

Zac reminds Ralph of his obligations

In the college dining hall, after the rugby, the bloodied teams separated to opposite ends and onto different tables, as though eating high-tea was a continuation of the game. Ruddy faced players, quiet and steaming from the shower, nursed blazing bruises and a broken nose, and the thin strips of tape that held cuts together would be testament of how hard they had fought until, hopefully, the middle of the following week. Stafford Police was always a tough match.

The usual crowd had cheered Harper Adams Agricultural College with enthusiasm while secretly resigned to a chilly and disappointing result. Along the touch line only the regular passing of sloe gin among the Barbour jacketed first fifteen girlfriends and the Student's Union Committee members had prevented a rout in the supporters similar to the one on the playing field as policeman after policeman, freed from daily constraint, battered bemused young farmers into the sandy silt loam.

On the far side of the pitch, alone but for his two black Labradors, the Principal of Harper Adams had watched his college play. He hadn't been that interested in the game. Home matches on Saturday afternoons were an excuse for him to take some air and not to have to talk to anyone. Students and staff knew that no one was ever required to go and make polite conversation with him. Principal Grimsay was happy to be abandoned against a hedge row, solitarily contemplating the week gone and the one ahead. It was a surprise to all when a stranger, a large and tall man in a long brown waterproof riding coat, had walked with wide strides to join him. He was seen to be talking, and the Prin unusually attentive. They had both been looking across the pitch, but without following the game.

Afterwards, with a home defeat confirmed, the same man had been seen walking around the Students Union building, peering through windows. In the dining hall he had made his way through the canteen and appeared in a doorway, a huge plate of food on a plastic tray, and stared around as if lost, as if looking for someone.

Tables of policemen went silent as he walked past until he unconcernedly sat with some students, the long bench flexing in the middle with his weight. They looked at his plate in astonishment.

He smiled at them.

“What can I say? I’m a big man. I eat a lot.”

He shook himself free of his massive coat as though it was something attacking him. It was like a tarpaulin for a wagon, or something for battening over hatches on a ship before a storm.

“It’s ok. I haven’t filled my pockets.”

The student’s seemed nervous to talk to him. They were farmers, shy and frosty with strangers until someone had broken the ice.

“Are you with the Police?” one of them asked.

The man looked at his food before replying.

“Sort of. I drove one of the mini buses.”

He looked up from the plate

“Aren’t you the new President?”

“That’s right.”

“Ralph?”

“Yes.”

Ralph realised that the others at the table were drifting away, thankful that their new President had relieved them of the need to socialise but leaving him trapped. One of them tapped him on the shoulder and winked as he left.

“I saw a notice on the board. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“I was curious. Where do all your students come from?”

“From all over the country really, not just Shropshire. Some are from overseas. Not many.”

“Oh really? Where overseas?”

“Occasionally places in Africa. Nigeria, I think. The foreign students are mostly Poults.”

“Poults?”

“They do the Poultry course.”

“What are you?”

“I’m an Agric.”

“Let me guess. Agriculture.”

“That wasn’t too difficult.”

“Any girls on your course? Any foreign Agrics?” the man asked.

“A few. Of both. The girls are mostly, umm, agricultural. The foreigners are mostly Irish.”

The man nodded toward a pretty girl sitting further down the bench.

“What about that one?”

“Mmm. No, she’s not Irish. And she’s not on my course. She’s an AMBA.”

“Explain,” he demanded through a mouth full of Shepherd’s Pie.

“Marketing and Business course. She’s also the new Students Union Secretary.”

“You are the Pres and she’s the Sec, right? So, you are looking forward to the two of you working very closely together?”

“I’d like to.”

He smiled and ate rapidly with big forkfuls.

He pointed outside into the gloom.

“Do all the students live here?”

“First years live in the Halls here at College. After that most people rent a house with a group of friends.”

“Is that cheaper?”

