



## NINETEEN

His thoughts were swirling to and fro. He couldn't get to sleep.

They had visited the University of Bath on an open day, catching the bus from the city centre to the campus and back. This was their second night in a hotel overlooking a quaint cobbled square. Tomorrow, they would drive home to Hertfordshire.

Gabby, his daughter, was sleeping in another room. Bath had not been his alma mater. Still, it had brought up certain memories from thirty years ago. He had been worried, a little ridiculously, about bumping into old acquaintances who might have children the same age as Gabby. He had, in fact, seen somebody who looked familiar. It almost certainly wasn't the chap he was thinking of – Ricky was his name – but it had unnerved him even so. Later in the afternoon, they had visited some of the well-known sights of the city, the Royal Crescent and the Abbey. History was everywhere in Bath. Some people were walking around in period costumes from the time of Jane Austen. Absent-mindedly, he had wandered into a bookshop. In one section, Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars* were on display. It was another reminder of the past...

He looked across at his wife, lying beside him, asleep. He felt alone and empty, aware of the passing of time. If Gabby performed as expected in her exams, she would go to university, leaving her old life behind. Of course, she would come back for the holidays, but she would be a different person, more mature, more independent. He could identify with his mother and father when they had seen him off in 1984. In those days, you were more shut off from the world. There was no Internet, no social media. The one phone available in his hall of residence was a payphone in the main building, which you might have to queue for with your ten pence pieces, running the risk of other people listening in to your conversation. Thinking back, he had used that phone only once. It was hard to imagine in this current age of lightning-fast connectivity, but if you wanted to communicate with your parents, you generally wrote letters. He had written six in his first year. He had discovered these letters a couple of years ago in his mother's dressing table drawer after her death. He had been amazed at their length and detail, assuming that his mother would be interested in the people he had



got to know. He recalled that he had used a blue leather journal to help him construct his dispatches. The journal had long since disappeared, perhaps gathering dust alongside old photos and certificates in the attic. The entries had ended suddenly, anyway, and he had no desire to go up there and conduct a search.

His father had died ten years ago. He had been reminded of him today when Gabby had said that Craig's time at university had been 'free'. Tell that to his dad! The full rate of grant in the mid eighties was not far off £2,000. Lower income people received the full grant, but there were some rich people, such as Lucinda Stanhope on the floor upstairs in his hall of residence who, according to rumours, had been given the full grant because neither of her parents worked. Unfortunately, because his dad had a well-paid job, Craig was only awarded half the grant. His dad had said, in all seriousness, that he wasn't sure whether the family could afford the other half and whether, therefore, Craig could go to university. They had moved house, downsizing from a property valued at £70,000 to one valued at £50,000. Paying for Craig's university education wasn't the only reason for the move, but it was still, apparently, a contributory factor.

He settled into his pillow. How he wished he could go to sleep! However, as neither sleep nor shutting off the past appeared to be viable options, he decided to revisit the days when he had been a student. This wasn't the first time he had entertained such memories – indeed, whole conversations were roughly recorded in his brain – but, perhaps because of the events of the day, it was easier to conjure up a more vivid mental picture...

And now he had returned to September in 1984, sitting in the backseat of his parents' Vauxhall Cavalier, driving south on the M3. Observing the banks of the chalk hills on either side of the road, he felt as if he was entering a different world. How funny! It was less than two hours from where he lived. It just went to show how parochial his existence had been up until then. He had not visited the university before, not for an open day and not for an interview, and presumably his parents must have felt under stress as well, getting him to his designated hall of residence.

Right – here they were. After visiting reception and obtaining a key, they crossed a grassy square to a red-brick building. Craig's room, number six, didn't contain much: a bed, a wardrobe, a



desk and a chair. But it was freedom. A new life. Looking through the window, he could see people bustling about and, outside the door, he could hear voices. In truth, he had wanted his parents to go as soon as possible so that he could meet his fellow students, but, in retrospect, leaving him behind must have been hard, especially on his mum. He was the first person in the family to go to university – the only son.

