

PAGES OUT OF ORDER

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Third form, Winter term, 1978

Tom's arrival in my life was preceded by the sound of his mother.

It was a sunny September weekend and most of our year had already arrived at our new school; we had shaken off our parents and were unpacking our trunks in the dormitory, casting covert glances at our neighbours or making shy conversation.

Once, a summer ago, we had known who we were. Good little public schoolboys, the future administrators of a dead empire; diehard Conservatives, sworn enemies of Callaghan's Labour government. Two months beforehand we were kings at prep school and the pinnacle of maturity was the grand age of thirteen. Now we were little boys again, dwarfed even by the mountainous fourteen-year-olds in the year above us. We were longing for an object on which to vent our new-found insecurity, and then the Meltons arrived.

We heard Mrs Melton coming down the corridor and suspended our unpacking to listen better: 'Is this the way? Doesn't anyone know anything? You, are you a prefect? Can you direct us to Thomas's dormitory?'

She was a brassy woman in a fur coat, who glided in like visiting royalty while two conscripted fifth-formers struggled behind her with a trunk. Absorbed in this spectacle, it took an effort to notice the small, red-haired figure in his mother's wake: misery incarnate, in a too-big suit.

'Now, where's your bed?' Mrs Melton stalked about the dormitory, squinting at the nameplates above each bed, and homed in on the bed next to mine. 'Here it is. Put the trunk there, will you?'

She turned to her son.

'Well, dear, I'll be off so you can settle in. Be good.' She gave his cheek a quick peck and looked around. Her eyes settled on me. 'This is your neighbour-' [she peered at my nameplate] '-William Sutton. William, this is Thomas. Remember everything I told you, Thomas. Ask a prefect if you need anything and if anyone offers you a cigarette go straight to the housemaster.' That line sealed her son's fate. 'Are you coming to see me off?'

We all realised, the two fifth-formers included, that we were staring at Tom, who followed after his mother with his face a flaming red that matched his hair. The fifth-formers tactfully vanished and left us sharpening our claws with glee for Tom's return.

* * *

9.30 pm, Day One of term. Bed time for little boys. The ribbing had eased off and we were still sorting out who would be the leaders of the year, who the followers of the leaders and who would be more or less independent. This last group had two sub-categories – acceptable and unacceptable. I knew from experience that my big ears would exclude me from the first group unless I showed a lot more bravado than I had in me; the best course was to lie low and hope no one noticed me. I therefore found myself in the second group, kidding myself that this was in fact acceptable independence. Tom, because no one else would dare take him, found himself squarely in the third, independence quite unacceptable.

I didn't have the heart for the prolonged persecution campaign that the far end of the dormitory had set themselves on (several voices had already broken up that end, which gave them a head start in the maturity stakes). Preventative alliances were forming in the squeaky-voiced camp and I decided to do my bit. Tom was curled up in his bed, nose buried in a book.

'Hi,' I said. No answer. 'Thomas?'

(*'Tha-maas!'* came a cry from the far end, in the tone used by the woman in *Tom and Jerry* when the cat has just wrecked the house again.)

He glared back at me.

'Tom,' he said, and turned back to his book.

'Oh, sorry.' Tom, eh? I had always been William, even to my friends. Time to grow up. 'I'm Will,' I said.

'Oh.'

I resented this treatment: maybe no one else had seen the teddy bear he had almost taken out of his trunk, but I had and I hadn't said a word.

'Good book?' I asked. He held it up – *The Spy Who Loved Me*. 'Oh, right! Is it as good as the film?' The latest epic to feature Ol' Eyebrows had come out the previous year.

('Want a cigarette?' someone called. 'If anyone offers you a cigarette, go *straight* to the housemaster,' someone else answered, falsetto.)

'It's far better,' he said loftily. 'It's a proper love story. It doesn't have any submarines or undersea bases.'

'Not even a Lotus?' I asked hopefully.

'Fraid not.'

('Hey, Melton! You queer?' 'That's it! He's bent!' 'Move your bed away from him, Sutton!')

'Is there any ... you know?' I said, even more hopefully.

'There is a bit, actually,' he admitted, with a bashful grin. He showed me a couple of choice passages, of which between us we understood about half, and we chatted a

bit more about James Bond. By the time the prefect came in to turn the lights out at 10 o'clock we were 0.1 of the way towards being friends.

* * *

Winter, 1978. Another generation of schoolboys navigated its way by instinct through the tricky passages of adolescence; selfish, arrogant prigs without a care in the world beyond proving our maturity. A boy's worth was judged by his prowess in sport and his body's testosterone count. You sank or swam, which meant you grew up fast. There was no point in running to Mummy because Mummy wasn't there and Matron, lovely lady that she was, wasn't quite the same. Outside our artificial, unreal environment the country suffered the Winter of Discontent. Margaret Thatcher would be the nation's salvation. James Callaghan was a Communist (no one was too sure what a socialist was). Liberals were all bent.