“Yeah, much cheaper. There are lots of big old farm houses around here. The farmers buy the land but don’t have any use for the property. They rent it out to the college, so they aren’t paying for the heat and light in an empty house. Not that the students usually put on the heating. Most houses are just freezing in winter.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Yes. I live at a place called Sydney House. Syd’s House.”

“Where are the others? Around here?”

“The furthest out is Redgreet Farm, that’s about ten miles away. The other big ones are at Lilleshall, or here in the local village at Edgmond. They are much closer to College. And there’s Wilbrighton Hall, that’s where a lot of the Irish lads live.”

“Do you go out there?”

“Not really. I know them all. They are often uncontrollable in the bar. When they are not smashing the place up they keep to themselves.”

The man concentrated on his food.

Ralph got up to leave.

“Well I better be off. It’ll be a big night in the bar tonight. There’s a good band if you are interested.”

The man looked at his empty plate.

“Hang on a minute. I’ve just had a thought.”

Ralph sat down reluctantly.

“I’ve just started this new job.”

“Oh yes. In the Police?”

“That’s right. I wonder if you might be able to help me out.”

Ralph sighed. As if he didn't have enough on his plate.

“Of course. What can I do?”

“You know Shawbury?”

“I know where it is.”

“Big RAF training base. Helicopters.”

“Okay.”

“Well, there are a few military bases around here. There's RAF Cosford as well, and Army bases at Withington Barracks, depot of the Price of Wales' Division, and Cophorne. Oh, and Tern Hill. The 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment have been there for over a year. In Clive Barracks.”

“I don't think we play them,” said Ralph.

“No, it's not that. I'm the Policeman the RAF and the Army contact when they need to talk to the Civvies. You know, if a squaddie goes mental in a pub, or they have cars vandalised in town. Any 'off base' problems they call me.”

He looked around at the now nearly empty dining room. The bar would be filling up.

“I've found that information sort of gravitates upwards. Well it struck me that information from students might gravitate up to you. Being President of the Students Union.”

Ralph laughed.

“Only when they want to moan about something.”

“Well, if you ever get to hear anything from your students...”

“Such as?” Ralph asked.

“Oh, I don't know. Maybe someone's witnessed a punch up with a short haired bloke. Anything really. Unusual vehicles making unexplainable rendezvous in unexpected places. Gossip. Drugs. Money. College kids with the type of girls that real students wouldn't be able to afford.

That sort of thing. And weapons. What they are really worried about of course is the terrorist threat.”

They should turn the heating on. Ralph would have to mention it to someone. He suddenly felt cold.

“Well, anyway. Just in case. If you hear anything go and see the Principal. Roy is it?”

Ralph nodded.

“Oh, and you don’t have to mention it to anyone. I mean you are the President, right? You would have a hundred reasons to see the Principal. No one would think twice about it. It could be about the new squash courts, or that troublesome ‘Non-Residents Fee’ the College charge you for when you live off campus.”

“You are well informed.”

“All part of the job.”

The man looked for his coat. It was under the table, in its lair.

“I’m also informed about why you were binned from the Army.”

Ralph had joined the Army. Other boys from his school forged ahead with Service careers but Ralph stumbled. He found this difficult to reconcile because he loved it. He loved the daily physicality, absorbing new skills like a military sponge, the variety of training challenges. The problem was most other soldiers. He found they were often inflexible, was frustrated by their sometimes lethargic thought processes, and their sluggish responses to situational changes. It wasn’t a one-way street. Other soldiers had a problem with him. Ralph would read instead of drink with them on a Saturday night at a Club in town, and then go alone to a village pub on a Sunday morning with the newspapers. In a hundred tiny ways there were unassailable breaches between them. They would turn to him to answer questions on navigation or radio procedure but exclude him from a quick kick around on the football pitch and then not invite him to that boozier with girls known to be easy pick-ups. It was Ralph’s fault. He had recoiled like his Self-Loading Rifle from the chummy group camaraderie that was essential in Army life. Joining up had been a mistake. He should have listened to that man Rots in Uganda.

