopped being offhand. Her eyes widened.

“What, that millionaire bloke?”

“His son. The one in the photo.”

“Wow,” she said, putting the pint in front of me, “I’ve never met anyone who’s met anyone who’s been on the telly.”

At first I assumed this was the kind of thing I could expect a naive and possibly poorly educated barmaid to say, but there was an ironic glint in her eyes. I took a sip.

“But that’s the point, he *hasn’t* been on the telly. He’s gone missing.”

She switched off the TV, took my money, gave me the change, shook her head.

“Not for long.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? He and that servant have done a runner.”

“A runner?”

“They’ve eloped.”

“So how come they didn’t take any of their stuff with them?”

She gave me a *duh* look.

“That would’ve made them easier to trace, wouldn’t it? The police would’ve issued a description of their things and every hotel and B&B in the country would be keeping its eyes open. No, either they just want to get away with a few weeks of uninterrupted nooky or maybe it’s more serious and they’ll go abroad and get married. Either way, they’ll surface sooner or later, mark my words.”

I thought about how Ralph had told me there was nothing between him and Sarah. Come to think of it, he’d stressed the point. Which would make sense if they’d wanted to keep their sneaking-off a secret.

“You might be onto something there.”

A full half pint glass had appeared in front of me.

“There you go.”

“But I didn’t order -“

“On the house.”

“Oh, well, thank-you -“

“Beth.”

Said Beth, smiling winningly.

THIRD

The following morning, my first thought was that I was waking up in my own room in college but found myself next to Beth's breathing body in the house she shared with a group of non-students in a part of town I'd never been in before. I recalled drinking through to closing time, and her insinuating that she wouldn't mind spending the night with me and me asking her if she'd like to come back to my room, before I remembered that the college wardens didn't let strangers stay on the premises, security being extra tight back then due to the IRA's mainland campaign. So I ended up walking to her place, which was so far away I had to stop not once but twice to pee in some bushes; after I'd offered diffident hellos to a couple of the other residents of her shared house, who were sipping cans in the living-room (men in her age group, with long hair and earrings in both lobes) we went upstairs and made love - well, fucked really - for the second time in my life but definitely not in hers.

Beth woke up soon after I did and when we'd made it down to the kitchen after making love (which, this time round, felt like the right way of putting it) I expressed surprise that the others weren't around. Beth gave me a stare.

"They're at something called *work*, but as a student, you might not understand."

It was tennish.

"No need to be so sarcastic. Besides, *you're* still here."

"I clock on at eleven. The others all work at the same site. Seven a.m. start. And I think you can take a little sarcasm from me, all things considered."

Followed by a peck on the lips.

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On my way back to my room, under a pigeon-grey sky with my brain blossoming happily as I remembered more and more details of how we'd spent the night. Then, through all that sex, and through the I-don't-know-how-many-pints I'd had on the house, I recalled last night's news about Ralph. At the first newsagent's I came upon, I bought all the broadsheets and the Daily Mirror, and when I got back to my room I laid them out on the bed. It wasn't that I expected Ralph's face to be splashed over every front page, but the disappearance of a filthy rich person's son should have merited at least a couple of banner headlines. But what was splashed over the front pages and in some cases several others as well was something that had happened later last night and that I'd missed. As had Beth.

The papers' front covers showed three houses. The one given the most attention was a luxury estate in central London called Unicorn Court. A bomb had been placed in the foyer, when nobody was about. There were images of shattered mirrors, a devastated flower arrangement, a smoking Axminster. The other two houses were in Preston, Lancashire. One was a boys' hostel, Durham House, and the other an approved school for girls called Owlcroft. These bombings had taken place a little earlier than the one in London and the MO had been the same in both cases: a fire alarm had been set off so that all the occupants had had to be evacuated. Only when everyone was out on the pavement did a small explosive device – a pipe bomb, the papers said – go off in each building, causing minor damage: shattered windows,

scorched walls. Nobody had been killed or injured. I could just about see the point of attacking the luxury estate, if the idea was to have a go at rich people, but even then it struck me as pretty daft thing to do. And as for bombing the hostel and the school, that struck me as just plain weird.

A previously unheard-of organisation calling itself The Vanguard had called the Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, of all people. Their message was printed in full in all my recently purchased papers:

Why these particular targets? Ask their owners. They know.
Au revoir.

The Vanguard.

Several professional pundits declared that Britain now had its very own version of an armed left-wing gang, like Action Directe in France, the Red Army Fraction in West Germany or the Weather Underground in America.