Tom Melton could do nothing right. He was small and his fair skin made him look even younger than he was. His voice refused to break, lodging itself in the higher registers (he left the choir to get away from this stigma, in vain). He had an accent so refined that even we noticed. He liked reading books and he played a musical instrument (the clarinet, and well – he was a Music Scholar). He was a sensitive, emotional boy and he was targeted for destruction.

We were placed in the same form, where his unpopularity and my cultivated nebbishness drew us together and we moved from shy liking to proper friendship. Since anyone who failed to come up to scratch was tagged as bent or queer ('gay' hadn't entered our lexicon yet), we both acquired the label. I did sometimes wonder, in the way that adolescents do, but since the sight of Tom in the shower did nothing for me I decided the others were wrong.

Half term came and went, and Tom refused to talk about it. I imagined a week alone with Mrs Melton and sympathised. I had learnt, to my fascination, that his parents were divorced and his mother had custody of him, though Daddy paid the bills. His father, an unspecified businessman, had left for another woman. I still hadn't got used to the idea that adults (especially parents) had sex even when they didn't want children.

The second half of term was much like the first, and then the threat of the holidays loomed. After his reaction to half term, I could guess how he felt about four whole weeks at home.

'Come and stay with us,' I invited, after consulting with my parents up in Hereford. His face split into the biggest grin I had seen.

'Can I? How long?'

'As long as you like, really.'

Mrs Melton didn't give in without a fight but we got Tom for the week before Christmas, at the cost of my spending a week with the Meltons in the new year.

Third form, Spring term, 1979

One term down, fourteen to go. I pitied Tom, torn between an unhappy home and a school he loathed. I had mentioned his unpopularity to my father, who shrugged. He had been through the system himself thirty years previously.

‘He’ll have to learn to cope,’ he had said with rough sympathy. ‘And you can stand up for your friend, can’t you, son?’

Well ...

‘Of course,’ I said quickly. Dad shrugged.

‘So there you are. Perhaps things will get better when his voice breaks.’

This happy day was still a way off when things changed.

* * *

The true bane of Tom’s life was a boy called Stephen Gale. Perhaps because he never quite made it at anything: he wasn’t quite good enough for the team, he wasn’t quite accepted as a leader of our year. Older boys smirked slightly when they spoke to him. The main reason for his general unpleasance I didn’t learn until later, but all these little things piled up and made him an obnoxious bully.

Hockey was the sport for the Spring term, and whenever Gale found himself near Tom on the field his stick always managed to catch itself around Tom’s ankle and send him flying. On this day he was spotted by the umpire and given a ticking off in public, which only made him worse.

We got back from games and showered. Gale turned Tom’s hot tap off when Tom wasn’t looking and tripped him up when he tried to leave. I came out of the showers a few minutes later to find Tom sitting by his locker with his towel still round his waist. His face was buried in his hands and his shoulders were shaking.

‘Tom?’ I said. He jerked his head up and the vicious hatred in his look made me take a step back.

‘Fuck off!’ he hissed.

‘Hey, Tom, it’s me,’ I said. I noticed the tears in his eyes and heard the rattle in his throat. He was trying very, very hard not to cry.

‘This isn’t like you, Tom,’ I said.

‘I don’t give a fuck.’ Two fucks in ten seconds was definitely not like Tom. He hugged his knees and his voice still shook.

‘I’ve had enough. I hate this place, I hate this life, I ...’ He broke off with a choke. ‘I’m going to flip, Will. I really am. I am going to flip.’

I towelled myself dry quietly, got dressed and went to lounge in the third form dayroom, waiting for afternoon lessons to start.

Tom came in shortly after me. He seemed to have got himself under control.

'It's the queer boy!' Tom ignored Gale. He went to his locker, took out a book, sat down and started reading. His ears were burning despite the show he put on.

'Hey, did you hear? Melton thought he had a pubic hair, until he peed through it.'

Cue general hilarity and mirth. Tom's ears burnt brighter and he studied the book even more fixedly. To my surprise, I found myself flushing and I buried my nose further in the work I was doing. There was going to be a fight and that wanker Gale was going to bully my friend again. Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Shut up, Gale, just shut up! Not Oscar Wilde, but it would serve. It probably would shut him up, too, if only out of surprise. And I would be his next target. No thanks.

'Is it a nice book, Tommy? Ooh, I do hope Mummy would approve.' Gale grabbed the book and held it up above him.

'Give it back, please,' Tom groaned. Gale danced away with the book held up in the air. Tom jumped up, shouting, 'Don't-'

He froze. I could see his face: his expression went blank for a moment and he staggered forward into Gale.

'Get off me, queer boy!' Gale shouted, knocking Tom away. Tom fell over backwards and landed in a sprawl. He shook his head and slowly climbed to his feet again.

'You all right, Melton?' one of the braver boys asked. Gale glared at him.