In his first letter home after a week, he had described his living conditions. M Block was a three-storey building. Each floor consisted of two corridors, one of eight rooms, divided in two by the stairwell, and another, which veered off midway along the left-hand side, composed of four rooms. The long corridor, which he was on, fronted a green or court, while the short corridor pointed towards the main building, where they ate their meals. On Craig's floor, there were eleven English boys, all white, and one Spaniard, Eduardo. The authorities placed only boys on the ground floor of M Block to discourage peeping Toms, for which there had been a precedent in a previous year. This obviously didn't rule out peeping Janes. Craig had once been disturbed to see a face with long hair appear outside the insufficiently opaque bathroom window combined with squeals of laughter. In future, whenever taking a bath, he had stuffed his clothes up against the window to block out the view.

To begin with, he had made a big effort to get to know people. At his comprehensive school, friendship groups had been based on distinctions such as an interest in football or a position in the choir or orchestra. At university, however, the differences were more profound: in class; the region of the country you came from; your accent. The first person Craig had met had been his next-door neighbour, Henry Osbourne, who surveyed him through half-closed eyelids. Henry had gone to a private school, spent a gap year receiving officer training at Sandhurst, and planned to rejoin the army after university. Craig felt as if he were talking to a member of the royal family.

The second person he had met was Richard Beeks, who later became known as the Venerable Bede because of his religious beliefs. Craig had asked him what subject he was studying – physics – and then made the faux pas on first meeting somebody of asking about their A-level results. Richard had hesitated before replying and then said, 'Five As.' It had been impossible to do five A-levels at Craig's school.



Not all private school pupils, Craig soon realised, had the same outlook and attitudes. Ollie Youngman, who lived in the room above Craig's, came from a similar background to Henry but didn't care for such gung-ho types. Ollie, who played the oboe, had hated his time in the cadet force at school. Jacob Robinson, at the other end of the corridor, was different again. He wanted to blend in with the lower orders and claimed, despite his plummy tones, to be a Liverpudlian. One didn't get this inconsistency with the mullet-haired Paul Armitage, who was truly working class and spoke with a Lancashire accent. For him, Craig was just another toff from the south.

The next people Craig had met were Justin Marshall and Dan Goldberg. The former was awkward but likeable, the latter a joker with wild curly hair. Phil Stewart, another friend, had left university halfway through the year, saying he was doing the wrong subject. He was replaced by Graeme Jones, whom Craig hardly saw, a ghost-like figure. After their first conversation, where he learned that Graeme liked the music of Jean-Michel Jarre and the novels of Robert A Heinlein, they had barely exchanged a word.

His next-door neighbour but one, Ricky Goodwin, had wine and beer bottles lining his window to show, presumably, what a party animal he was. He supported Spurs, whereas Craig supported Arsenal, their north London rivals. There would be a certain amount of banter in the run-up to each game, and then Ricky would give him superior – or sour – looks for days after each result.

Who else lived along his corridor? Oh, yes – Roland Naismith. He would invite Craig into his room and play his radio cassette recorder with the curtains closed and the lights off. (At no time did Craig think that Roland might be gay. Up until that point in his life, he had never knowingly come across a gay person.) Roland was a gentle soul, who kept Craig up-to-date with the music scene. Craig had stopped watching *Top of the Pops* during this period and, indeed, television in general. He could recall Roland playing '19' by Paul Hardcastle. The number represented the average age of the combat soldier in Vietnam.

*According to a Veteran's Administration study, half of the Vietnam combat veterans suffered from what psychiatrists call post-traumatic stress disorder. Many vets complain of alienation,*



*rage, or guilt; some succumb to suicidal thoughts. Eight to ten years after coming home, almost eight hundred thousand men are still fighting the Vietnam War.*

Politics was an issue then, as now. At school, Craig had discussed fighting in the Falklands in the unlikely event that the war would escalate and trigger a national call-up. His life, however, was quite different to the one in Hardcastle's song. When *he* had turned nineteen, three weeks after starting university, he had splashed out £285 on a Yamaha organ (not mentioned in his letters home) that was supposedly the next best thing to a synthesiser. This was meant to kick-start a pop career and worldwide fame, which had only not happened thus far because of the baleful influence of his father, whose negative energy had stifled any creative endeavour on behalf of his son. Oddly enough, though, once purchased, he had hardly played the instrument. Considering how good his memory was in terms of recalling people and events from that period, he honestly could not recall what had happened to the blooming thing. Presumably, his parents had sold it or given it away.

