

of years' time, employee participation is going to be codified. It's going to be government policy.'

'Which government?'

'It doesn't matter. Doesn't make a blind bit of difference. I'm telling you, we're going to be entering a whole new phase. Management and workers – elected representatives, that is – are going to sit around the table and take decisions *together*. Looking at the forward plans of the company *together*. Mutual interests. Common ground. That's what we're looking for. And it's got to happen because at the moment confrontation is crippling the industry.'

'This,' said Slater, suddenly and irrelevantly, 'is a bloody good steak.' His meal had arrived first, and he hadn't waited for the others before starting. 'Give me something like this every day of the week and we might be talking, do you know what I'm saying?'

Bill ignored him. 'The point is, Jack, that it's not confrontation for the sake of it. That's what you people never seem to understand. There are grievances, you see. Real, proper grievances.'

'And they'll be addressed.'

Bill paused for a while, sipping his beer, his eyes narrowed. A waitress arrived with their food and he was distracted, momentarily, by the sight of his steak and then, more extensively, by the sight of her calves and slender thighs encased in sheer nylon, the promise of an untried body insinuated by the fall of her white blouse. The old habit. Never shaken. He forced his gaze away from her and towards Jack, coating his chips with salt and tomato ketchup as if there were no tomorrow. Bill cut off a wedge of steak, chewed on it with undeniable relish (you didn't get this at home) and said:

'Of course, I can see where this is leading.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's the usual tactic, isn't it? Divide and rule. Take a few shop stewards, invite them upstairs, sit them round the conference table, make them feel important. Let them in on a few secrets – nothing too sensitive, mind, just a few little titbits to make them think they're in the know. And suddenly they're feeling very full of

themselves, suddenly they're beginning to see things from the management's point of view, and as for their members . . . Well, they're beginning to wonder why these guys are spending half the day up in the boardroom, why they're not around on the shop floor any more when there's a problem to solve. Isn't that the way it'll be, Jack?

Incredulous, Jack Forrest laid down his cutlery and said to Colin, 'Do you hear that, though? Do you hear the kind of thing we're up against? That typical trade-union paranoid mentality.'

'Look, mate,' said Roy to Bill, speaking indistinctly through a mouthful of chips, 'if these two gentlemen want to treat us to a nice dinner every now and again, put their point of view across, what's the problem, eh? You've got to take what you can in this life, mate. It's every man for himself as far as I can see.'

'Spoken like a true pillar of the Labour movement,' said Bill.

'What do you think, Colin?'

Colin glanced at his boss nervously. He had a hatred of confrontation, an undoubted drawback for someone saddled with a job in industrial relations.

'It's the strikes that are holding this company back,' he said at last, talking into his plate, giving voice, reluctantly, to a firm conviction that nevertheless had to be dredged up from somewhere remote and unvisited, in his profoundest depths. 'I don't know if this is the way to stop them, but they've got to be stopped somehow. It doesn't happen in Germany or Italy or Japan. Only here.'

Bill stopped eating, and held Colin in a thoughtful, penetrating gaze. Of all the things he could have said, he chose only: 'I wonder what your son and my son talk about on the bus home.'

Jack saw the chance to inject a note of levity. 'Girls and pop music, I expect,' he said, and after that Bill gave up, turning his attention to the food and his sixth pint of Brew. A steak was a steak, after all.

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Bill and Roy, their paths lying in the same direction, were obliged to share a minicab home. Roy pulled a face when he saw the

turbaned driver sitting behind the wheel, and turned to his companion, ready to share some blokey, insulting witticism. But Bill wasn't having any of it. He let Roy get into the back and then pointedly made for the passenger seat, where he chatted to the driver for most of the twenty-minute journey. He learned that he and his wife were second-generation immigrants, living in Small Heath; that they liked Birmingham because it was full of parks and you didn't have to drive far to get out into the hills; that his eldest son was training to be a doctor, but the youngest was having trouble with bullies at school.

Overhearing this last fragment, and sensing a lull in the conversation, Roy leaned forward and said to Bill:

'That thing you said to Trotter, about your kids talking on the bus home: what was that about?'

'It was just a comment, that's all,' Bill answered.

'Your kids go to the same school, then? Is that it?'

'What's it to you, Slater?'

'Trotter's boy goes to King William's, doesn't he? That fucking . . . toffs' academy in Edgbaston.'

Bill snorted. 'You don't know what you're talking about. We don't pay anything for him to go there. It's a direct-grant school. He's a bright lad and he passed the exam. All I'm doing is giving him the best start in life.'

Roy didn't reply to this, but sat back, satisfied, believing apparently that he had located some chink in his colleague's armour. They said nothing more to each other that night, apart from the most cursory goodbyes.

