



## I

Larry went officially missing from the world on the second Monday of October, at ten minutes past eleven, when he failed to deliver his opening lecture of the new academic year.

I am able to set the scene exactly because it was not so very long ago, in the same dreary Bath weather, that I had dragged Larry down to see the wretched place for the first time. To this day I have the most accusing memory of the brutalist slab barracks closing in on him like the walls of his new confinement. And of Larry's ever youthful back walking reproachfully away from me down the concrete canyon like a man going to his Nemesis. If I had had a son, I thought as I stared after him, this was how it would feel to be dumping him at his first boarding school.

'Hey, Timbo,' he whispers over his shoulder, the way Larry can speak to you from miles away.

'Yes, Larry.'

'This is it, is it?'

'This is what?'

'The future. Where it all ends. Leftover life.'

'It's a new beginning,' I say loyally.

But loyal to whom? To him? To me? To the Office?

'We have to scale down,' I say. 'Both of us do.'

The day of his disappearance was by all accounts equally

depressing. A cloying mist envelops the hideous grey university campus and breathes a sticky pall over the alloy-framed windows of Larry's grimy lecture room. Twenty students sit at desks facing the empty lectern, which is of a particularly violent yellow pitch-pine, very scratched. The subject of his lecture has been chalked on the blackboard by a mysterious hand, probably a doting pupil's. 'Karl Marx in the Supermarket: Revolution and Modern Materialism.' There is a bit of laughter. Students are the same everywhere. On the first day of term they will laugh at anything. But gradually they fall quiet and content themselves with smirking at each other, peering at the door and listening for Larry's footsteps. Until, having allowed him the full ten minutes' grace, they self-consciously put away their pens and notebooks and clank along the rocking concrete to the canteen.

Over coffee, the freshers are duly appalled by this first experience of Larry's unpredictability. This *never* happened to us at school! *How* will we catch up? Will we be given *notes*? Oh, *God!* But the hardened ones, Larry's fans, only laugh. That's Larry for you, they explain happily: next time round he'll bat on for three hours and you'll be so hooked you'll forget lunch. They speculate about what might have kept him: a bumper hangover, or an outrageous love affair of which they ascribe any number to him, for in his mid-forties Larry is still a lover just to look at, he has the lost-boy appeal of a poet who never grew up.

The university authorities took an equally relaxed view of Larry's reluctance to appear. Common Room colleagues, not all from the friendliest of motives, had reported the offence within the hour. Nonetheless the administrators waited for another Monday, and another no-show, before mustering the energy to telephone his landlady and, on receiving no satisfaction from her, the Bath police. It was a further six days before

the police called on me: a Sunday, if you can believe it, ten o'clock at night. I had spent a wearisome afternoon escorting a coachload of our village elderlies on a trip to Longleat, and a frustrating evening in the winery wrestling with a German grape press which my late Uncle Bob had christened the Sulky Hun. Nevertheless, when I heard their ring my heart leapt while I pretended to myself that it was Larry hovering on my doorstep with his accusing brown eyes and dependent smile: 'Come on, Timbo, fix us a bloody big Scotch, and who gives a damn about women anyway?'

Two men.

It was pelting rain, so they had huddled themselves into the porch while they waited for me to open up. Plain clothes of the deliberately recognisable kind. Parked their car in my drive, a Peugeot 306 diesel, very shiny under the downpour, marked POLICE and fitted out with the usual array of mirrors and aerials. As I peered through the fish-eye their hatless faces stared back at me like bloated corpses: the elder man coarse and moustached, the younger goatish with a long sloped head like a coffin and small round eyes like bullet-holes shot through it.

Wait, I told myself. Add a beat. That's what being calm is all about. This is your own house, late at night. Only then did I consent to unchain the door to them. Seventeenth-century, iron-bound, and weighs a ton. The night sky restless. A capricious wind snapping at the trees. The crows still shifting and complaining, despite the darkness. During the day we had had a crazy fall of snow. Ghostly grey lines of it lay on the drive.

'Hullo,' I said. 'Don't stand there freezing. Come on in.'

My entrance lobby is a late addition by my grandfather, a glass and mahogany box like a vast elevator that serves as an antechamber to the great hall. For a moment, there we stood,

all three, under the brass lantern, going neither up nor down while we looked each other over.

'This is Honeybrook Manor, is it, sir?' said the moustache, a smiler. 'Only we didn't seem to see a sign at all.'

'We call it the Vineyard these days,' I said. 'What can I do for you?' But if my words were polite, my tone was not. I was speaking the way I speak to trespassers: Excuse me. Can I help you?

'Then you would be Mr Cranmer, am I correct, sir?' the moustache suggested, still with his smile. Why I say smile I don't know, for his expression, though technically benign, was devoid of humour or semblance of goodwill.

'Yes, I'm Cranmer,' I replied, but preserving the note of question in my voice.

'Mr Timothy Cranmer? Just routine, sir, if you don't mind. Not disturbing you, I trust?' His moustache hid a vertical white scar. I guessed a hare-lip operation. Or perhaps someone had smashed a broken bottle into him, for he had a patchy, reconstructed complexion.

'Routine?' I echoed, in open disbelief. 'At *this* time of night? Don't tell me my car licence is out of date.'

'No, sir, it's not about your car licence. We're enquiring about a Dr Lawrence Pettifer, of Bath University.'

I allowed myself a chastened pause, then a frown midway between amusement and vexation. 'You mean Larry? Oh my Lord. What's he been up to now?' And when I received no answer but the stare: 'Nothing *bad*, is it, I trust?'

'We're given to understand you're an acquaintance of the Doctor's, not to say close friend. Or isn't that correct?'

It's a little too correct, I thought.

'Close?' I repeated, as if the notion of proximity were new to me. 'I don't think I'd go *that* far.'