Tom smiled: it was the creepiest thing I had ever seen because there was a most un-Tomlike glint in his eye.

'Ah, yes, Gale. The original cock-sucker.'

Gale stood stunned and his cheeks reddened at the burst of laughter. This had to be revenged. He stood over Tom, using his height to dominate.

'Listen, queer boy-'

'Oh do be quiet, Stevie-poos,' Tom pouted and minced at him. 'You'll make Evans jealous.'

Evans? Evans was the captain of the Firsts and surely as straight as they come. Couldn't Tom have picked a better target?

But Gale was gaping, mouth open. Then he recovered and stepped forward, dangerously close to Tom and looming over him.

'One last chance, Melton-'

'One last chance, Melton,' Tom mimicked perfectly. 'Go squeeze your zits, Gale.'

Gale's hand shot out-

Tom's grabbed it and pulled Gale into a tight embrace. Gale bellowed and writhed to escape, but somehow Tom was hanging on to him and seemed to be

whispering in his ear. Gale stopped writhing and stared down at Tom in horror. Tom released him and Gale, white faced, took a step back.

'I ... you ... wouldn't!' he gasped.

'Want a bet?' Tom said evenly. Gale fled.

The rest of us were a frozen tableau, still awed by the extraordinary exchange. Tom seemed to have forgotten about us; he stood still, looking at his hands, then down at the rest of his body. Then he, too, left.

I found him in the washroom. He was standing motionless, looking in the mirror. Not squeezing blackheads or zits, just looking. Sometimes he would move his head from side to side, never taking his eyes off his reflection. Then he saw my reflection behind him and turned round, grinning.

'Will. Hi,' he said, and put his hands on my shoulders. I was terrified he was going to pull me into an embrace too, but he just stood and took me in as though he had never seen me before.

'What was all that about, Tom?' I said.

'Hmm? Oh, Gale, yes. I just mentioned a couple of names, that's all. I shouldn't have made fun of him.' He smiled and actually put an arm round my shoulders, for all the world like a big brother. 'He won't bully anyone again, that's what counts. I've done him a favour, really, 'cos now he's going to have to learn to make friends.'

* * *

That was all it took. Tom didn't want universal popularity, just to be left alone, and it worked. He could live his life his way and when it suited him he could be on good terms with anyone. He was not a violent boy and he despised bullies. He remained independent of cliques, but now it was the acceptable form of independence. He was open to everyone; he could mix with anyone if he so chose, and if he wanted to he could have been a leader of the year in his own right.

One of the boys he could have led was Stephen Gale, who now practically worshipped his footsteps. Funny old world.

With the Easter holidays on the horizon, I thought we should make arrangements for visiting again.

'We're going to Scotland for the week before Easter,' I said, 'but we could squeeze you in any other time.'

'Ah ... yes,' Tom said. 'Will, would you mind if I didn't come at all? I mean, do come and stay with us, I'd really like that, but I want to be with my mother.'

What?

He smiled and shrugged sheepishly.

'She's lonely, Will. Dad's treated her like shit and she deserves a bit more than she's getting from her only child.'

‘Then why did she send you here?’ I demanded.

‘Because, my dear, one does,’ he said in his best Noel Coward. In his own voice, he went on, ‘it would never occur to her not to. Her family have been going to public school since 1066 and the stiff upper lip’s been genetically inbred. I’m going to change all that.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Look, give me your diary.’

I handed it over and he riffled through April.

‘When do you get back from Scotland? The sixteenth? Fine. Not a lot of holiday left after that, but ... say, come on the seventeenth, and see for yourself.’

* * *

Both Meltons were waiting for me at the station and Mrs Melton swooped on me.

‘William! How nice to see you again.’ She kissed me. She kissed me! I could see Tom grinning over her shoulder. She was smiling and animated and as she drove us back to the house, a vast palace in the gin-and-Jaguar heartland of deepest Surrey, she chatted about all the lovely things she and Tom had been doing over the holidays. When she left us in my room it was a relief. Tom was still grinning. He sat in a chair and let me unpack.

‘You’ve drugged her food, haven’t you?’

‘I’ve been nice to her, that’s all.’

‘We’ve done so many *lovely* things, Thomas and I-’

‘Fancy coming up to London this evening?’ he said, changing the subject.

‘Sure.’ I had discovered in January that the local nightlife – at least for two boys of fourteen who weren’t really sure what a good time was anyway – left a lot to be desired.

‘There’s a girl I’ve been seeing, and she’s got a sister-’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ I stopped unpacking and looked at him. He was serious.

‘Don’t tell me, it’s your baby cousins, right?’

‘Will! No, Maria’s sixteen, and Alice is fourteen, same as you.’

I must have gone pale. The thought of girls – real girls – was terrifying. Tom hooted with laughter.

‘You’re scared!’ He ran over to the window and shouted out of it, ‘He’s scared-’

‘Tom!’