Which was all very well, but it was Ralph I was interested in, because I'd known him for years, he was a real, flesh and blood person to me, and these Vanguard people were just another headline, so I skimmed through the pages and finally found that in two of the broadsheets there were photos of him and Sarah (the same ones that had been flashed up on the news last night) and a gnat-sized item about their disappearance. Most of the rest of the papers carried equally tiny items about them, without photos; and one of the broadsheets and the Daily Mirror didn't mention them at all.

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A week after the pipe bombings, The Vanguard drove a car past the Essex home of Jim Johnson, the presenter of Britain's favourite children's TV show, 'Jumping Jimbo', and peppered his front door with a machine-gun. I'd grown up watching this man and his team showing me how to make toy yachts out of toilet rolls; organising massive collections of milk bottle tops or jam jar labels for designated charities; and doing a different dance each week, this being the most popular spot on the programme, given that Johnson was over six feet tall, skeletally skinny and highly agile for a man in his late forties. It also helped that, as he went through the moves, he pulled all kinds of faces. A couple of years ago he'd started up a children's club for his young viewers - 'Jumping for Joy' - whose membership card afforded them discounts to a variety of pantomimes, concert halls, bookshops, swimming pools, and other places that children were likely to go to; at the time of the drive-by, it had four hundred thousand members, aged between three and fourteen. For that, he'd been knighted. Beth shook her locks when I mentioned it at the pub that evening.

"Saw the news on the telly. I never liked Jumping Jimbo very much, I thought all that dancing about he did was kind of creepy. But shooting his door down is just plain daft."

My thoughts exactly. This time the responsibility note was even briefer than the first:

Just getting into our stride.

The Vanguard.

Like that, with the 'the' in italics.

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Two days later, they gave the same treatment to the Kent home of Sebastian Hayley, a television chef whose trademark was preparing dishes from everywhere except England and - polyglot that he was - giving the foreign names as well as the English ones for all the ingredients. He wore a Savile Row suit as he would pour and fry and boil and sprinkle and plate and serve. Sired by a wealthy family, his accent was only a notch below that of the aristocracy. Like Johnson, the British citizens who hadn't heard of him could have been counted on a maximum of two hands. Minutes after the second shooting a hand-delivered note was popped into the letterbox at the RSPCA's head office in Southwater:

We'll never let you spoil the broth again. Tootle pip, old chap.

The Vanguard.

Again, there seemed to be no clear motive. A police spokesman made a short statement to the effect that 'investigations into the terrorist organisation that calls itself The Vanguard are continuing', his over-solemn face hinting that Scotland Yard didn't as yet have a clue as to who or where The Vanguard was.

The third attack took place the following Tuesday night. Members of the so-called Vanguard machine-gunned the home of Hugh Lowell, MP, in a working-class district of Preston.

Lowell had become famous for defending authentic dialect words - mack for make and tack for take and er for she and owd

for old and mon for man and so on - by speaking them loudly and clearly in public whenever he could. That, and a smile which was considered cheeky and his down-to-earth irony, had endeared him to large swathes of the population as well as the media, which gave him plenty of air time and column space. The bullets left his front windows smashed to smithereens and his front door looking like a Swiss cheese. The message from the Vanguard?

You got nothing like your just desserts. Give us time.

Beth shook her head.

"The man's a working-class hero, for fuck's sake. This bunch say they're left-wing, but I reckon they're just a bunch of nutters."

And I reckoned the same. There seemed to be neither rhyme nor reason to their actions. And the papers had made it repeatedly clear that they were as baffled as anyone else, with headlines like:

THE VANGUARD: THE LOONY LEFT, OR JUST PLAIN LOONY?

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Ralph's disappearance, of course, was still on my mind, but was now slowly shifting onto a back burner, given that I was falling in love. Beth turned out to be a continuous source of surprises. Her favourite writers – and I confess, I was amazed she had any – were Franz Kafka, Elias Canetti and Virginia Woolf, all of whom I personally found hard going. She didn't have any A levels and had never crossed the threshold of a university building, but had an

interest in the cultivation of her own brain which, as well as books, took in cinema, the occasional exhibition and plenty of music.

In bed, she broke me into oral sex and a couple of positions I'd previously been unaware of. And we joked about trying anal sex, without trying it. In fact, every day spent with Beth was like watching a window opening wider and wider on the, for me, sorely neglected real world.

I spent less and less time in the university, and more and more of it in Beth's bedroom or the pub where she worked. I stopped going to lectures, and limited myself to doing my obligatory weekly essay. But that was something close to a pleasure, given that I taken a liking to my tutor, Alan Curtis, a solemn middle-aged man - who was quiet and kindly, and indulgent with my not always good and sometimes downright sloppy essays on Wordsworth or Coleridge or whoever it was that week - and whose study's thick green curtains were kept fully drawn throughout the day. He had a penchant for dark brown suits and black lace-up Oxfords of the type my grandfather used to wear.