As one man they handed me their coats and watched me while I hung them up, then watched me again while I opened the inner door for them. Most first-time visitors to Honeybrook make a reverent pause at this point while they take in the minstrels' gallery, the great fireplace, the portraits, and the wagon roof with its armorial bearings. Not the moustache. And not the coffin-head who, having until now lugubriously observed our exchanges from behind his older colleague's shoulder, elected to address me in a deprived and snappish monotone:

'We heard you and Pettifer were bosom pals,' he objected. 'Winchester College was what we heard, no less. You were schoolmates.'

'There were three years between us. For schoolboys that's a lifetime.'

'Nonetheless, in public school circles, *as we hear*, such things make a bond. *Plus* you were students together at Oxford,' he added accusingly.

'What's happened to Larry?' I said.

My question drew an insolent silence from both of them. They seemed to be deliberating whether I rated an answer. It fell to the elder man, as their official spokesman, to reply. His technique, I decided, was to play himself in caricature. And in slow-motion too.

'Yes, well, your doctor friend has gone a bit *missing*, to tell you the truth, Mr Cranmer, sir,' he confessed, in the tones of a reluctant Inspector Plod. 'No foul play suspected, not at this stage. However, he's missing from his lodgings and his place of work. And so far as we can *gauge*' – how he loved that word, his frown said so – 'he's not written anybody a goodbye billy-doo. Unless he wrote you one, of course. He's not here, is he, by any chance, sir? Upstairs, sleeping it off, so to speak?'

‘Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.’

His scarred moustache abruptly widened, revealing anger and bad teeth. ‘Oh? Now why am I being ridiculous, Mr Cranmer, sir?’

‘I would have told you at once. I’d have said, he’s upstairs. Why should I waste your time, or mine, pretending he isn’t here if he is?’

Again he didn’t answer me. He was clever in that way. I was beginning to suspect he was clever in other ways as well. I had a prejudiced view of policemen that I was trying to unlearn at the same time that he was deliberately playing on it. Partly it was a class thing; partly it stemmed from my former profession, which treated them as poor relations. And partly it was Larry agitating in me because, as we used to say in the Office, Larry only had to be in the same borough as a policeman to be arrested for obstructing him in his lawful duties.

‘Only you see, sir, the Doctor doesn’t appear to have a wife, a companion, a significant other, nobody,’ the moustache was lamenting. ‘He is highly popular with the students who regard him as a card, but ask his colleagues in the Common Room about him, you meet what I call a blank wall, be it contempt, be it envy.’

‘He’s a free spirit,’ I said. ‘Academics aren’t used to that.’

‘Pardon me, sir?’

‘He’s used to speaking his mind. Particularly on the subject of academics.’

‘Of which body, however, the Doctor himself happens to be a member,’ said the moustache, with a cocky lift of his eyebrow.

‘He was a parson’s son,’ I said unthinkingly.

‘Was, sir?’

‘Was. His father’s dead.’

‘He’s still his father’s son, though, sir,’ said the moustache in reproof.

His phoney unction was beginning to act like an insult on me. This is the way you think we ignorant coppers should be, he was telling me, so this is the way I am.

A long passage hung with nineteenth-century water-colours leads to my drawing room. I went ahead, listening to the clip of their shoes behind me. I had been playing Shostakovich on my stereo, but without conviction. I switched him off and in a show of hospitality poured three glasses of our ’93 Honeybrook Rouge. The moustache murmured, ‘Good health’, drank, and said amazing to think it had been grown right here in this house, as you might say, sir. But his angular sidekick prodded his glass at the fire in order to examine the colour. Then shoved his long nose into it and sniffed. Then took an expert bite and chewed while he peered at the exquisite baby Bechstein piano that in my madness I had bought for Emma.

‘Do I detect a certain hint of a Pinot in here somewhere?’ he demanded. ‘There’s a lot of tannin, that’s for sure.’

‘It is a Pinot,’ I retorted, through gritted teeth.

‘I didn’t know a Pinot could be ripened in England.’

‘It can’t. Not unless you have an exceptional site.’

‘Is your site exceptional?’

‘No.’

‘Then why do you plant it?’

‘I don’t. My predecessor did. He was an incurable optimist.’

‘What makes you say that, then?’

I mastered myself. Barely. ‘Several reasons. The soil is too rich, it is poorly drained and too high above sea level. My uncle was determined to ignore these problems. When other local vineyards thrived and his did not, he blamed his luck and tried



again next year.' I turned to the moustache. 'Perhaps I might be allowed to know your names.'

With a due show of embarrassment they pushed their passes at me but I waved them away. I too had flourished passes in my day, most of them fakes. The moustache had tried to telephone me in advance, he said, but discovered I had gone ex-directory. So happening to be in the area on an unrelated matter, sir, they decided to take a liberty and ring the bell. I didn't believe them. Their Peugeot had a London registration. They wore city shoes. Their complexions lacked the country glow. Their names, they said, were Oliver Luck and Percy Bryant. Luck, the coffin-head, was a sergeant. Bryant, the moustache, was an inspector.

Luck was taking stock of my drawing room: my family miniatures, my eighteenth-century Gothic furniture, my books – Herzen's memoirs, Clausewitz on war.

'You read a lot then,' he said.

'When I can.'

'The languages, they're not a barrier?'

'Some are, some aren't.'

'Which aren't?'

'I have some German. Russian.'

'French?'

'Written.'

Their eyes on me, all four of them, all the time. Do policemen spot us for what we are? Do they recognise something in us that reminds them of themselves? My months of retirement were rolling away. I was Operational Man again and wondering whether it showed and where the Office was in this. Emma, I was thinking, have they found you? Grilled you? Made you say things?

It is four in the morning. She is seated in her attic studio, at

her rosewood knee-hole desk, another extravagant gift I have bought for her. She is typing. She has been typing all night long, a pianist who has formed an addiction to the typewriter.

'Emma,' I entreat her from the doorway. 'What's it all for?' No answer. 'You're wearing yourself out. Get some sleep, *please*.'