When Bill got home he found that Irene had already gone to bed. He scowled at the heap of paperwork waiting for him on the dining-room table and decided that he would leave it for another day. It was almost midnight. But he took the cheque out of his jacket pocket one more time and examined it again by the light of his reading lamp.

It continued to puzzle him. A cheque for £145, drawn on the Charity Committee account, made out to a name he didn't even recognize. Signed not by Harry, the chairman, or by Miriam, the

highly fanciable secretary (and was it his imagination, by the way, or had she been staring at him through most of the meeting the other night?) but by himself. And yet he could remember nothing about it. What was more, the bank had returned this cheque because the amount had only been written out in words, not figures: again, a mistake he was very unlikely to make. Unless he was cracking up. Unless the pressure was getting to him.

He filed the cheque away in his bureau and poured himself one more beer before going to bed.

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Jack Forrest and Colin had said goodnight in the restaurant car park. Jack seemed ambivalent about the evening, not sure that it had been worthwhile. 'Was that a success, d'you reckon?' His breath was cloudy in the winter air. There would be frost before morning.

'I think so,' said Colin, who always wanted everything to be for the best. 'I think it was, well . . .'

'Constructive?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Good. Yes, I think you're right. I think it was constructive.' He rubbed his hands, clicked back the knuckles of his long fingers. 'There's a nip in the air tonight, though, isn't there? Hope the wife's remembered to put the blanket on.'

They shook hands and parted. Their cars were on opposite sides of the car park. Colin tutted, then allowed himself a few mild swear words as he wrestled with the lock of his brown Austin 1800, struggling to free the obstinate catch he had personally designed, a few years ago, with such confidence.

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On Wednesday afternoons they had double English, taken by a Scotsman called Mr Fletcher who slurred his words and whose accent was hard enough to understand in the first place and who they all suspected of being an alcoholic. Most of them were frightened of Mr Fletcher, because he shouted whenever he lost his temper and lost his temper every lesson, sometimes twice or even three or four times. The only person who never seemed to be frightened of him was Harding. But then everybody – especially Benjamin – had been known to wonder exactly what it would take to frighten Harding.

Double periods were different. When the bell went after forty minutes you just had to sit there, as if nothing was happening. More often than not, the master would actually make a point of talking through it, as if to emphasize that this was nothing special, only a halfway point, but it was hard to hold the boys' attention for those few minutes, with the corridors outside roaring beneath the impact of hundreds of youthful feet, as the rest of the school thundered from classroom to classroom. Slowly the rumble of footsteps, the banging of doors would fade away, silence would settle again, and you had no further excuses for not listening to the queasy fits and starts, the lurching monotone of Mr Fletcher's voice.

'That was a masterpiece, Spinks, a veritable masterpiece,' he said, as three red-faced boys returned to their desks. Sarcasm,

unleavened by humour or playfulness of tone, was a fixed habit of mind for Fletcher. 'When Hollywood comes to make the inevitable film of *Catcher in the Rye*, you will undoubtedly be called upon to play Holden Caulfield. You've got him perfectly, right down to the Brummie accent. Peter Fonda won't get a look-in. Right -' he raised his voice to quell an upsurge of laughter which never materialized '- who's next? Trotter, Harding, Anderton, Chase. Sounds like a bloody legal conglomerate. Solicitors and commissioners for oaths. What have you got for us?'

The three of them stood up (Harding had asked to be excused, a few minutes ago, and was expected back any moment) and Philip Chase, as unofficial spokesman, announced: 'We're doing the trial scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, sir. Dramatized by Trotter and I.'

'Trotter and *me*, Chase. Trotter and me.'

'Yes, sir. I play Atticus Finch, the defendant.'

'The defence *lawyer*, not the defendant.'

'Yes. Sorry, sir. Anderton is playing Mr Gilmer, the, er . . . the prosecuting lawyer. Trotter is going to play Judge Taylor, and Harding -'

At which point the door was flung open and Harding re-entered the classroom, to howls of laughter and delight.

'- Harding plays Tom Robinson, sir.'

This explanation was already superfluous, for Harding's make-up told its own story. His face was more or less unrecognizable beneath a black coating of ink. He must have hidden the bottle in his pocket when he went to the toilet. The effect was astonishing, not least because of the rings of translucent whiteness that circled his eyes, and because he had also, for some reason or other, failed to apply any ink at all to his nose, so that it now stood out preposterously like a little white punctuation mark. His classmates went berserk. The room ricocheted with trebly laughter, like an aviary at feeding time, until this gave way, after nearly half a deafening minute, to what sounded like a wall of machine-gun fire as twenty-two boys pounded the lids of their desks up and down in a frenzy of gobsmacked approbation. Fletcher, unsmiling, waited

for the uproar to subside, his patience only running out when Harding lost his cool and began to surf the wave of his audience's enthusiasm, parading back and forth in front of the blackboard with flapping hands and extended fingers in an impersonation which owed less to Al Jolson than to weekly viewings of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. At which point the master stood up and thumped his desk imperiously.