‘Ah, relax.’ He turned back to me. ‘You’ll hang on to your virginity for a few more years.’

‘Tom!’

‘Will, they’re a really nice couple of girls. We’ll go up after tea, right?’

* * *

My toes still curl at the memory of my fears. It was a totally innocent evening. Maria and Alice were the daughters of a friend of Tom’s father; they were good looking, intelligent and thoroughly pleasant to be with. We met up in Leicester Square, went to see *Superman* and afterwards went to their home in Kensington for dinner. Just the four of us, and when their parents came home we had a couple more drinks and the party broke up.

It was still the first time I’d talked to a girl other than my sister – yuk! – or one of her friends –*yuk!* – for years; certainly the first time since girls had become something more to me than inferior imitations of boys, flat all the way down, to be avoided and despised. Alice and I circled each other like a couple of teenagers on a first date, which is exactly what we were, but we got on well enough and enjoyed each other’s company. Just before setting off to catch the tube we managed a quick, shy kiss, and it was like heaven.

I had been much too absorbed in Alice to think of how Tom was getting on with the sixteen-year-old Maria, much less wonder about how he had managed to bridge the age difference so effectively. There is a lot more than two years between a sixteen-year-old girl and a fourteen-year-old boy. On the train back, it occurred to me to comment in as tangential a manner as possible.

Tom grinned and gave his one comment on the subject.

‘It’s company I’m after, not sex, Will,’ he said, ‘and that’s just a question of knowing the right words.’

Fourth form, Winter term, 1979

Tom and I finished our first year as the closest and best of friends and made arrangements to keep in touch over the summer holidays. When we returned for the fourth form we had progressed from the dayroom to shared studies. We got to choose room mates and inevitably we shared together.

This was more like it! A year older, several inches taller and much, much wiser than the previous Autumn, and (best of all) one step up the maturity ladder from the new third form. We had passed through the worst traumas and adjustments that adolescence could throw at us and we weren’t so worried about flaunting our heterosexuality at all and sundry, but again I began to wonder about myself. Had Alice (who I hadn’t seen since) been just a flash in the pan? I was the only really close friend that Tom had; he seemed to make a deliberate effort to seek out my friendship, which I found flattering, but ... I put it down to the fact that I had been his friend even before his volte-face the previous year.

But even so ...

I plucked up my courage one evening to tell him my fears, in the privacy of our study with no one else about, and he laughed.

'You're not gay, Will,' he said. He was the first person I knew to use that word, and he said it with such conviction that I was paradoxically hurt.

'How do you know?' I demanded, and bit my tongue when I realised how I sounded.

'You're not,' he repeated. He turned back to his work, then looked up again. 'Gale is.'

'Gale?'

'Sure. What made him such a dork was that he was terrified of anyone finding out and so he had to act like he thought a strapping hetero should. He'll come ... I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if he came out at university. In fact ...' He looked about, as though afraid of eavesdroppers, though no one else could be in the same room. '... in fact, and if you repeat this to anyone else you die, you remember Evans?'

'Yeah.' Our school's rugby hero had left at the end of the last year for Cambridge.

'I happen to know that he and Gale ... well, did it, as t'were, last year. Or rather, Gale had it done to him, and found he liked it. And he has, so to speak, done it with a couple of other boys too. And I'm not just talking adolescents tossing each other off, I'm talking the whole hog.'

'No!' I was shocked, horrified, fascinated, and I wanted to know everything. It didn't occur to me to doubt him. 'How do you know?'

'Because he ... has told me. And, no Will, I'm not telling you who the others are. You'd refuse to go in the showers with them if you knew.'

There was a look in his eye – a cold look, as if he was challenging me to disbelieve him, and I didn't dare.

'You sound as if you don't mind,' I said.

'Mind?' He seemed to muse on it. 'I suppose I mind sixth formers bugging third formers, but on the other hand, why fight what's inevitable?'

'I can't believe it!'

'It's understandable,' he said. 'These are the most potent years of our life, Will, did you know that? You and I should be out there spreading our seed about and instead we're here with nowhere to spread it except each other.'

This conjured up an image so revolting that it wasn't difficult to push it away. Without looking up from his work, Tom carried on:

'And we're cooped up here with nothing but other boys for company, if we're seen talking to a girl it's regarded as subversive and unnatural, and they're surprised when places like this get a reputation as hotbeds of buttocks and buggery. You wait 'til

I'm dictator, Will. The public school system will burn. It serves no useful purpose and gives its victims grief for the rest of their lives.'

'So-' I said, but there was no stopping him now.

'Anyone who has ever sent an adolescent to a single sex boarding school will be forcibly confined in a room with members of whichever gender they would least like to shag, and pumped full of hormones until they feel they'll burst if they don't have it off with someone. Let them see how they like it.'

'I don't understand you, Tom.'

He looked up at me and gave that grin again. His usual confidence.