Inspector Bryant was rubbing his hands straight up and down between his knees, like a man separating wheat. 'So then, Mr Cranmer, sir,' he said, his smile set to invade, 'when did we last see or hear from our doctor friend, if I may make so bold?'

Which was the question for which I had been preparing myself day and night these last five weeks.

But I didn't answer him. Not yet. Determined to deny him the interrogator's rhythm, I favoured a leisured tone in keeping with the fireside atmosphere we were sharing.

'Now when you say he had no *companion* –' I objected.

'Yes, sir?'

'Well, for Heaven's sake' – I laughed – 'Larry always had someone on the go, surely.'

Luck cut in. Rudely. He was a stop or sprint man, no middle gear. 'You mean a *woman*?' he blurted.

'Whenever *I* knew him he had a stable of them,' I said. 'Don't tell me he's turned celibate in his old age.'

Bryant weighed my words.

'Such was the reputation that preceded him to Bath, Mr Cranmer, sir. But the truth, we find, is somewhat different, isn't it, Oliver?' Luck went on glowering at the fire. 'We have quizzed his landlady thoroughly, and we have quizzed his academic colleagues. Confidentially. Not wishing to stir up a mare's nest at this early stage of our enquiries, naturally.' He drew a breath, and I was moved to wonder how much his lugubrious behaviour was modelled on his absurdly successful

television counterparts. 'To begin with, immediately subsequent to his taking up his appointment in Bath, he was all that you imply. He had his drinking haunts, he had an eye for the pretty girl student and it appears that more than one succumbed. Gradually, however, we see a change. He goes serious. He doesn't do the parties any more. Many evenings are spent away from his diggings. Sometimes whole nights. Less drink is taken. *Subdued* is a word that crops up quite a lot. *Purposeful* is another. There's a secretiveness in the Doctor's recent habits, not to put it too finely, that we seem unable to crack.'

It's called tradecraft, I thought. 'Perhaps he was growing up at last,' I suggested airily, but evidently with more feeling than I intended, for Luck's long head turned to stare at me, while the firelight played red and orange on the strings of his neck.

'His only occasional visitor we're aware of in the last twelve months is an overseas gentleman known as the Professor,' Bryant went on. 'Professor of what or where is anybody's guess. The Professor never stayed long, he seemed to turn up unannounced but the Doctor was always glad to see him. They'd have a take-away curry and a pack of beer, some Scotch was popular and laughter was heard. The Professor was clearly a wit in his own right, according to our source. He would sleep on the sofa and leave next day. Just a light bag, he had, very self-sufficient. A cat that walked by himself, she called him. He never had a name, not as far as the landlady was concerned, just Professor, this is the Professor. Him and the Doctor spoke in a very foreign language too, quite often into the small hours.'

I nodded, trying to display a polite interest, rather than the fascination he was kindling in me.

'It wasn't Russian or the landlady would have recognised it. Her late husband was a naval officer who'd done a Russian

course, so she knows what Russian sounds like. We've checked with the university. None of their official guests fit the bill. The Professor came privately and left privately.'

I am walking on Hampstead Heath, five years ago, Larry at my side. We walk too fast. Together, we always do. In London parks, on our weekend retreats to the Office's safe house in Norfolk, we walk like two athletes competing even in their leisure.

'Checheyev's become a curry convert,' Larry announces. 'For six bloody months he's been telling me a lamb's a lamb and sauces are decadent. Last night we go to the Viceroy of India, he wolfs a chicken vindaloo and discovers God.'

'A small, sturdy type of person he was in build apparently,' Bryant was saying. 'Late forties, she puts him at, black hair swept back. Sideburns, a full moustache drooping at the corners. Usually wore a bomber jacket and track shoes. Complexion *brownish* but still *white*, she says. Pitted. Like he'd had spots when he was a kid. Dry type of humour, a lot of twinkle. Not like some professors she knows. I don't know if that rings a bell at all?'

'I'm afraid it doesn't,' I said, refusing to allow the bell to ring – or, more accurately, to acknowledge its deafening chimes.

'Went so far as to say *sparkling*, didn't she, Oliver? We thought she might have the hots for him.'

Instead of answering, Luck brusquely addressed himself to me. 'Which languages does Pettifer speak, precisely, apart from Russian?'

'*Precisely*, I don't know' – he didn't like that – 'he's a Slavonic scholar. Languages are his forte, minority languages particularly. I had the impression he picked them up as he went along. He's something of a philologist, too, I believe.'

'In his blood, is it?'

'Not to my knowledge. He has the flair.'

'Like you then.'

'I have application.'

'And Pettifer hasn't?'

'He doesn't need it. I told you. He has flair.'

'When did he last travel abroad, to your knowledge?'

'Travel? Good Heavens, he travelled all the time. Used to. It was his passion. The more unsavoury a place the better he liked it.'

'When was his *last* time?'

*September 18th*, I thought. *When else? His last time, his last clandestine meeting, his absolute last laugh.* 'The last time he travelled, you mean?' I said. 'I'm afraid I've really no idea at all. If I ventured a guess I should simply mislead you. Can't you check flight-lists and things? I thought that sort of information was computerised these days.'

Luck glanced at Bryant. Bryant glanced at me, his smile stretched to the limits of its patience.

'Well now, Mr Cranmer, sir, if I could just go back to my original question,' he said with terminal courtesy. '*When's* the problem, that's for sure. And it would be very nice of you if you would finally let us into the secret and tell us *when* you last had contact with the missing man.'

For the second time truth almost intruded. *Contact?* I wanted to say. *Contact, Mr Bryant? Five weeks ago on September 18th at Priddy Pool, Mr Bryant! Contact on a scale you'd never imagine!*

'I guess it must have been some time after the university offered him permanent employment,' I replied. 'He was ecstatic. He was sick of short-term lectureships and scrabbling for a living as a journalist. Bath offered him the security he was looking for. He grabbed it with both hands.'