“When was it? Oh, yes. February ’83. A frosty night navigation exercise in Sennybridge.”

It had come to a head at Sennybridge, a 37,000-acre Ministry of Defence training area with a straight access road called Church Hill to the top of the Brecon Beacons, cut like a staircase in the Welsh hillside by an ambitious Royal Engineer.

“That time you left your squad and found your own way home because an Officer wouldn’t listen to you and was leading you all, cold and tired, to nowhere slowly. They were very impressed from what I hear. You broke some sort of record. Got back six hours before the rest of them. But not very ‘Army’ was it? I mean you have to sympathise. You can’t have soldiers just doing their own thing and leaving their platoon to muddle through in the dark.”

To Ralph, tired as he was, the way home had been obvious. Even in the blackness that dogleg shape that was even blacker could only be the forestry plantation that led to a valley and a track by a meandering stream to the waiting Bedford’s. The Officer preferred his soldiers to follow, quietly. Ralph had slipped away, alone. He still awoke at night thinking of it, ashamed.

“I wasn’t binned, I left. Services No Longer Required. Conduct Exemplary,” Ralph said defensively.

“That’s right. You told them to take the eight-figure number starting 2465 that they’d given you and put it somewhere alimentary. Never been a great team player though, have you? Still, it didn’t matter to that odd, oily, baby pink, round bloke who collared you just as you’d handed in all your kit, minus one kitbag canvas green and one beret size seven with cap badge, and suggested you might like to see a mate of his in London. The ‘mate’ sent you to a security firm, didn’t he? Guards for art galleries and night watchmen for City offices, that sort of thing. Where was it? Diamond Street?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Of course. Emerald Street. That’s right. An unmarked glass door opposite the Emerald Street nick. Get buzzed in, then upstairs for the regular office with a pretty girl on reception, people pushing bits of paper around, and a tall rangy Rupert name unknown, ex ‘vulgar-fraction’ Lancer, always on the phone haughtily selling static guards for exhibitions at the Tate Modern and the Royal Academy. And you could tell Ian and Innes, the old Grammar School mate’s you were lodging with in Lewisham, that you were ‘In Security, in the Control Room’. Working long shifts to explain your absences from the pub. Working days and nights to explain your nocturnal movements. But you weren’t a security guard Controller. You didn’t go upstairs

and chat with ‘the Sandra’ or ‘the Dawn’ when she wasn’t answering the phone. You went downstairs through an air lock with heavy doors and a monitor in the middle to where the real action was, to The Trainer. The renowned Trainer. Didn’t he have a surname that was a Christian name? Philip? Tony?”

“Did he have a real name?”

“Peter. John Peter. That’s right, the retired six foot seven Welsh Guards Warrant Officer with a scary scarred face cratered from some childhood pox, a Queen’s Gallantry Medal, and a dapper line in brown shoes and brown hats to go with his pinstripe in town.”

Ralph, fed-up by more than the stodgy food, scowled at the man.

“You’ve proved your point. You know a lot about me.”

“The Trainer particularly liked it when you came back with the complete airline meal on the little tray it’s served on, one of those silly tasks like getting a footballer’s signature or your photo with a topless model, tasks that can reveal so much about you. Of special note to him was how well he had taught you to lie. You convincingly told The Trainer that you had gently persuaded a plump and understanding stewardess to give you the meal tray and that you then ravenously ate it all on the tube home. He was very impressed by how well you did it. He *wanted* to believe you. Sadly, it was clear to him that you had helped yourself to a used one from a rubbish skip at the airport. The coffee stains in the little plastic cup gave you away. It was a small black mark to an otherwise faultless performance.”

“Story of my life,” admitted Ralph.

“Did The Trainer tell you what the QGM was for? No? An Officer wouldn’t listen to him and led him, cold and tired, into a gunman’s kitchen where the Officer immediately froze. The Trainer saved him. The Trainer was there to save him, you see. The Trainer hadn’t left the Officer to find his own way home like you would have done.”