Though I dropped in on the RWP meetings from time to time, I was finding them less and less interesting, consisting as they did of student party members repeating Marxist-Leninist dogmas, using slightly different wording in order to give the impression they weren't all running exactly the same tape. However, at one of these meetings an upcoming series of evening lectures from a London-based party intellectual was announced. He would be coming up every Thursday to give a one hour talk on topical matters, that day's chair explained.

"And look," he said, pushing up his glasses and mumbling into his beard, "I know that some people don't find this caucus

exactly electrifying,” and he essayed the slimmest of smiles at the ten or so people around him, “but this guy is really worth a listen to. He’s called James Delaney. We’ve taken the risk of booking the Matthew Arnold auditorium for him, as we think he’ll attract quite a crowd.”

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The Matthew Arnold auditorium was a fifty-seater that had twenty people sitting in it when Thursday rolled around. There was no table and no chair, just a standing mike placed centre-stage.

The light dimmed, a shadow moved up onto the stage until a sudden spotlight revealed it to be a thin man with a bloated face, wearing a black shirt and jacket and black jeans and black boots that glimmered a touch. He could have been anywhere between thirty and forty.

"Good evening," he said, in a voice laced with a dash of Liverpudlian, "today I'd like to talk about racism. People often say there's always been racism and there always will be. This isn't true. Racism first reared its ugly head as recently as the late eighteenth century..."

Not having expected anything much other than the usual repetitive RWP fare, I sat straight in my seat, ears pricked up, delighted as Delaney took forty minutes to walk us through the origins of racism starting with pseudoscientific quotes from otherwise scientific luminaries such as Linnaeus, Kant and Herder, through to its acceptance as a supposedly proven reality in the nineteenth

century, with consequences ranging from decades of lynching in the United States of America to the mass measurement of human heads in Europe. He explained how, in the case of the Jews, religious anti-Judaism was gradually replaced by racist anti-semitism, thus slating all Jews for murder within the Nazi sphere of influence, irrespective of whether they had converted to Christianity or not. He ended with a list of racist incidents that had taken place in Britain within the last twelve months and explained how the discovery of the hominid Lucy just three years ago could be an indication that all humans originally came from Africa, something which would render the very concept of 'race' obsolete; a conclusion which elicited a gasp from his little audience.

My mind felt cleansed, as if it'd just stepped out of a bath and was now towelling itself down. Once he'd finished, he sat on the edge of the stage and a few of us went over to thank him. Last in line, I congratulated him with genuine enthusiasm and went as far as to say how refreshing it had been to listen to a left-wing speech that was free of cant.

"You're the first person who's pointed out that I deliberately avoid clichés."

He smiled. I felt, well, chuffed.

"Come back next Thursday," he said, "when I'll be putting the boot into religion."

FOURTH

No sooner had I entered The Bird in Hand the day afterwards, at a quiet early hour, than Beth started brandishing a newspaper and when I got to the bar she opened the centrefold, displaying her nice white teeth to me.

"Your mate," she said, "is in the Mirror."

SON OF MILLIONAIRE INDUSTRIALIST CONFIRMS HE'S
ALIVE AND WELL...AND HAPPILY MARRIED

Ralph and Sarah, arms around each other, were smiling seriously at the camera next to a splurge of tropical vegetation. In the background, a row of grainy palm trees could be made out.

"Christ," I said, "you were right."

"Don't look so surprised."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologise."

'At 11.15pm last night, newly-weds Ralph Finns and former womanservant Sarah Jane Olsen informed Mr Finns's father, industrialist Jeffrey Finns, that they had married at an undisclosed location to avoid publicity and were planning a round-the-world trip by way of a honeymoon. Ralph Finns stressed that he wished, above all, to ask forgiveness for the anguish that his disappearance had caused his parents.'

I moved on to the facing page, where Ralph's Dad had been given a longer interview, but a smaller photograph.