‘And?’ said Luck, for whom gracelessness was a sign of virtue.

‘And he wrote to me. He was a compulsive note scribbler. That was our last contact.’

‘Saying what exactly?’ Luck demanded.

*Saying that Bath University was exactly what it was when I brought him here: grey, bloody cold and smelled of cat piss, I retorted in my mind as the truth again welled up in me. Saying that he was rotting from the head down, in a world without faith or anti-faith. Saying that Bath University was the Lubyanka without the laughs and that, as ever, he held me personally to blame. Signed Larry.*

‘Saying he had received his official letter of appointment, that he was overjoyed and that we should all share his happiness,’ I replied blandly.

‘When is this, exactly?’

‘I’m not good at dates, I’m afraid. As I keep telling you. Not unless they’re vintages.’

‘Have you got his letter?’

‘I never keep old correspondence.’

‘But you wrote back to him.’

‘Straight away. If I get a personal letter, that’s what I do. I can’t stand having anything in my in-tray.’

‘That’s the former Civil Servant in you, I expect.’

‘I expect it is.’

‘Still, you’re retired now.’

‘I am anything but retired, thank you, Mr Luck. I have never been busier in my life.’

Bryant was back with his smile and his scarred moustache. ‘I expect that’s your varied and useful community work you’re referring to there. They tell me Mr-Cranmer-sir is the regular saint of the neighbourhood.’

'Not neighbourhood. Village,' I replied equably.

'Save our church. Help the Aged. Country holidays for our disadvantaged children from the inner cities. Open up the house and grounds to the peasantry for the benefit of the local hospice. I was impressed, wasn't I, Oliver?'

'Very,' said Luck.

'So when was the last time we *met* with the Doctor, sir, face to face – forgetting our compulsive letter-writing?' Bryant resumed.

I hesitated. Intentionally. 'Three months? Four? Five?' I was inviting him to choose.

'Was that here, sir? At Honeybrook?'

'He's been here, yes.'

'How often, would you say?'

'Oh my goodness – with Larry you sort of don't log it, he drops in, you give him an egg in the kitchen, kick him out – in the last couple of years, oh, half a dozen times. Say eight.'

'And the *very* last time, sir?'

'I've been trying to think. July, probably. We'd decided to give the wine vats an early scrub. The best way to get rid of Larry is put him to work. He scrubbed for an hour, ate some bread and cheese, drank four gin-and-tonics, and pushed off.'

'July then,' said Bryant.

'I said. July.'

'Got a date at all? A day of the week say? A weekend was it?'

'Yes, it must have been.'

'Why?'

'No staff.'

'I thought you said we, sir.'

'Some children from the housing estate were helping me for a pound an hour,' I replied, again delicately avoiding mention of Emma.

‘And are we talking here of the middle of July or the beginning or more the end of it?’

‘The middle. It must have been.’ I stood up, perhaps to indicate how relaxed I was, and made a show of studying a bottlemaker’s calendar that Emma had hung beside the telephone. ‘Here we are. Aunt Madeline, twelfth to the nineteenth. I had my ancient aunt staying with me. Larry must have dropped in that weekend. He chatted her up.’

I had not set eyes on Aunt Madeline for twenty years. But if they intended to go looking for witnesses, I had rather they went after Aunt Madeline than Emma.

‘Now they do *say*, Mr Cranmer,’ Bryant proposed archly, ‘that Dr Pettifer also made quite copious use of the *telephone*.’

I gave a sprightly laugh. We were entering another dark area, and I needed all the self-assurance I could muster. ‘I’m sure they do. And with reason.’

‘Something come back to you, does it, sir?’

‘Well, dear me, yes, I suppose it does. There were times when Larry with a telephone could make one’s life utter hell. Ring you up all hours of the day or night. He wasn’t singling you out, he rang everyone in his phonebook.’

I laughed again, and Bryant laughed with me, while Luck the puritan went on brooding at the flames.

‘We all know one of those, don’t we, sir?’ Bryant said. ‘Drama merchants, I call them, no disrespect. They get themselves a problem – a fight with the boyfriend or girlfriend – should they buy this incredible house they’ve just seen from the top of a bus? – and they’re not happy till they’ve sucked you in. I think it’s my wife who attracts them in our household, to be frank. I haven’t the patience myself. When was the last time Dr Pettifer came up with one, then, sir?’

‘With one what?’



'A drama, sir. A what I call a wobbly.'

'Oh, way back.'

'Months again, was it?'

I again affected to rummage in my memory. There are two golden rules to being interrogated, and I had already flouted both of them. The first is never volunteer extraneous detail. The second is never tell a direct lie unless you are able to stick it out to the bitter end.

'Perhaps if you could describe to us the nature of the drama, sir, that might enable us to put a date on it, mightn't it?' he suggested in the tone of somebody proposing a family game.

My dilemma was acute. In my previous incarnation it was the accepted wisdom that the police, unlike ourselves, made little use of microphones and phonetaps. Their misnomered discreet enquiries were confined to pestering neighbours, tradesmen and bank managers, but stopped short of our private preserve of electronic surveillance. Or so we thought. I decided to take refuge in the distant past.

'So far as I remember it was the occasion when Larry was taking some kind of public farewell from left-wing socialism and wished his friends to be part of the process,' I said.

Still seated before the fire, Luck laid a long hand to his cheek, seeming to nurse a neuralgic pain. 'Is this *Russian* socialism we're talking?' he demanded in his surly voice.

'Whatever kind you like. He was de-radicalising himself – that was his expression – and he needed his friends to watch him do it.'

'Now when would that have been exactly, Mr Cranmer, sir?' asked Bryant from my other side.

'A couple of years ago. More. It was while he was still cleaning up his act before applying for the job at the university.'

'November '92,' said Luck.

'I beg your pardon?'

