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A filthy mist rolls down the grimy street, the yellowing vapour reminiscent of the smogs of my grandparents' childhood days. Along greasy footpaths, I hasten towards the ageing terraced-house I call home. A lethal combination of fog and the onset of darkness have reduced visibility to a few bare paces. Bus-services stopped running a while before I left work. What a day for it to happen; I have a date with Julie later this evening. At the thought of her, I increase my pace. The day has brought a marked drop in temperature. I shiver in the dank mid-November air.

Through the murk comes the muffled tooting of horns. Streams of foolhardy motorists clog the roads, persistent in their efforts to find a way home. Inside their heated tin cans they sit, their speed a crawl, no faster than my own. Bloody idiots! The worst fog in forty years - or so banal presenters on local radio have been announcing all day. Their voices, filled with false sincerity, promote an inconvenience up to that of a crisis. I imagine it enlivens their day; a change from broadcasting an endless stream of stories about pets, pigeons and the local football team. I swear, each time a player breaks wind, the channel has a three-hour in-depth debate on the subject.

On the third attempt, I find the right house and make it home. In these conditions, how easy it is for the senses to become confused. The Jones and Ashley families will be chuckling still about my unexpected arrival into their homes. My face burns with embarrassment, as I push open my own front door.

"Mum, Dad, I'm back," I splutter as I suffer a coughing-fit, brought on by the change of air.

Away from the swirling fumes, the foul atmosphere has irritated a chest-cold I thought I had conquered. A hot shower and dinner revive me. Dressed in much warmer clothes, I am fit enough again for anything. A last flick of the razor over the day's growth and it is time to go to meet Julie. In the background, the familiar closing-theme of an early evening TV soap fades. Ma rushes into the kitchen to switch on the kettle, and uncover the packet of chocolate biscuits she believes she has hidden from me. A vain hope, but I have left them some. Dad, of course, decides on the rest of the evening's viewing.

"Where do you think you're going?" a scandalised cry comes from the kitchen. "You know you've had that cold for a fortnight. You'll be up all night coughing if you go out again in this weather. Dad, you tell him!"

Silence from the front room. Dad ignores the altercation. His interest lies in the TV section of the evening paper. Sensible chap. Where possible, he avoids becoming embroiled in one of Ma's rants. I shuffle into my coat.

"All right, Nathan, but don't you come running to me for sympathy when you're poorly again!"

"Okay Ma, I won't. Promised I'd see Julie, must fly, seez you later."

In haste, I close the door, cutting-off further comments. With my scarf wrapped over my nose and mouth, I vanish into the swirling darkness. By the dim light coming from the window of a nearby office, I snatch a look at my watch; damn it, late again. It is already a quarter to eight. I promised Julie I would be at her house by half-past seven. Damn the weather! Damn the buses! The meeting we are to attend starts at eight-thirty. Rush-hour traffic has dissipated. Along silent, empty roads I race. The dismal light from street lamps struggles to penetrate the mist. Vague shapes loom out of the darkness. People, walls, hedges, house-sides, all are unrecognisable until close to. From their shapes they could be monsters lying in wait! The clang of the gate, outside Julie's house, alerts her to my arrival. The cheesy sound of door chimes strengthens as the door swings open.

"Damn you, Nathan Philip Andrews, you're late again," she snaps, her back straight and stiff.

When Julie uses my full name, I know I am in trouble. Her eyes are ablaze and her lips pursed, confirmation, if needed, of her state of mind.

"Sorry, love, the buses stopped running at lunch time. I had to walk home from work. It took me hours. Come on, hurry up, put your coat on, if we rush we can still make it on time to the meeting."

After a quick kiss and struggle in the doorway, Julie, somewhat mollified, grabs her coat from a peg in the hallway. At speed, we set off down side-roads and through claustrophobic, crumbling brick-lined ginnels towards our destination. We burst into the wood-panelled and white-plastered hall. The meeting is due to commence. Breathless, we slide into a pair of seats at the rear of the room.

The inclement weather has kept away many of the potential audience. Row after row of plastic chairs are empty. The speaker-to-be appears unconcerned by this insult to his magnetic personality. On stage, after a brief glare of disapproval towards us at our late arrival, he launches into his well-crafted speech.

"The Party for National Unity..." he booms.

We sit and listen. On and on his voice drones. My eyes droop. There is no lack of motivation in his words, but I have heard them many times. A question and answer session will follow the speech. Later, after the non-party members have left, for the chosen few the evening's important agenda commences. Three years ago, Julie became a party member. Because I was, still am, very much in love with her, I joined soon afterwards to be closer to her. In those days, when we were both eighteen, it was a fledgling organisation. If I am honest, Julie is the fanatical one; but her passions extend beyond politics, which means I reap the rewards of party-membership in other ways.