'You will.'

Fifth form, Spring term, 1981

In the fifth form, I got expelled.

Towards the middle of the year, with 'O' level exams looming, the school was hit by a drinking spree. Getting paralytic was the trendy thing to do.

When, for three weekends running, boys had been hospitalised for alcohol poisoning, the headmaster made a speech to the whole school. Just possessing the stuff was to be an expulsion offence. That was all.

Two boys from our year were expelled a fortnight later, for just that crime. Tom, in public, was as shocked as the rest of us. Privately, he was disdainful.

'Boys will be boys,' he said. I was angry.

'Doesn't it bother you?' I demanded. 'Just for a little drink-'

'If they didn't want to go,' he said, 'all they had to do was not get drunk. And as for getting in to intensive care, nearly getting yourself killed, using up a good hospital bed which someone deserving might need ...' Then he grabbed my shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes.

'Will, promise me now, you'll never, ever be so stupid, right?'

'Well, I ... I mean ...' I stammered.

'Promise!'

'Sure, I promise.'

And it was a safe promise. I'd never been drunk in my life and I wasn't a rebel. I didn't go out of my way to break the rules.

Then I had more important things on my mind, like 'O' levels. I'd first heard of these mystical institutions when I was eight, which meant I had been dreading them for half my life. The crucial bits of paper that would affect the rest of my time on this world. Never mind your degree or your 'A' levels or even just practical experience

– without a good crop of ‘O’s, no prospective employer will even look at you. When you’ve had that hammered into you for half of your existence, getting through them is worth celebrating.

Which a group of us did, with a couple of bottles of whisky. Don’t ask me where it came from. I just remember being flattered by the invitation to join a group of the lads who had got the magical fluid from somewhere. We retired behind the bushes in the park and drank it.

Choose your friends. I passed out first and they left me there.

I was woken up by Tom, shaking me.

‘Will! Will, for fuck’s sake, Will!’ He slapped me, hard, and it didn’t hurt a bit. He was muttering to himself, something like:

‘Too late, Melton, too fucking late-’

The fact that this was the first time in ages that I had seen Tom worked up about anything, or even swearing, failed to register. I looked blearily up at both of him and burst out laughing.

‘I’m pissed!’ I squealed, and fell onto my back, quivering with mirth. It was the funniest thing ever.

‘Will, you berk,’ he said more softly, and pulled me to my feet. He supported me back to the house.

‘Wha’going?’ I demanded.

‘Back to the study for some coffee. The housemaster’s on the prowl and he’s not going to find you. He’s not.’

‘The housemaster!’ I called. ‘Hello, Bugsy! I’ve ... hee, hee, hee, I’ve had a whole bottle...’ I collapsed laughing again, dragging Tom down.

He got me to the study with the help of a passing third former. The kettle had just boiled.

‘Drink,’ he ordered, thrusting a cup of coffee into my hands. I sipped it reluctantly.

‘Tastes soapy,’ I objected.

‘That’s because you’re pissed. Finish it.’

I shrugged and did as he said.

‘Still soapy.’ He looked thoughtful.

‘It could be the shampoo, of course,’ he said.

I finished throwing up an hour later; it took a day for the retching to die down. During that time, Tom was more agitated than he had ever been. He couldn’t sit still but paced about constantly. Word circulated; one of the three boys I’d been with was in hospital, intensive care. The other two, apparently, hadn’t been caught.

So what was the problem? I was sober, no one had seen me, it was a day later, and anyway, friends don't rat on friends, do they?

The long hand of the housemaster, Mr Buckingham – Buggy – caught up with me at tea time the next day. I was summoned to his study.

'You've heard about Langton?'

'Um – yes, sir,' I said, trying to sound puzzled. Langton was the hospital case.

'He's named names, Sutton.' I gulped; Buckingham scowled at me. 'Morgan, Robson and ... you. I know you're not a troublemaker and I think I can trust you. So I'll ask you to your face. Were you drinking yesterday?'

Oh, please! All I had to say was-

But ... he was looking at me just a bit askance, just a bit too carefully. I lowered my head.

'Yes, sir,' I said. He nodded.

'I'm glad you said that, Sutton, because that's what Morgan said too.' Was there sympathy in his look? 'I'll see what I can do with the headmaster because I don't think you deserve expulsion, but don't hold your breath.'

* * *

I had never seen Tom so upset. He seemed to fold in on himself as though all his strength had left him; as though he had been hit by a terrible tragedy.

'But it's not so bad,' I said foolishly. 'He's going to speak up for me, they won't sack me for one offence-'

He was almost in tears.

'They will, they will. I'm so sorry, Will! I tried to get to you in time, I really did, I tried to change it, but I got held up and I couldn't get away ... I'm sorry!' When he looked up there were tears in his eyes. He seemed so convinced of my fate that I began to believe it too, despite all my desperate optimism to the contrary.