'If we're talking the Doctor's public renunciation of radical socialism, we're talking his article entitled "Death of an Experiment", published *Socialist Review*, November '92. The Doctor linked his decision to an analysis of what he termed the underground continuum of Russian expansionism whether it was conducted under the Tsarist, Communist or, as of now, Federalist flag. He also referred to the West's new-found moral orthodoxy, which he likened to the early phases of Communist social dogma without the fundamental idealism to go with it. One or two of his left-wing academic colleagues considered that article a rather hefty act of betrayal. Did you?'

'I had no opinion of it.'

'Did you discuss it with him?'

'No. I congratulated him.'

'Why?'

'Because that was what he wanted.'

'Do you always tell people what they want?'

'If I'm humouring somebody who is being a bore, Mr Luck, and I want to get on with something else, yes, I very likely do,' I said, and ventured a glance at my French striking clock in its glass dome. But Luck was not so easily confounded.

'And November 1992 – when Pettifer *wrote* this famous article – that would have been about the time you were retiring from whatever it was you were doing in London, I take it?'

I didn't like Luck's drawing parallels between our two lives, and I detested his assertive tone.

'Probably.'

'Did you approve of him renouncing socialism?'

'Are you asking me to tell you what my politics are, Mr Luck?'

'I was merely thinking it must have been slightly risky for you knowing him during the Cold War period. You being a Civil Servant and him, in those days, as you have said this very moment, a revolutionary socialist.'

'I never made any secret of my acquaintance with Dr Pettifer. It was no crime that we were contemporaries at university or went to the same school, though you appear to think otherwise. It was certainly never an issue with my department.'

'Ever meet any of his Soviet bloc friends? Any of the Russians, Poles, Czechs, and so forth that he knocked around with?'

I am sitting in the upper room of our safe house in Shepherd Market, sharing a farewell drink with Counsellor (Economic) Volodya Zorin, in reality head resident of the re-vamped Russian intelligence service in London. It is the last of these semi-official exchanges between us. In three weeks I shall take my leave of the secret world and all its works. Zorin is a grizzled Cold War-horse with the secret rank of Colonel. Saying goodbye to him is like saying goodbye to my own past.

'So what shall you do with the rest of your life, Friend Timothy?' he asks.

'I shall limit it,' I reply. 'I shall do a Rousseau. I shall turn my back on grand concepts, cultivate my grapes and perform good works in miniature.'

'You will build a Berlin Wall around yourself?'

'Unfortunately, Volodya, I already have one. My Uncle Bob put his vineyard inside an eighteenth-century walled garden. It's a frost trap and a haven for disease.'

'No, Dr Pettifer never introduced me to anybody of that kind,' I replied.

'Did he talk to you about them? Who they were? What he

got up to with them? The deals they were hatching together? Mutual services performed, anything of that nature?’

‘Deals? Of course not.’

‘Deals. Mutual services. *Transactions*,’ Luck added with threatening emphasis.

‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. No, he didn’t discuss anything of the sort with me. No, I don’t know what they did together. Talked hot air, most likely. Solved the problems of the world in three easy bottles.’

‘You don’t like Pettifer, do you?’

‘I neither like nor dislike him, Mr Luck. I am not of a judgmental slant, as you appear to be. He’s an old acquaintance. Taken in small enough doses, he’s an amusement. I have always treated him as such.’

‘You ever had a serious quarrel with him?’

‘Neither a serious quarrel nor a serious friendship.’

‘Did Pettifer ever offer to cut you in on a piece of the action in exchange for favours of some sort? You being a Civil Servant. Or an ex one. Some path you could smooth for him, a tip-off, a recommendation you could put his way?’

If Luck was intending to annoy me, he was making a rare job of it. ‘The suggestion is totally improper,’ I retorted. ‘I might as well ask you whether you take bribes.’

Once more, with a laboriousness calculated to exasperate me, Bryant lumbered to the rescue. ‘Forgive him, Mr Cranmer, sir, Oliver is but young.’ He put his hands together in mock prayer. ‘Mr Cranmer, sir – *please* – if I may, sir –’

‘Yes, Mr Bryant?’

‘I think we have distracted ourselves once more, sir. We’re rather good at that I notice. We’re talking the telephone and the next thing I know we’re talking a piece of history two years ago. What about *today*, sir? When was your most *recent*

conversation with Dr Pettifer on the electric telephone, put it that way. Never mind the subject or topic, just tell me when. That's what I'm after and I'm beginning to think that for some reason you don't want to give me a straight answer, which is why young Oliver there was getting a bit testy just now. Yes, sir?'

'I'm still thinking.'

'Take all the time you require, sir.'

'It's like his visits. You just forget them. He always telephones when you're slap in the middle of things.' Making love with Emma, for instance, in the days when love was what we made. 'Have I seen such-and-such an article in the newspaper – did I see that jackass so-and-so on television lying in his teeth about the whatever? That's what happens with undergraduate friendships. What was charming twenty-five years ago becomes a pest. You grow up. Your friends don't. You adjust. They stay the same. They become old kids, then they become bores. That's when you switch off.'

I did not like Luck's glower any more than I liked Bryant's moustachioed leer.

'Now by *switch off*, sir,' said Bryant, 'do we mean here literally switch off? Switch off our telephone? Have it disconnected? Because that is what I believe we did on the first of August last, Mr Cranmer, sir, and did not resume contact with the outside world for three full weeks thereafter. At which point we acquire a new number.'

I must have been ready for him, for I struck back quickly, and at both of them.

'Inspector Bryant. Sergeant Luck. I think I've had rather more than enough of this. One minute you're engaged in a missing person enquiry. The next you're asking a lot of extraneous nonsense about unethical contacts while I was a Civil

Servant, my politics, whether I'm a security risk, and why I went ex-directory.'

'So why did you?' Luck said.

'I was being intruded upon.'

'Who by?'

'Nobody of the smallest consequence to you.'