'Quiet!'

Afterwards, in conference at the bus stop, Chase, Trotter and Anderton agreed that this had probably been one of their friend's sillier ideas, and they should never have let him attempt it. The joke had backfired on all of them, and they were now saddled with the task of writing six sides each on the subject of 'racial stereotyping', to be deposited in Fletcher's pigeonhole by nine o'clock the next morning: a particular humiliation for Benjamin, who was famous for never incurring punishments of any kind. As for Harding himself, he had been put, inevitably, in Saturday-morning detention. They could see him now, waiting at the bus stop on the other side of the road (Harding lived to the north of Birmingham, in Sutton Coldfield), surrounded by fans and still bearing the battle scars of his adventure, for his face had been thoroughly scrubbed but retained a spectral residue of ocean blue. At least half of his audience was female, Benjamin noticed. King William's School for Girls stood on the same site as its male counterpart, and while there was very little official contact between the schools – until you got to the sixth form, anyway – a good deal of nervy, spellbound fraternization would take place on the buses home, and Harding already had no shortage of female admirers. He looked gleefully unbowed, basking in the heat of his growing notoriety.

Benjamin and his friends were savagely envious. The girls in their bus queue talked only among themselves, perhaps throwing an amused glance in their direction once in a while, but otherwise indifferent to the point of hostility. Lois, of course, would not have dreamed of talking to her brother on these occasions, even though they were standing only a few feet apart. The edgy fondness which they sustained at home collapsed into hideous embarrassment when-

ever their schoolfriends were around. It was bad enough that they were known, collectively, as 'the Rotters', an epithet dreamed up when somebody noticed that their names could be pronounced 'Bent Rotter' and 'Lowest Rotter'. What made it worse was that Benjamin still had to wear school uniform while Lois, as a sixth-former under the Girls' School's more liberal regime, could dress as she pleased. (Today she was wearing her long blue denim coat with thick white fur collar, over a ribbed acrylic roll-neck jumper and embroidered denim loons.) Somehow this created another barrier, the firmest of all, so that normal contact was out of the question until they had reached the impenetrable privacy of the family tea table.

'Busy evening ahead for you boys, then?' said a plummy, prematurely broken voice behind them. They turned to see their old enemy Culpepper: junior rugger captain, junior cricket captain, would-be athletics champion and long-standing object of derision. As always, he was carrying his books and his PE kit in the same bulky sports bag, from which the handle of his squash racket protruded like a permanently erect penis. 'Six sides apiece, wasn't it? That should have you burning the midnight oil.'

'Fuck off, Culpepper,' said Anderton.

'Ooh,' he gasped, in mock-admiration. 'Most amusing. Such dazzling repartee.'

'It was only a joke, anyway,' said Benjamin. And he pointed out: 'You were laughing with the rest of them.'

'You've only yourselves to blame,' said Culpepper, wiping his nose and thereby revealing, to less than general astonishment, that even his handkerchiefs had name-tags attached. 'Fletcher's a dreadful old liberal softie. He wouldn't let anyone get away with impersonating a nigger.'

'You shouldn't use that word,' said Chase. 'You know you shouldn't.'

'What - nigger?' said Culpepper, enjoying the effect these two tiny syllables were having upon them. 'Why not? It's in the book. Harper Lee uses it herself.'

'You know that's different.'

'All right, then. Wog. Coon. Darkie.' Having failed to provoke

them, he added: 'It's a rotten book, anyway. I don't know why we have to read it. I don't believe in it at all. It's propoganda.'

'No one's interested in you or what you think,' said Anderton, and to prove the point they turned away from him, knotting themselves into a tighter group. The conversation drifted, as it always did, towards music. Anderton spent nearly all his pocket money on records and had just bought *Stranded* by Roxy Music. He was trying to persuade Chase to borrow it, insisting it blew the socks off his poxy Genesis albums. Benjamin was listening, but half-heartedly. Both bands left him cold: so did the Eric Clapton tape his parents had given him for his birthday. He was growing out of rock music, looking for something new . . . And besides this, something very distracting was going on at the bus stop on the other side of the road. Harding now seemed to be talking – this was unbelievable, but true: actually talking – to Cicely Boyd, the willowy goddess who ran the junior wing of the Girls' School Drama Society. How was this possible? Her aloofness was legendary, and yet there she was, staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed as he recounted and pantomimed the recorded highlights of his latest prank. Ben watched in amazement as, even more incredibly, she licked her finger and rubbed at his cheek, attempting to wipe off some of the inky traces.

'Look at that,' he said, nudging his friends and pointing.

The musical spat was quickly forgotten.

'Bloody hell . . .'

'Shit . . .'