While the speaker answers questions, Julie and I sneak-out through the stained-glass, wood-framed doors at the back of the room. Down the corridor, in a draughty kitchen at the side of the hall, we prepare

tea and biscuits. Well-practised, we work with an economy of effort. We have time to spare before the wearisome session next-door ends. The same issues, which arise time after time, meeting after meeting, the speaker deals with as if they are original and thought-provoking.

Will the Party's policies work in practice? Why does the PNU, which claims to be a party for national unity, seem determined to split the country? Why does the party's name appear, whenever, since Brexit, a strike or demonstration takes place; in fact, when anything happens to challenge the established order of the country?

No matter how trivial, every question receives an erudite answer. Each response, statesmanlike though it may be, bears little, if any, relevance to the original request. In this respect, we differ little from any other political party. Almost without fail, the questioner goes away pacified, if not satisfied. This charismatic speechmaker, whose words overflow with charm and assurance, delivers his replies with confidence, as indeed he should. He is the great Joseph J Emerson, esteemed leader of the PNU.

An exaggerated 'Ahem' comes from the doorway leading into the corridor. Julie and I break apart. She wipes a smear of her lipstick from my face. We look round, trying to appear unconcerned. Old Alf, the caretaker, leers at us. A knowing sly wink he aims in my direction.

"They're about done in there. I thought I'd better warn you two - to put the kettle on, of course," again the knowing wink.

"I suppose that means you'll want the first cup and the pick of the biscuits," Julie says.

Alf's habits are familiar to us. Soon, a majority of the audience, twenty in total, amble into the room at the other side of the serving hatch. They invade our privacy in search of their compensation for sitting through the evening's proceedings. Joseph J circulates. He speaks in broad terms or in confidence, if requested, to those who hang on to his words. After a while, once the plates of biscuits are empty, the non-members drift away to pastures new (home or, in all likelihood, the nearest pub).

Those invited to remain behind retire to a former function room upstairs, which we rent as the local party office. Julie and I wash up. Ten minutes later, we join the others. Downstairs, Alf keeps a watchful eye for anyone who might try to gain entry or eavesdrop. He takes no interest in what goes on behind the locked door above. The generous payment he receives for his duties is enough to satisfy his curiosity.



JJ rises to his feet. The idle chatter of the gathering comes to a halt. We wait, eleven of us, for the great man's words.

"Right," he commences. "Is anyone missing? Apologies? No. Good. Let's start, shall we?"

A subtle change has taken place in his tone and accent. It has become down-to-earth, conspiratorial and encompassing toward us, his selected audience. He waits until the usual coughing and fidgeting subside. Once we are comfortable, he clears his throat, then continues.

"As you are aware, our agents meet with great success as they incite unrest throughout the country. The economy is in a mess, although that is nothing new. Strikes have spread nation-wide. Demonstrations against the government take place daily. Our participation in these events we keep secret. Of course, rumours of our involvement abound, which we deny and dismiss as fabrications.

"So the polls tell us, the PNU has the majority backing of the country's electorate. Whenever an opportunity arises, in public or in private, we condemn the government. Everyone knows that, in our opinion, the malpractices of our leaders have led to this widespread disorder. Yet, at the same time, we offer sympathy to the populace, to those citizens in extremis, driven to attempt to bring about a better Britain. By demonising the elderly, the jobless, those on low-incomes or benefits, while squandering billions on unhelpful reforms across institutions countrywide, the government plays into our hands. They make it easy for us to ferment nationwide unrest.

“We know our actions are necessary. A succession of weak and half-brained administrations, in or out of coalition, has dragged our once great island through the mire. Do the ruling parties ever put aside petty jealousies to do the job the people elect them to do? Did they learn the lessons of the Brexit referendum? No! Do we have a remedy? Yes! We are the answer. You, me and our colleagues spread throughout the land. We are the Party for National Unity.”

JJ pauses a moment. Enthusiastic applause rings out. His beaming countenance lights up the room. He waits until his audience falls silent before he continues.

“Never before have we fielded parliamentary candidates. Although requested on numerous occasions to do so, we have declined. Now, at last, the time is right. Clamour for our involvement is at fever pitch. Stage-two of our campaign is set for implementation. In twelve months, a general election will be upon us. We shall contest it, compelled, we shall say, to do so by the ineptitude of the country’s current political parties. We shall field a candidate for each seat and, my friends, we shall achieve an overwhelming majority. We have the backing of many major figures in business, the police and the military. Once in government, we will put Britain back where it belongs, as a leading international power.”

We sit back and listen. The rhetoric continues. Each member of the audience is in awe at the presence of such an incredible visionary. We will dominate the election, achieve an historic victory and, in doing so, secure the futures of those activists involved.