'Have you seen Craig's organ?'

That was a popular double entendre at the time. Short of money because of his extravagant purchase, he had lived on nothing but porridge for a while, which had brought him out in large spots, probably a harbinger of some nutrient-deficiency disease like scurvy. Another money-saving idea had been to cut his hair himself, which at least had taught him the value of hairdressers in society. In fairness, he probably wasn't more immature than many others around him. Justin had once turned a pizza upside-down on a grill to do the other side, not thinking that all the toppings would fall out. The unusual people were the grown-ups. Henry discovered the laundry room a long time before Craig. (When Craig first came across it, he thought he had stumbled into a NASA space station.) Henry would occasionally iron his clothes or shine his shoes. To Craig, it felt as if his neighbour had aged twenty years overnight.

And then there was the conundrum that represented the opposite sex. Practically the whole hall of residence walked past Craig's room on the corner of M Block to get to the dining hall in the main building. It wasn't long before his friends – all boys, of course – congregated in his room,



standing back in the shadows, to view the spectacle. (Justin had been sent out to test what you could see and reported back that such viewings were private so long as you kept seven feet from the window.) Girl diners – and presumably boy diners – were surprisingly regular in the hour they went to dinner. You could therefore choose whether you wanted to see the front or the back view of certain individuals depending on when you went to dinner yourself. Just about every boy Craig knew, it seemed, was obsessed with girls. They had big hair in those days. They dressed in oversized jumpers and skinny jeans and wore bold make-up.

He recalled a conversation with Gabby. A friend of hers had said that her sister was having a wild time at university. The friend's parents were worried about their other daughter turning into a sex-crazed alcoholic.

'Which university?' he asked.

Fortunately, it wasn't one of the places Gabby was thinking of applying to.

'Nothing like that went on in my hall of residence,' he said.

'Back in the day, eh? You might not have been messing around, but I bet a lot of people were.'

He shook his head. 'Of the twelve boys on my floor, I would say that probably ten were virgins – at the very least, six – and they stayed that way until the end of the year. I doubt whether most of them had ever kissed a girl passionately.'

'No way!'

Her tone suggested that he had said something outrageous.

'I knew those people pretty well. If they had indulged in anything of that nature, I'm sure I would have heard about it.'

'This was the eighties, wasn't it? It's a long time after the sexual revolution.'

The sexual revolution, he had argued, had been an ongoing process. It wasn't fun, for example, being a single mum in the sixties. There was still a lot of stigma.

'Back when I was a student, I didn't know anyone who'd bought a condom. And I doubt that that many girls were on the pill.'



While she dipped in and out of her phone, he went into a speech about life as it used to be growing up in his village. There weren't many people of his age living nearby. He might get invited to parties but, even then, there were only so many spare rooms.

'It would have been even harder for those who went to single-sex schools.'

Gabby looked at him sceptically but did not reply. Probably something had popped up on her phone that was more interesting – something involving kittens, for example.

Had there been more sexual antics occurring among the people he had known at university? He stared up at his hotel room ceiling as if it held the answer. No, he didn't think so. M Block, according to Dan, stood for Monastery Block. The two non-virgin exceptions whom Craig had identified were Henry and Ricky, although Craig had never discussed the subject with them and so couldn't be sure. Now and again, he had heard suspicious giggling from Henry's room late at night, which had been infuriating when he was trying to get to sleep.

Compared to his male peers, he hadn't been girl-mad. He presumed he would get a girlfriend at some point but wasn't in any great rush. There were even disadvantages to having a girlfriend, as he had learned from observing the few couples that had formed at his school. Being part of a couple was antisocial. It cut you off from everybody else. In addition, couples mooned over each other with a tiresome and tireless assiduousness, as if nothing in the world exceeded the importance of their relationship. This calamity of being unduly soppy over another human being could apparently affect anyone, even the people you least suspected of succumbing. You could be hanging out one day with Iain Henderson, sniggering about something typically immature, and then, on the next day, your buddy, Iain, could desert you for Sharon Pargeter, following her around with an obsequiousness that was shocking to behold. Iain and Sharon had split up after a couple of months, and normal service had been resumed, but it felt to Craig, and perhaps to Iain as well, as if the other had contracted a special form of spring fever. Neither of them, once reunited, referred to this unfortunate episode.