'You weren't to know, Tom! I mean, I was stupid ...'

'You were,' he agreed. We held each other's gaze.

'Thank you for sobering me up,' I said eventually.

'A pleasure.'

'You don't seem surprised.'

'No.'

I was silent for a bit more. Then-

'You really think they'll throw me out?'

'Yup.'

And they did.

* * *

We stayed in touch, of course, and still exchanged visits during the holidays. His last words to me as a co-pupil of the same school were:

‘If you had a choice, I’d advise you to go to a decent sixth form college and unlearn the damage this place has done. But since you don’t, I expect you’ll be sent to somewhere just like this.’

I was; the only real difference was the lack of Thomas Melton about the place. All the other characters were there, with different names. And now I stood on the touchlines at matches and cheered my new school on against my old.

The sixth form, lower and upper, passed mostly in a blur. The world moved into 1982 with not a war cloud to be seen; those who had heard of them at all thought that the Falkland Islands were off Scotland.

The Argie scum invaded, and we raged at the swine who invaded our sovereign territory and applauded the sending of the task force. It was a military-oriented school with a lot of officers’ sons, so a lot of fathers were sent down to the South Atlantic. Some were killed.

The world moved on. The upper sixth dawned and the end of my school days was in sight. Margaret Thatcher won her second election victory in 1983, cruising on the Falklands factor. I was old enough to vote and gave mine to the fledgling Social Democrats. Three million unemployed were beginning to wear, even on my far-right conscience.

Back at the old place, Tom of course became a prefect. Not so for me – one thing I had carried with me to my new school was my determination not to be tied down by responsibility. The independence that I prided myself on manifested itself for the first time in an outright refusal to take on obligations.

‘A’ levels loomed; we sat our prediction exams in the Easter term. On the strength of my predicted two As and a B, I was encouraged to try for Cambridge. Tom set his sights lower; in those days you still had to stay on for an extra term to take the Oxbridge exam and Tom, in one of his letters, said he had no intention of staying incarcerated for a minute more than necessary.

Tom rung me the day my actual results came through and was politely sympathetic about my disastrous three Cs. I didn’t know what had gone wrong with me in the exam room. He had two Cs and a B. Reluctantly I turned to the shortlist which I had drawn up in the unlikely event of not making it to Cambridge, and we ended up at the same Midlands redbrick, back together again. I had forgotten how much of my life had depended simply on his presence about the place. It was good to have it once more.

Tom, to my surprise, eschewed maths – his strongest point – completely. Instead he did politics. Politics! He looked almost apologetic.

‘It’s a change of direction,’ he admitted, ‘but so’s going to university, in my family. I thought of doing sociology, but I’d be disinherited.’

Freshers’ year, Winter term, 1983

University life was wonderful. I relished the new environment and gladly sloughed off all the old snobberies, the old prejudices, the old attitudes that had been ingrained in me by school. From being a despicable snob I became an equally despicable inverted snob. I could flatten my vowels and drop my aitches with the best of them. I experimented with growing long hair and a moustache (‘What will you do when you grow up, Will?’ Tom said) but chickened out and reverted to normal the day before my parents came to visit.

Tom fell into the whole thing like a fish returning to water. He didn’t change because he didn’t need to. Tom Melton at almost nineteen was just the same as Tom Melton at fourteen – a mature, well balanced character at ease with the world. He knew he had nothing to prove and so never bothered trying to.

Another familiar face was Stephen Gale, of fond memory, who I had actually found I could like. It’s amazing what a leveller just growing up can be. But it was still an eery feeling when he nervously, and with an embarrassed smile, told me over a cup of coffee that he had joined the Gay Society, he felt happier than ever before, I shouldn’t feel offended but he didn’t really fancy me (‘too gangly’), and could I think of a good way for him to break it to his parents?

I fell in love with a dark-haired girl called Joanna Hughes, who I met through Tom (she was on his course), and by the end of term we were inseparable. Tom didn’t seem to mind that I had poached ‘his’ girl, and when Jo and I became a fixture he gave all the encouragement he could and refused to be a gooseberry.

The most surprising thing was the nondevelopment of Tom’s own love life. He remained a bachelor. When I mentioned this, as casually as I could, he shrugged.

‘I believe in lasting relationships,’ he said.

‘So do I,’ I said, a bit self-virtuously.

‘I know but ...’ Tom actually seemed flustered. ‘However hard I tried, Will, it wouldn’t last. That’s all.’

Tom’s nerve giving out on him? Surely not.

‘How do you know?’ I said.

‘Because I’m clever.’

* * *

It was towards the end of summer, 1984 that Tom and I had our biggest disagreement. Second-year students traditionally lived off-campus and we three were such good friends that surely, he said, it would be good if we moved in together?