'Scrap metal mogul Jeffrey Finns told the Mirror: "After all he'd put his mother and me through, I confess I was angry when Ralph finally got in touch, but then on second thoughts, I felt so relieved that he was alive and well, I decided to cut him some slack." This 'slack', he revealed, is enough cash to allow Ralph and his mint-condition spouse to celebrate their clandestine contract with a months-long honeymoon. "Extravagant?" mused Mr Finns, "I suppose it is. But afterwards, Ralph's going to have to face up to the fact that it's time to knuckle down and get a job." As for his son's whereabouts, the man who made millions from any old iron shook his head. "Ralph doesn't want his honeymoon to be turned into a documentary," he said, "and that seems fair enough to us, all things considered. Having said which, I would like to take this opportunity to offer my most sincere apologies to the police for the inconvenience caused by the irresponsible behaviour of my son and his fiancée."

Mrs Finns was unavailable for comment.'

Beth snorted.

"They can apologise all they want, but it just goes to show that if your family's got stacks of money, you can get away with anything. If I'd pulled a stunt like that, they'd have locked me up and made me pay for the cost of the search."

She pointed at the photo of Ralph and Sarah.

"I wonder where that was taken? Bali? Hawaii? The Seychelles?"

"They'll probably go to all those places and more. Some people have all the luck."

She gave me a sarcastic smile.

"Marxist, aren't you? I thought you lot wanted everybody to live in communal apartment blocks with shared toilets and porters working for the KGB."

I blushed.

"No, my lot, as you put it, want *everyone* to be able to enjoy places like...like Bali, not just a privileged few."

She touched my arm.

"Sure you do. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some lumpen proletarians to attend to."

I turned to the door at which she'd just nodded. A bunch of hooray-henry type students had irrupted into the saloon bar, their voices plummy, their laughs fake.

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The next Thursday, I went back to the Matthew Arnold auditorium - now almost full - to listen to what James Delaney had to say about religion. The *mise-en-scène* was the same: the single spotlight, black clothes.

"Religion has existed for a longer period of time than racism, but like racism, it hasn't always been with us. For thousands of years, people's lack of scientific information about the world led them to indulge in magical thinking. What we today call superstition..."

He went on to trace the emergence of priest-kings from the primeval ooze of sorcery, and about how the rise of agriculture

brought about the formation of towns and cities, followed by the quasi-separation of the priestly and political functions, with royalty enjoying its divine right and ecclesiastics acquiring political clout; a separation that finally gave rise to the organised religions and extant monarchies we know today. He also showed how easy it was to start up a religion, citing Mormonism, the cargo cults and Raëlism as recent examples; as a finale, he explained why religious belief, when exacerbated, can lead to excessive and often violent behaviour.

It was a tour de force of a talk, better even than the last one and just as jargon-free. This time round, I was one of the first to congratulate him. He smiled.

“You were here last week, right?”

“And I’ll be here next week as well.”

He hesitated, as if a thought had struck him:

“How long have you been with the RWP?”

“About four months.”

“And are you keeping the faith?”

“I’m sorry?”

“No doubts at all?”

“Well, now that you ask... I do have some, yes.”

His expression sat up.

“Listen,” he said, “what are you doing after this?”

I’d arranged to see Beth, but later on.

“Nothing much.”

“Fancy a coffee?”

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“So what do you think could be done to make the RWP more effective?” he asked, stirring his white coffee in the working-class café he’d taken me to. I put down my cup of tea, not having expected a leading party official to ask this of me.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but getting together twice a month to comfort each other with quotes from Marxist scripture isn’t going to change much.”

He laughed, a little bit.

“What about the demos? We get a pretty big turnout, as you know.”

“Whenever I’ve been on a demo, afterwards I’ve always felt I’ve been let down. Demos always make me feel, well, I don’t know if I should say this...”

“Say it anyway.”

“Post-coital.”

A chuckle.

“So, what would you propose?”

“I don’t know. But something more...”

“Attention-catching?”

“Maybe.”

“Which college are you at?”

I told him. It took him a single gulp to finish his coffee.

“Nice talking to you.”

With which he got up and left.

FIFTH

Beth had the evening off, and we'd decided we'd hole up in her room with some fish and chips and a six pack of lager and a bottle of white wine. I got the booze and she the fish.

After a mutual hand job, we snuggled down in front of her small black and white set, waiting, with the sound off, for 'The Day of the Jackal' to come on, and tucked in, the beers first, the wine on hold, the chips picked at before the fish.

On her single bookshelf there were now nearly a dozen or so volumes (the ones I'd already seen - Kafka, Canetti and Woolf - plus a couple of volumes of Victorian porn and Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'). I noticed a couple of drawings had been blu-tacked to her light grey walls: charcoal renderings of two faceless, genital-less couples embracing each other passionately.

"What are those?"

She blushed a touch.

"I go to evening classes when I get the chance. Painting and drawing."

I pointed to the pictures.

"They're good."

She poked me in the ribs, half-pleased, half sarky.