For most people in the room, their involvement with the party has been since its inauguration. We will become leaders of an invigorated nation. Whether our role be a political one, or one of a multitude of other positions, we will take control of the country. Life is amazing. To be twenty-one and to have a bright and assured future is exhilarating. Some of our compatriots might distrust us, even fear us, but we have the backing of the majority - for as long as it matters. Rare it is for my zeal to approach that of Julie’s, but tonight is one of those occasions.

The clock approaches eleven. The meeting ends. After much handshaking and backslapping, we make our ways back to our respective homes. JJ's enthusiasm has inspired each one of us. We are secure in the knowledge of our roles in the momentous events to come. Hand in hand with Julie, I walk her home. The all-pervading mist is thicker than ever. We part at her doorstep. A passionate goodnight kiss, a slapped hand, then away I go, to dream of glory to come. Soon, we will put the country to rights.



The months that follow the meeting pass by at an astonishing rate. The owner of the factory, where I work in production-planning, is a party-sympathiser. He allows me extensive time-off, on full pay, to canvass door-to-door, district-by-district. On evenings and at weekends, Julie and I attend political gatherings, far and wide. There, among thousands of other jubilant followers, we listen to, and applaud, our various candidates.

Groups of troublemakers ensure meetings, held by other parties, face frequent disruption. In contrast, our gatherings have tight security, policed by either the appropriate authorities or our own well-disciplined groups. Friends in the right places ensure we receive the maximum amount of positive publicity. As a result, the election in October, as forecast by JJ, is a landslide. The PNU take all but seventy-five seats in the Houses of Parliament. A token resistance now sits on the opposition benches, bereft of influence and effective voice.

Throughout this period, Julie and I become much closer. Two weeks after the announcement of the results, we hold a double celebration, victory and our engagement. Julie's parents have misgivings about the latter, but that is a common failing among parents when faced with their offspring's choice of partners. My parents are the opposite. I am to marry someone who lives in a semi; a huge step up from our well cared-for back-to-back terraced house.

Within weeks, the new government shows its iron fist to the country. Strikes become illegal. Firms must provide monthly productivity figures to the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, which then demands improvements. A public outcry from some owners, and near riots by workers, follows these repressive measures, a response we had anticipated.

Twelve months after taking office, JJ's government instigates a state of emergency. The government create a National Security Force, using loyal party elements from both police and armed-forces. Unlike the police, NSF units bear arms and are a law unto themselves. This, of course, was a part of the Party's hidden agenda. Loyal members welcome it with open arms. Now we can begin in earnest to put the country back on its feet. For me, the vicious methods employed by the new force tempers my enthusiasm for them. Their brutality is gratuitous. Julie, as usual, maintains her belief in her beloved party.

With the exception of PNU rallies, a ban on all public meetings comes into effect. Days later, with their leaders arrested or on the run, the disbandment of trade-union organisations takes place. Imprisonment, without trial, for troublemakers becomes the standard method of dealing with opposition. Instead of to prison cells, the authorities put the detainees to work on the many improvement schemes the government has initiated.

These measures stir-up further unrest among the populace; protest groups receive similar treatment. In a calculated escalation, instead of the police, NSF troops become the ones to handle dissent on the streets. On the first occasion in which they see action, several protesters are shot and killed while 'resisting' arrest. Under such harsh treatment, support for open opposition collapses. A massive propaganda campaign comes into being.

In time, people begin to appreciate the advances that appear in everyday life. Public services and transport become more efficient. Industrial productivity soars. The rich become richer, while the less well-off see some improvement in their lives. The populace finds

it convenient to forget the plight of thousands of political detainees. These are the people who, by their sweated labour in and out of the political reform-centres and forced-labour camps, bring about many of these changes. Providing no-one voices their thoughts in the hearing of the many informants, the majority of the population find their standard of living rises.

For myself, I reap the rewards for my diligent work within the movement. I become the party representative at a large factory complex in the centre of Sheffield, Dawson's Springs and Metal Forgings. With powers greater than those of the directors, lord, how everyone fawns over me. The board, in particular, are careful to watch their words and temper their actions. One word from me and they could be sweeping the floors. Under my tenure, productivity increases. My reputation within party-circles also rises.

Power! That, I suppose, is the meaning of the game. In many ways, a game it has become to me. I soak up the attention gained through my position. At first, I hesitate to exercise my authority to the full. With the gradual realisation of my true position in society, I try-out my strength and wield my influence with greater confidence.

I learn to quieten my conscience. With practice, it becomes easier to hide my guilt or remorse when, because of some infringement, I condemn someone to several months of re-education in a political-reform centre. Power is a mantle to wear; I wear mine as if moulded to me, or give the appearance of it being so. My sense of right and wrong, instilled into me by my parents from childhood, although suppressed, refuses to abandon me.