I was adamantly against it, and my reasoning must have been transparent. My relationship with Jo had still, despite my best efforts, a bit further to go. She was determined to be a one-man-per-lifetime girl and had just about convinced me that sex isn't the be-all and end-all of a relationship; possibly a bonus, which we had yet to enjoy, if I indeed turned out to be said man. I wasn't exactly pawing the ground, but on the other hand, given a year in a flat together, the possibility couldn't be ruled out, could it?

So, much as I liked Tom's company, much as I could even admit to myself that I loved him, I could conjecture times when his presence might not be welcome.

Jo thought it was a great idea ('he'll be someone to talk to if we split up,' she said encouragingly), so grinding my teeth as quietly as I could I put my signature next to the other two on the application form.

Second year, Easter holidays, 1985

Tom's twentieth birthday came and went. That was March 1985, the last normal month I was to have for a long time.

One April evening I came up the stairs to our flat and to my surprise smelled chicken roasting. When I went into the kitchen, there was Tom, happily preparing a full Sunday-type meal. He had blown a fortnight's budgeting.

'What are we celebrating?' I asked. He waved an arm about him.

'Roast chicken, roast potatoes, gravy ... my favourite meal!'

'Since when?'

'Not for a long time,' he admitted, 'but when I was a boy I loved it. Mummy always cooked it to welcome me home.'

'But-'

'Here, this is for you.' He handed me a brown paper package, the size of an exercise book. It had TO TOM boldly inscribed on the front.

'It's not for me, it's for you,' I said.

'It will be. I want you to give it to me at eight o'clock this evening. Promise?'

'Why?'

'Just ... just an experiment, Will. Please? Put it up there for safe keeping, if you like.'

I shrugged and put it up on the shelf he had indicated.

'All right,' I said, and set my watch for eight.

Jo came in a while later.

'How lovely!' she exclaimed. 'What are we celebrating?'

'It's an experiment,' I said, a bit sarcastic, looking up from the potatoes I was slicing.

'We eat at quarter to eight. Okay?' Tom said.

'Fine,' she said.

* * *

Tom was a prompt cook. Jo and I sat down and Tom took the chicken out of the oven. He carved it up and served the food onto the plates. We started eating.

Tom had taken three bites when it happened. He choked.

'-Gale!' he shouted, leaping up and spraying food across the table.

'Tom?' said Jo. Tom dropped his cutlery and stared about him, eyes wide and a look of utter bewilderment on his face. He looked down, saw his chair and dropped in to it heavily. He jerked his gaze all around the room, as though desperately trying to find a familiar reference point. 'W-where am I?'

'Tom, don't be-' I said.

The look in his eyes stopped me. I knew Tom's eyes and it wasn't Tom in there now. There was a stranger, frowning, trying to recognise me.

'Where am I? Who are you? How did I get here?'

'You're Tom Melton,' Jo said soothingly. 'You know that.'

'Yeah, I know who I am ...' He peered closely at me, then recoiled. 'S-Sutton?' he squeaked.

'It's all right, Tom,' I said foolishly, trying to be soothing. 'Everything's fine ...'

'You ... you're Will Sutton, aren't you? *How old are you?*'

'I'm twenty, like you.'

'Twenty!'

He went sheet white and looked around in horror. For the first time he really seemed to notice Jo and he blushed.

'Hello,' he said shyly. Jo had got her bag and was holding out a mirror.

'Look, Tom. Remember?'

He squinted at himself in the three square inches of glass, and his jaw dropped. He looked up.

'Have ... have you got a bigger mirror anywhere?'

'Bathroom's first on the right,' I said. He bolted, and Jo and I stared at each other.

'What's happening?'

'Some kind of breakdown?'

There was a scream from the bathroom. We found him, sobbing, staring at his reflection through his fingers.

‘Look at me!’ he choked. ‘Look at me-’

I had a sudden flashback – a memory that was six years old. Tom Melton in the washroom at school, looking in the mirror ...

I was about to pursue the train of thought when my watch beeped. Was this how Cinderella felt? It’s amazing how doom-laden a clock striking the time can sound. Somehow I knew that Tom, earlier, had been expecting just this to happen. I led Tom gently back into the living room, sat him down and gave him his package.

‘This is for you,’ I said.

It was a red-cloth exercise book, of the type we had had at school. Battered and old, but cared for. Tom opened it and began reading, while we watched. At first he seemed absorbed, then his lips began to tremble, and then with a wail he dropped it and curled up into a corner of the sofa, sobbing again. It was a pathetic sight.

Jo comforted him and I picked the book up. The writing inside was in Tom’s own hand, and the first words meant I had to keep on reading.

‘GREETINGS, TIME TRAVELLER!!! Yes, that’s right. Time traveller. You are Tom Melton, aged almost 14 in a body aged 20. I’m Tom Melton, aged 20 in a 14-year-old body, and it’s a bummer for both of us.