Bryant's turn. 'Now if that was the case, sir, why didn't you get in touch with the police? Not as if you're a wilting violet, is it? We're more than happy to assist with nuisance phone calls, be they threatening or obscene. In collaboration with British Telecom, naturally. No need to cut yourself off from the outside world for three weeks.'

'The calls I found objectionable were neither threatening nor obscene.'

'Oh? So what were they, sir, if you don't mind?'

'They were not your business. They aren't now.' I added a second excuse where one would have served well enough: 'Besides, three weeks without the telephone are a rest cure.'

Bryant was delving in an inside pocket. He extracted a black notebook, removed the elastic band and opened it longways on his lap.

'Only you see, sir, me and Oliver here have been making quite a study of the Doctor's phone calls, going back over his entire period of residence in Bath,' he explained. 'We are highly fortunate in the Doctor having a very Scottish landlady and a shared telephone line. Every outgoing call was timed and noted down. Her late husband the Commander started the practice. Mrs Macarthur carries it on.'

Bryant licked a thumb and turned a page.

'Incoming calls, the Doctor had any number of them, many from far-flung places by the sound of them, and a lot cut off in midstream. Quite often the Doctor was speaking this

language she can't place, too. But outgoing, that's different. When we're talking outgoing, you were the Doctor's star telephone partner until August the first this year, according to Mrs Macarthur. Six hours and twenty minutes the Doctor notched up with you in May and June alone.'

He paused, but I still didn't interrupt him. I had played an impossible hand and lost. I had wriggled and ducked, I had hoped to satisfy them with half-truths. But against such a well-planned assault I had no defence. Casting round for a scape-goat, I lighted upon the Office. If the fools in the Office were aware of Larry's disappearance, why the devil hadn't they sent me an early warning? They *must* know the police were looking for him. Then why didn't they stop them? And if they couldn't stop them, why leave me dangling in the wind, not knowing who knew what or why?

I am attending my last meeting with Jake Merriman, Head of Personnel. He is sitting in his carpeted rooms overlooking Berkeley Square, snapping his Rich Tea biscuit in half while he moans about the Wheel of History. Merriman has played the English bloody fool so long that neither he nor anybody else knows any more whether he is the genuine article.

'Done your job, Tim old boy,' he complains in his drawled, echoless voice. 'Lived the passion of your time. Who can do more?'

I say, who indeed. But Merriman has no ear for irony except his own.

'It was there, it was evil, you spied the hell out of it and now it's gone away. I mean we can't say, simply because we won, there was no point in fighting, can we? Much better to say, hooray, we trounced them, the Commie dog is dead and buried, time to move on to the next party.' He manages a little

whinny of amusement. 'Not Party with a capital P. The small kind.' And he subdivides one section of his Rich Tea before lowering the point of it into his coffee.

'But I'm not invited to the new party, am I?' I say.

Merriman never gives you the bad news himself. He prefers to drag it out of you.

'Well, I don't think you are, Tim, are you?' he agrees, with a commiserating tilt of his fleshy head. 'I mean twenty-five years do rather shape the mind, don't they? I'd have thought you'd be *far* better off agreeing you'd served your stint, and time to find pastures new. After all, you're not a pauper. You've got your nice place in the country, and a little bit of your own. Your dear Uncle Robert has had the grace to die, which is more than we can say for some rich uncles. What could be jollier?'

There is a saying in the Office that you have to be careful with Merriman lest you resign by mistake, rather than wait for him to sack you.

'I don't think I'm too old to take on new targets,' I say.

'Cold Warriors of forty-seven don't recycle, Tim. You're all far too nice. You have too many rules of engagement. You'll tell Pettifer, won't you? It's best coming from you.'

'Tell him what, exactly?'

'Well, the same as I've just told you, I suppose. You don't think we can direct *him* against the terrorist target, do you? Do you *know* what he's costing me? Just for his retainer? Not to mention his expenses, which are a joke.'

'Since it's my section that is responsible for paying him, yes.'

'Well, I mean for what, any more? Hang it all, when you're trying to persuade chaps to join the Baghdad Brotherhood for you or whatever, you need every penny you can get. The Pettifers of this world are extinct. Admit it, says I.'



Too late, as usual, I start to lose my temper. 'That wasn't the Top Floor's ruling when his case last came up for review. It was agreed by all parties that we would wait and see whether Moscow dreamed up a new rôle for him.'

'We waited and we got bored.' He slides a cutting from the *Guardian* across the desk at me. 'Pettifer needs a context or he'll be trouble. Talk to the resettlement people. Bath University is looking for a linguist who can double up on something called global security, which sounds to me like the oxymoron of all time. Temporary but could be permanent. Their Big-I-Am is ex-Office and well-disposed, provided Pettifer keeps his nose clean. I didn't know Bath *had* a university,' he adds grouchily, as if nobody ever tells him anything. 'Must be one of those techs in drag.'

It is the worst moment of our twenty-something operational years together. Life has decreed that we sit in parked cars on hilltops. This time we are in a layby on a hilltop outside Bath. Larry sits beside me, his face buried in his hands. Above the trees I can make out the grey outlines of the university that we have just inspected, and the pair of dirty metal tubular chimneys that are its ominous landmark.

'So what do we believe in now, Timbo? Sherry at the Dean's and stripped-pine furniture?'

'Call it the peace you fought for,' I suggest lamely.

His silence, as always, is worse than his abuse. He reaches up his hands but finds, instead of free air, the roof of the car.

'It's a safe haven,' I say. 'For half the year you're bored, for the other half you're free to do whatever you want. That's a damned sight better than the world average.'

'I'm not tameable, Timbo.'

'No one's asking you to be.'

‘I don’t want a safe haven. I never did. To hell with safe havens. To hell with stasis. To hell with dons and index-linked pensions and cleaning my car on Sundays. To hell with you too.’