The man lifted his huge frame and got up to go.

“OK. I now feel sufficiently worthless that I am ready to do whatever you want me to do in order to redeem myself. I guess that was the idea,” said Ralph.

“Good.”

“I never entered into any sort of contract to do this. I was barely twenty years old. I didn’t have a clue what I wanted to do. In the end I chose to come here. I wanted to be a farmer”

“And we supported that,” the man agreed. “You have to look at that time as a continuation of your service. It was out-placement provided by the Army to help you decide what you wanted to do, to give you skills for use in civilian life.”

“Skills like lying and cheating and stealing?”

“You have to admit that it was great fun at the time. All that running around. The feeling of power that came from knowledge, the things you knew that others didn’t.”

“What if I just said I can’t be arsed?”

“You are under no obligation. Just tell me to bugger off. It’s very simple. People come to our attention, usually because they have got into trouble. It’s ironic that you stand out from the crowd when you are mildly bad rather than when you are wholly good. We invest a little time in them, put them back out into the world to do what they want to do, and sometimes they can repay us by being our eyes and ears. Sometimes they can’t be arsed.”

“Who are ‘We’? Who are ‘Us’?”

The Policeman just smiled. It had been a project developed initially by some free-thinking high flyers at the Home Office for cheap but valuable domestic surveillance. Sometimes the recruits were military, but from any rank and with diverse periods of service and from any branch. Equally they could come from the Civil Service, or from one of the professions. The Church had provided notable recruits including a young vicar from Tyne and Wear, a keen amateur boxer, who had beaten up two youths he found trying to steal the church silver. Fleet Street had provided an investigative journalist sacked by his paper before he discovered too much about his editor’s dodgy business dealings and cocaine fuelled wife swapping parties with a Chief of Police. Occasionally they came from people destined for nationally important British Companies, or strategically important British industries. Like farming. After all, it had to be strategically important for a nation to be able to feed itself. If it didn’t eat, it couldn’t fight. The recruits were given some ‘one on one’ basic trade craft, which it was never expected they would need but it gave an opportunity to evaluate if they were interested and whether they were interesting. They were called Meerkats.

“So, you have a network of eyes and ears?”

“It’s nothing sinister. It’s not a secret sect with funny handshakes. All we ask is that you occasionally stick your head up, have a look around, and warn us if there’s anything nasty.”

He corralled his drover’s jacket.

“I think you’ll help. Either way, there’s something we take very seriously which we call the OSA39. You signed it. Technically it’s a law not a contract so whether you signed it or not is immaterial. We get people to sign it just to remind them of their obligations. I’ve just reminded you of your obligations. Of course, nothing similar to what I’ve described actually exists. I’ve made it all up. This isn’t North Korea. We can’t have the public spying on the public.”

His coat was putting up a spirited struggle. He looked at Ralph as he did battle.

“Good luck with the farming. You know, I can completely understand. Lots of fresh air. Able to be your own boss. Drive around all day in a Land Rover with a couple of good dogs. Shooting in the winter. Your jug hanging in the village pub. The Landlord pulling your usual pint the moment you step in. ‘Evening Ted’. ‘Evening Ralph. Finished lambing yet?’ Or something equally pastoral. And girls that ride. They’re the best by the way.”

“And the Principal knows about this?” Ralph asked.

“That’s right. Well, some of it. If you hear of anything you think may be useful just go and talk to Roy.”

He was nearly gone, his mission as always a success.

“Tell him you have information for Zac.”

Ralph watched him through the refectory windows. The Shropshire autumn evening had come unexpectedly early and in the car park outside the dining hall, in between the Halls of Residence, it was already dark. A few yellow squares of light from study windows belonging to students who hadn’t already made it to the bar smouldered onto the visiting teams transport. The Policeman had lied. He wasn’t driving at all, he was being driven, and not in a mini bus but in a new dark blue unmarked Discovery. Ralph doubted that he was a Policeman at all.