It’s 1985, and you’re in your second year at university. But take heart, you’ll survive. It won’t be easy, but you have the best friend any bloke could ever have in Will Sutton. That’s about the only good news I have for you; the next best thing is that you’re not going to die in the next six years, are you? Think about it, Tommo-’

It made sense. Just. I could remember the scene that Tom went on to describe, back in the changing room in 1979. Tom Melton, bullied and on the verge of a breakdown, trembling and muttering that he was about to flip. And flip he did – to six years in the future. His own, personal future.

Tom even produced an analogy.

‘Look at it this way. Your life is a book, and every year is a page. The book has a beginning and a middle and an end. In your case, the book looks OK from the outside and it has the right number of pages, but when you read it you find it was badly bound and twelve of the pages are out of order. You start at the beginning and read up to page 13, but instead of page 14 it has page 21. You read on to page 26 and find the next page is 14. After another six pages you find they’re all in order again.

I’ve been through everything you’re going through now and I know exactly how you feel reading this. You’re frightened and you’re the loneliest boy in the world. Well, you’re also the world’s leading authority on time travel.

‘There, that got a smile, didn’t it? Keep it up ...’

I browsed on through the book. The middle pages were blank, then I came to writing again. He had started from the back. It was a simple listing, he said, of everything he could remember about the six years that lay ahead of Tom now. There were laptop computers, jacuzzis, Yuppies, all recently impinged on my consciousness. Names and places and events I’d never heard of – Kylie and Jason, *Challenger* explodes, Warsaw Pact breaks up, Lockerbie, Hillsborough, the Gold Blend couple, massacre in Tiananmen Square, Berlin Wall comes down, Madonna, Oliver North, AIDS hysteria, the condom comeback, glasnost, the Brighton bombing, Fergie and Andrew, Mikhail and Raisa, George and Barbara, Thatcher’s downfall, Chernobyl, *Herald of Free Enterprise*, Terry Waite, Live Aid – no particular order, with no particular consistency of significance, and some (like the Warsaw Pact and the Berlin Wall) that I just couldn’t take seriously as predictions. The complete iconography of the eighties and the two years after, past and present and supposedly future, jumbled up at random.

When Tom had calmed down, I gave him the book back to read and retired to my room with Jo. We sat on the bed and I told her what the Tom from the past had said.

‘I don’t know if it was time travel or what,’ I said, ‘but I’m sure he did change when he was fourteen, somehow. I mean, I know he changed, I was there! He seemed so well balanced because he had to adjust himself to the world, anchor himself in reality like no one else, because otherwise he was so unsettled. Does that make sense to you?’

Jo had a habit of seeing everyone’s point of view.

‘And being a teenage boy who suddenly had to be an adult would make anyone grow up fast, wouldn’t it?’ she said. ‘So what happens now?’

‘According to the book, he lives until-... no, hang on ...’

It was mind boggling, but once we had sketched it out on the back of an envelope it made sense. Tom’s mind/soul/karma/whatever and his body were going to last together for another six years, until 1991, when his mind would be 20 and his body would be 26. Then his mind/soul/etc. would jump back, aged 20 and with all its memories, to his nearly-14-year-old body, where one of his first acts would be to cling to Stephen Gale, whisper the names of his various amours in his ear and threaten him with blackmail unless he stopped being a poisonous bully. Six years after that, when his mind was 26 and his body was 20, Tom imagined (and hoped) that his mind would jump forward again and he would be reunited with his body in 1991, when both body and mind would be the same age. That was where the Tom who had cooked tonight’s meal was now.

Hopefully.

We looked at each other.

‘Shit,’ I said. ‘We’ve got a fourteen-year-old in there, Jo.’

‘And we’re the only people he’s got,’ she said. She held my gaze.

‘Oh, shit,’ I said again. I fell backwards onto the bed to think about it. So this was what it was like when your thoughts whirled.

There was a gentle, timid knock at the door, and Tom poked his head round.

‘Um ... Will?’

‘Hmm,’ I grunted.

‘Come in, Tom,’ Jo said kindly. He sidled in, clutching the book.

‘It ... it says here ...’ He held the book out, like a supplicant illustrating his point to the Lord with a reference to the scriptures. ‘It says you’ll help me.’

He was still trying not to cry. Tom Melton, who had been a pillar of my life for so long, needed me.

‘Does it?’ I said, as discouragingly as possible. Jo poked me; there was a twinkle in her eyes.

‘Look, dear, we’ve got a boy,’ she said.

For the third and final time, I said, ‘Oh, shit.’

In front of me was a badly frightened boy, totally alone, dependent purely upon me. I had lived for twenty years without being responsible for anything, but at long last I took on a challenge. And what a challenge! I made a list mentally. Someone had to teach him all his course work, who his friends were, how to drive ...

‘I’m scared, Will,’ he said.

‘Yeah, me too,’ I grumped. I waved a hand at a chair. ‘Sit down, Tom.’ He sat on the edge of the chair, hardly daring to move. I grinned.

‘Sitting comfortably? Then we’ll begin ...’