‘To hell with history, to hell with the Office, to hell with life and to hell with growing old,’ I suggest, enlarging on his thesis for him.

Nevertheless I have a lump in my throat, I can’t deny it. I would put my hand on his shoulder, which is trembling and hot with sweat, except that it is not our way to touch each other.

‘Listen,’ I say to him. ‘Are you listening? You’re thirty miles from Honeybrook. You can come every Sunday for lunch and tea and tell me how bloody it all is.’

It is the worst invitation I ever extended to anyone in my life.

Bryant was talking to his notebook, which he held before his face while he taunted me with the record of Larry’s phone calls.

‘Mr-Cranmer-sir also features on the incomings, I see. It’s not *all* your funny foreigners. An educated gentleman, always very polite, more like the BBC than human, is how the landlady describes you. Well, that’s exactly how I’d describe you myself, no disrespect.’ He licked a finger and gaily flipped a page. ‘Then all of a sudden you turn round and cut off the Doctor without a shilling. Well, well. No more incomings, no more outgoings, for three whole weeks. What you might term a radio silence. Slammed the door in his face, you did, Mr Cranmer, sir, and me and Oliver here were wondering why you did that to him. We wondered what had gone on *before* you cut him off, and what *stopped* going on once you did. Didn’t we, Oliver?’

He was still smiling. If I had been taking my last walk to the gallows his smile would not have altered. My anger against Merriman swung gratefully towards Bryant.

‘Inspector,’ I began, gathering heat as I went. ‘You call yourself a public servant. Yet at ten o’clock on a Sunday night, without a warrant and without an appointment, you have the impertinence to barge your way into my house – two of you –’

Bryant was already on his feet. His facetious manner had fallen from him like a cloak. ‘You’ve been very kind, sir, and we’ve overstayed our welcome. We got carried away by your conversation, I expect.’ He slapped a card on my coffee table. ‘Give us a call, sir, won’t you? Anything at all. He rings, he writes, he turns up on your doorstep, you hear something from a third party which could be of assistance in locating him –’ I could have knocked his insinuating smile through his head. ‘Oh, and in *case* the Doctor surfaces, would you be so kind as to give us your new telephone number? Thank you.’

He scribbled to my dictation while Luck looked on.

‘Nice piano,’ Luck said. He was suddenly too close to me, and too tall.

I said nothing.

‘You play, do you?’

‘It’s been known of me.’

‘Your wife away?’

‘I have no wife.’

‘Same as Pettifer. What branch did you say you were? Of the Civil Service? I forget.’

‘I didn’t mention a branch.’

‘So what were you?’

‘I was attached to the Treasury.’

‘As a linguist?’

‘Not especially.’

‘And you didn’t find that too negative? The Treasury? Cropping public spending, pegging pay-rounds, no more money for the hospitals? I think that would get me down.’ Again I disdained a reply. ‘You should keep a dog, Mr Cranmer. A place like this. Crying out for one.’

The wind had dropped dead. The rain had ceased, leaving a pall of ground mist that made autumn bonfires of the Peugeot’s headlights.

I am not given to panic, but that night I came as near to it as I had ever come. Which of us were they pursuing – Larry or me? Or both of us? How much did they know of Emma? Why had Checheyev visited Larry in Bath and when, when, when? Those policemen weren't looking for some fringe academic who had gone walkabout for a few days. They were on a trail, smelling blood, hunting someone who appealed to their most aggressive instincts.

Yet who did they think he was? – Larry, *my* Larry, *our* Larry? – What had he *done*? This talk of money, Russians, deals, Checheyev, me, socialism, me again – how could Larry be anything except what *we* had made him: a directionless English middle-class revolutionary, a permanent dissident, a dabbler, a dreamer, a habitual rejector; a ruthless, shiftless, philandering, wasted, semi-creative failure, too clever not to demolish an argument, too mulish to settle for a flawed one?

And who did they think *I* was – this solitary retired Civil Servant, speaking his foreign languages to himself, making wine and playing the Good Samaritan in his desirable Somerset vineyard? *You should keep a dog*, indeed! Why should they assume, just because I was alone, that I was incomplete? Why pursue *me*, merely because they couldn't get their hands on Larry or Checheyev? And Emma – my fragile, or not so

fragile, departed Mistress of Honeybrook – how long before she too is in their sights? I went upstairs. No, I didn't. I ran. The telephone was by my bed, but as I lifted the receiver I humbled myself by forgetting the number I meant to dial, a thing that in the tightest operational situations had never happened to me through my entire secret life.

Yet why had I come upstairs at all? There was a perfectly good phone in the drawing room, another in the study. Why had I rushed upstairs? I remembered some gung-ho lecturer at training school boring us on the arts of siege-breaking. When people panic, he said, they panic upward. They make for lifts, escalators, stairs, any way to go up, not down. By the time the boys go in, anyone who is not too petrified to move is in the attic.

I sat on the bed. I dropped my shoulders to relax them. I rolled my head around on the advice of some colour supplement guru I had read on the subject of do-it-yourself massage. I felt no relief. I crossed the gallery to Emma's side of the house, stood outside her door and listened, for what I didn't know. The tap-tap of her typewriter as it promiscuously embraced each Hopeless Cause in turn? Her doting murmurs on the telephone until I cut them off? Her tribal music from remotest Africa – Guinea, Timbuctoo? I tried the doorhandle. It was locked. By me. I listened again, but did not enter. Was I afraid of her ghost? Her straight, accusing, over-innocent stare that said: keep out, I'm dangerous, I've scared myself and now I'm scaring you? About to return to my own side, I paused at the long landing window and gazed at the far outlines of the walled garden glowing in the pale light of the greenhouses.