Even Anderton, whose sexual politics were rather more sophisticated than the others', was reduced to speechlessness by the spectacle of Harding so casually hitting this particular jackpot. There seemed to be nothing they could do, except gawp; until, after a few moments, the 62 bus arrived, and with a series of wistful backward glances they piled on to the front of the top deck.

'He's got a nerve, you know,' said Chase, as the bus swayed into motion again and rattled with the din of schoolkids' chatter. 'It was all his idea. Now we get into trouble and he gets all the glory.'

'It was a crap idea anyway,' said Anderton. 'I said so at the time.'

You never listen to me, you people. There's only one person who should have been allowed to play that part, and that's Richards.'

'But he's not in our form.'

'Exactly. So we should have dropped the whole thing.'

Richards was the only black pupil in their year: the only one in the entire school, in fact. A tall, sinewy, somewhat melancholy Afro-Caribbean, he lived on the outskirts of Handsworth and was a new arrival at King William's; he had joined in the third year, and his form was upper-middle D. Anderton, incidentally, was unique in referring to him as Richards. The other ninety-five boys in his year called him 'Rastus'.

'But we worked for hours on that scene,' Chase protested, 'and we never even got to perform it.'

'That's life.'

The bus had squeezed its way through the Selly Oak traffic and was making its way along the faster, leafier carriageways of the Bristol Road South. Chase's stop was the first, just before Northfield, and a strange thing happened when he got up to leave. The girl who had been sitting behind them – a girl they had all seen countless times before, but barely noticed – followed him down the stairs, but just before she disappeared from view she threw a glance, unmistakably, in Benjamin's direction. It was an eloquent glance: sidelong, surreptitious, but at the same time not exactly quick. Her eyes, peeping out from an unruly fringe of dark hair, lingered on Benjamin for two or three seconds, almost appraisingly, and there was the clear intimation of a smile in her full lips. In a couple of years' time, Benjamin might have recognized this smile as flirtatious. For now, it merely stupefied him, setting in motion a wild complex of different feelings which had the effect of rooting him helplessly to the spot. Before he could make any kind of response, she was gone.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'Her name's Newman, or something. Claire Newman, I think. Why, d'you fancy her?'

Benjamin didn't answer. Instead, he looked curiously out of the window, watching as Chase followed her along St Laurence Road.

He was walking at an unnaturally slow pace, probably because he was too shy to overtake her on the pavement. At this point it would have been hard to imagine that one day they would become friends or even, briefly and unsuccessfully, husband and wife.

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The girl's name was indeed Claire Newman, and she also had an elder sister called Miriam, who worked as a typist at the British Leyland factory in Longbridge.

When Claire got home that afternoon she found that the house was empty, and she let herself in using a key hidden in the watering can in the back porch. Her mother, father and sister were all still at work. She dumped her schoolbag on the kitchen table, took some cream crackers out of a biscuit jar and spread them with butter and Bovril. She put the biscuits on a plate and went upstairs. Before going into her sister's room, she paused on the landing. The house was wonderfully quiet and still. A good atmosphere for mischief.

Miriam kept her diary hidden beneath a chest of drawers, along with a man's purple nylon shirt presumably of some mysterious sentimental value, and a good supply of the Pill. Claire had discovered this treasure trove two weeks earlier and was now well up-to-date with her sister's private life, which had become rather exciting of late. She reached for the diary, put the plate of food down on the floor and sat cross-legged beside it. Impatiently, she thumbed through to the latest page, licking the Bovril off her fingers as she went.

Her eyes darted across the most recent entry, which turned out to be disappointing. No further progress, then: Miriam's current *amour* was still stuck at the fantasy stage. But the details at least were getting more colourful.

20 November

Went to another meeting of the Charity Fund Committee last night. All the usual people there (including Vile Victor). Mr Anderton not in the chair, this time, but sitting opposite me. I took the minutes as usual. He kept looking at me, just

like before, and I kept looking back. It couldn't be plainer what he was thinking, I'm amazed nobody noticed anything. He is rather old I suppose, but so dishy, I couldn't concentrate on a thing and must have missed half what was being said. I really, really want him to kcu f me and I know that he wants to as well. Spent most of last night thinking of the ways he could kcu f me and what it would feel like. It would have to be at the factory but there are lots of places like the showers where the men clean themselves off after the shift. I imagined him taking me in there and lifting my skirt and licking my tnuc until I came. Somehow I have got to speak to him and get him to have me but I don't think it will be difficult, he wants it just as much as I do if not more. I don't think I will be the first either but that doesn't matter. It has got to happen soon or I will go spare with fancying him.

Downstairs, the kitchen door slammed. Claire shoved the diary back into its hiding place and scrambled to her feet. It would be her mother, probably, back from the solicitor's office where she worked. She would have stopped at the supermarket on her way home. She would need some help with the unpacking.