If he was being honest, Craig felt an element of envy, as well as curiosity, towards such amorous relationships. (It had nothing to do with Sharon Pargeter who, for all her charms, didn't affect him in the same way as she affected Iain.) The advantage, however, of adopting a cynicism towards



the subject was that it protected you from the feeling you should be taking the initiative with girls. Craig was above such undignified behaviour. Or so he liked to think. How he expected to get a girlfriend, when it was generally boys who were expected to make the first move, was unclear in his mind.

In truth, he had had a slight fear of girls back then. They were particularly intimidating when they went around in groups.

‘There’s a... a...’

Justin was at his door, throwing the occasional glance along the corridor.

‘What?’

‘In the kitchen.’

‘What’s in the kitchen?’

He was expecting the answer to be something like a rat or a cockroach.

‘A female.’

‘A girl, do you mean?’

‘Keep your voice down!’ Justin looked genuinely panicked. ‘I’m not sure any more. She was there a couple of minutes ago. She might be somewhere else by now. I was walking by. I had no idea. And there she was. By the sink.’

Justin, it was probably safe to assume, was a virgin in those days. (He was now a married man with four children.) Craig had left his room to investigate with Justin cowering behind him. The female could, in theory, be anywhere, ready to spring out at any moment. He recalled that Ricky had said that his girlfriend, Jan, was staying with him that weekend, but he had assumed for some reason that this had been a joke. They had proceeded gingerly along the corridor. Craig had half expected Justin to say at any moment, ‘Your three o’clock,’ meaning that the target was located to his right. But no immediate sighting was made. Reports meanwhile filtered back from other sources. Somebody had seen her in the bathroom. She had looked ‘moody’. It was disturbing. In the end, Craig had caught a glimpse of her from a distance – she had stayed in Ricky’s room most of the time – but, like most residents on the ground floor, he hadn’t spoken to her. Shockingly, Ricky continued to talk about





other women in sexual terms after she had left. No one asked him what had occurred in his room that weekend.

Private school pupils – Ricky Goodwin excepted – were generally more forward with girls. Jacob Robinson, as Craig had reported to his mother in one of his letters, had been rejected nine times in the first year. And yet his confidence remained undented. He would set out by saying that he would rock the world of his chosen belle. Perhaps girls detected his split personality over class – Craig had once heard him say, ‘Golly gosh, mate’ – or sensed that he was trying too hard. His desperation may have come in part from being a boarder at an all-boys school. At a disco at the start of the year, he had approached Craig and said, ‘Have you ever seen so many hot-looking women in your life?’

Craig was at least used to having girls around (and not talking to them). At the time of Jacob’s pronouncement, he had been thinking that there were probably about half a dozen girls at his school who were more appealing than anyone present. Certainly, there was no one to compare with Barbara Collins, the ice maiden, with whom he had been enthralled for years and who, undoubtedly, could have infected him with Iain’s form of spring fever. Looking on the bright side, however, perhaps this absence of anyone he found desirable was a good thing. Perhaps he would be able to concentrate fully on his studies, put Barbara behind him, and end up achieving a first. (It was possible to dream about such things before you had even handed in an essay...)

Jacob had wandered off and, almost simultaneously, a girl had come into Craig’s line of vision. It wasn’t that she was especially beautiful. Her charms, in all honesty, were a bit obvious. Shapely, yes, but with everything exaggerated. She had big, bouncy hair, bright red lips, and a jumper that, more than anybody else’s, clung to her body. Even so, she had a way of moving that, in Craig’s mind, carried a certain sensuousness, a certain suggestiveness. She was his favourite out of everyone he had seen.

[These are the first few pages of a longer story.]

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