It is a warm late summer Sunday at Honeybrook. We have been together six months. First thing this morning we have

stood shoulder to shoulder in the bottling room while Cranmer the great viniculturalist breathlessly measures the sugar content of our Madeleine Angevine grapes, yet another of Uncle Bob's questionable selections. The Madeleine is as capricious as any other woman, a visiting French expert assured me with much winking and nodding: ripe and ready one day, over the hill the next. Prudently, I do not relay this sexist analogy to Emma. I am praying for seventeen per cent but sixteen will promise a harvest. In the fabled *année* of 1976 Uncle Bob touched an amazing twenty per cent before the English wasps had their share and the English rain the rest. Emma watches as I nervously hold the refractometer to the light. 'Pushing eighteen per cent,' I intone at last, in a voice better suited to a great general on the eve of battle. 'We pick in two weeks.'

Now we are lounging in the walled garden among our vines, telling ourselves that by our presence we are nurturing them to the last stage of their fruition. Emma has the swing chair and is wearing the Watteau look that I encourage in her: wide hat, long skirt, her blouse unbuttoned to the sun while she sips Pimm's and reads sheets of music, and I watch her, which is all I want to do for the rest of my life. Last night we made love. This morning after our sugar-measuring ceremony we made more love, as I pretend to myself that I can tell by the polish of her skin and the lazy pleasure in her eyes.

'I reckon if we got a sensible crew in we could clear this lot in one day,' I declare boldly.

She turns a page, smiling.

'Uncle Bob made the mistake of inviting friends. Hopeless. Total waste of time. Real villagers will pick you six tons in a day. Five anyway. Not that we've got more than three here, at the outside.'

Her head lifts, she smiles but says nothing. I conclude that she is gently mocking me for my yeoman's fantasies.

'So I reckon if we have Ted Lanxon and the two Toller girls, and if Mike Ambry isn't ploughing, and maybe Jack Taplow's two sons from the Choir could come after church if they're free – in exchange for our support at Harvest Festival, naturally –'

An expression of distraction passes across her young face and I fear that I am boring her. Her brow puckers, her hands lift to close her blouse. Then I realise to my relief that it is merely some sound that she has heard and I have not, for her musician's ear hears everything before I do. Then I hear it too: the wheeze and clatter of a frightful car as it pulls up in the sweep. And I know at once whose car it is. I do not have to wait until I recognise the familiar voice, never raised yet never too quiet to hear.

'Timbo. Cranmer, for God's sake. Hell are you hiding, man? Tim?'

After which, because Larry always finds you, the door of the walled garden swings open and he is standing there, slim as a whip in his not very white shirt and baggy black trousers and disgraceful buckskin boots, the Pettifer forelock dangling artistically over his right eye. And I know that, nearly a year late, just when I am beginning to believe I have heard the last of him, he has come to claim the first of my promised Sunday lunches.

'Larry! Fantastic! Good Heavens!' I cry. We shake hands, then to my surprise he embraces me, his designer stubble scraping against my freshly shaved cheek. All the time he was my joe, he never once embraced me. 'Marvellous. You've made it at last. Emma, this is Larry.' I am holding his arm now. Again, the holding is all new to me. 'God sent us both to



Winchester and then to Oxford and I haven't been able to get rid of him since. Right, Larry?'

At first he seems unable to focus on her. He is guillotine pale and a little fierce: his Lubyanka glower. To judge by his breath he is still drunk after an all-night binge, probably with the university porters. But as usual his looks do not reveal this. According to his looks he is a studious and sensitive duellist, about to die too young. He stands before her, head tipped critically back to examine her. He rubs his knuckles along his jaw. He smiles his scampish, self-deprecating smile. She smiles, scampish also, the shadow of her sunhat making a mystery of her upper face, a thing she knows perfectly well.

'Well, stone the crows,' he declares happily. 'Turn, beauty, turn. Who is she, Timbo? Hell did you find her?'

'Under a toadstool,' I reply proudly, which if unsatisfactory to Larry sounds a great deal better than 'in a physiotherapist's waiting room in Hampstead on a wet Friday evening'.

Then their two smiles connect and light each other – hers quizzical, and his, perhaps because of her beauty, momentarily less confident of its reception. But a mutual smile of recognition all the same, even if it doesn't quite know what it recognises.

But *I* know.

I am their broker, their intermediary. I have guided Larry's search for more than twenty years. I am guiding Emma's now, protecting her from what in the past she has too often found, and swears she doesn't want to find again. Yet as I observe my two destiny-seekers taking stock of one another, I realise that I have only to step out of the ring to be forgotten.

'She knows nothing,' I tell Larry firmly as soon as I can get him alone in the kitchen. I'm a retired Treasury boffin. You're you. That's absolutely *it*. There's no subtext. Okay?'

‘Still living the old lie, eh?’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘Oh sure. All the time. So what’s she?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What’s she doing here? She’s half your age.’

‘She’s half yours too. Less three years. She’s my girl. What do you think she’s doing here?’

He has his face in the fridge where he is looking for cheese. Larry is always hungry. Sometimes I wonder what he would have eaten all those years if he hadn’t been my joe. A local Cheddar takes his fancy.

‘Where’s the bloody bread? Then a beer, if you don’t mind. A beer first, then an alcohol.’

*He scented her*, I think, as I rummage for his bloody bread. *His voices have told him I’m living with a girl and he’s come to check her out.*

‘Hey, saw Diana the other day,’ he says, in the deliberately careless voice he uses for referring to my ex-wife. ‘Looks ten years younger. Sends her love.’

‘That’s new,’ I say.

‘Well, not in as many words. But *implied*, as the great loves always are. The same old creamy look in her eyes whenever your name crops up.’

Diana was till now his ultimate secret weapon against me. Having ridiculed her to hell and back while I was married to her, he now professes a brotherly fondness for her, and wheels it out whenever he thinks it will discomfit me.

‘*Heard* of him?’ Emma protests that evening, offended that I should even have to ask. ‘Darling, I’ve sat at Lawrence Pet-tifer’s feet since *infancy*. Well, not *literally*. But metaphorically he’s a *god*.’

So as quite often happens I learn something new about her.