"An expert, are you?"

"No, but as an aunt of mine says, I know what I like."

It was good to see her teeth white inside her smile and as my second beer settled down inside me I felt a comfort that hovered, stable, in the air. Beth smelt of shampoo and a dash of supermarket perfume and I realised there and then that this was the best combination possible, the only combination desirable, shampoo and shop brand perfume; and that this was the only

place I wanted to be, the only place I needed to be, that all was well with the world inside her room, the telly muted and the chips tentatively tasted, the drawings on the wall, and her and I taking swigs of beer from cans that were still chilled, even as beyond the walls of her room, the rest of the world swarmed and glowered, crept and lurked, its eyes untrustworthy, its limbs rustling through the night, itchy and inflamed. Let things stay like this, I said to myself, just like this, exactly like this, just us and the beer and the take-away and the flickering black and white motion on the screen.

I took another sip of beer, and smiled. She looked at me.

"Happy?"

"Happy."

"Maybe we should try the cod."

As we did so, the news came up.

"Want to see this?"

I shrugged.

"Why not?"

Another murder by the Yorkshire Ripper. A spat between the National Front and anti-Nazi protesters, including some from the RWP.

"Shouldn't you have been in that?"

I sighed.

"I suppose I should. But I wasn't, was I?"

She pointed to the melee of skinheads giving the Hitler salute to the protesters, with police trying to form a line between the two groups.

"I'm glad you weren't."

As we wolfed down the fish, a caption popped up:

POLICE REPORT NO FURTHER LEADS IN VANGUARD INVESTIGATION

Followed by a brief clip of a police spokeswoman reporting there were no further leads in the Vanguard investigation.

"That bunch of idiots," Beth said, "have been quiet since those shootings they did. Just as well. If you start messing about with bombs and guns, in the end someone's going to get hurt."

"But they haven't been so far," I said, surprised by my surprise.

"Don't tell me you're in favour of those people?"

Alarm in her voice, lined with anger.

"No! You know what my politics are."

"Yeah. Why don't you open the wine?"

As it began its slow journey through our veins, 'The Day of the Jackal' came on. We watched Edward Fox go through his deadpan paces for about half an hour before we started kissing then petting then making love and it was when we were in full coitus that the bang went off, a bang so loud it made the windows shudder and my penis fly out of its burrow. We sat up simultaneously.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I've no idea. It wasn't a car backfiring, that's for sure."

Beth started redressing in a hurry.

"Let's take a look."

We trotted down the stairs to a front door already opened by the other tenants, of whom there were four, I now saw, one of them with snakey tattoos on both arms. They were pointing at a flickering glare just visible somewhere beyond the rooves of the houses opposite.

The tattooed one turned to Beth. "We were thinking about taking a look-see. Want to come?" He glanced at me. "You too, if you want."

"Sure," said Beth. The others were already opening the doors of a shabby-looking Ford Cortina. The tattooed man was at the wheel. I squeezed into the back and sat on Beth's lap. We headed in the general direction of the glare and when we were close enough to feel heat blowing our way, the man in the front passenger seat said:

"I think it's Saint Martin's."

Barely had he got the words out of his mouth than we were flagged down by two policemen in yellow fluorescent jackets.

"No vehicles beyond this point."

We parked, got out and walked past a half dozen semi-Ds to a cordon beyond which, sure enough, a parish church was burning. High flames rose out of its now vanished roof, spiralling into the night, their tips releasing strings of black smoke. Dozens of spectators, their bellies pressed against the police tape, were gazing, staring, gawping at the blaze. Beth had a hand over her mouth.

"The stupid bastards!"

The tattooed man turned to her:

"You know who did this?"

She took her hand away.

"I can bloody well guess."

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Back at the house, we put on the radio and tuned into a news channel. A male voice was saying, hurriedly:

“...parish churches in Preston and Golding were bombed simultaneously at eleven forty-five tonight. Responsibility has already been claimed by the terrorist organisation that calls itself The Vanguard.”

Beth looked at me.

“Told you!”

“A message phoned through to Vogue magazine said the following: ‘God's servants are not to be trusted. The Vanguard.’ Nobody was injured in the attacks, but in Golding, the roof of Saint Martin's Parish Church was completely destroyed and the inner walls severely scorched...”

Footage.

“..on the other hand Saint John's Minster in Preston was barely scathed, with minimal damage done to the foot of an altarpiece.”

Footage. Beth shook her head.

“They're fucking certifiable, those people.”

“But, like I said, they still haven't hurt anybody.”

The four men and Beth looked at me. I thought they were about to say something. But no.