How To Lose Friends And Alienate People

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Extract

PROLOGUE

To anyone within a ten-block radius of Mortons, the West Hollywood power restaurant, it was obvious something was going on that night. Monday evenings at Mortons usually attract some big industry players, but on this particular Monday – 28 March, 1994 – it was as if the entire Hollywood A-list had decided to assemble on the corner of Melrose and Robertson. Lines of police officers struggled to hold back the crowds as wave upon wave of movie stars converged on the restaurant's entrance, some of them clutching gold statuettes. It was the night of the 66th Annual Academy Awards and *Vanity Fair* was throwing its first ever Oscar party.

I checked my watch: 11.25 p.m. In five minutes' time I'd have to approach the clipboard Nazi guarding the entrance and convince her to let me in. I busied myself with picking specks of dirt off my dinner jacket in an attempt to calm my nerves. Of all the Oscar parties taking place that night, this was undoubtedly the one to be at. That distinction used to belong to the party hosted by Irving 'Swifty' Lazar at Spago, but the legendary superagent had died the previous December. One of the reasons Swifty's party had been so hot was because the guest list was restricted to a limited number of VIPs. Those deemed insufficiently important were fobbed off with the excuse that the Los Angeles fire marshals had decreed that no more than 300 people were allowed to attend, a ruse dreamt up by the

wily agent to keep the numbers down. As a result, the atmosphere at the party had been surprisingly intimate. My friend Alex de Silva had gatecrashed the soirée in 1992 and, in the space of ten minutes, had met Sharon Stone, Michael Douglas and Tom Cruise. Indeed, Cruise had actually marched up and introduced himself, assuming that if Alex was at the party he must be someone important. In fact, he was a freelance British hack who'd flown in to town for the sole purpose of crashing the Oscar parties.

The reason the *Vanity Fair* party had emerged as 1994's hot ticket was a combination of happenstance and extremely hard work on the part of the magazine's party planners. Swifty's death from liver failure at the age of eighty-six had set off a mad scramble to fill his shoes. According to Wolfgang Puck, the owner of Spago, people had started calling up and attempting to book the restaurant while the agent's body was still warm. In the end Puck had decided to close Spago on Oscar night as a mark of respect for Swifty, leaving the field wide open to his rival Peter Morton. Once Graydon Carter, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, had secured Mortons, his crack team of party planners had set to work. Jane Sarkin, the magazine's chief 'celebrity wrangler', had spent the best part of three months in tense negotiations with agents, managers and publicists, making sure their A-list clients agreed to show up. Once a sufficient number of show ponies have been rounded up and placed in the paddock it's only a matter of time before the rest are scrabbling to join them. A good celebrity wrangler concentrates her efforts on a few prize animals and the Hollywood herd instinct takes care of the rest.

When I had called Beth Kseniak the previous week, I'd thought the fact that I'd written a short piece for *Vanity Fair* a year before would give me some leverage, but I was wrong. 'What kind of coverage are you planning to give the party?' she asked. I hadn't been planning on giving it any – I was in LA accompanying Alex de Silva on his annual party pilgrimage – but after my conversation with Kseniak I called up a friend

on the *Daily Telegraph* and persuaded him to commission a piece. Even that failed to impress the hard-nosed publicist. 'I'll have a word with Graydon,' she sighed, 'but I'm not making any promises.'

She'd gotten back to me on Friday, tentatively agreeing to let me come provided I arrived no earlier than 11.30 p.m. She explained that in order to accommodate all the guests, invitations had to be staggered over the course of the evening. The first lot of people – the *crème de la crème* – had been invited at 5.30 p.m. so they could watch the Oscars on little television sets at their tables while enjoying a four-course meal. From 9.30 p.m. onwards, different categories of guests were invited at half-hourly intervals in descending order of importance. 11.30 p.m. was the final timeslot of the evening, half an hour before the party ended. As a member of the 'foreign press' I was at the bottom of the Hollywood food chain, but that didn't bother me. I was on the list.

My sense of triumph was compounded by the fact that Alex hadn't been able to get on it in spite of offering to write a piece for the *Daily Mail* which, as he pointed out to Kseniak, had a higher circulation than the *Telegraph*. Frustratingly for him, she didn't rule out the possibility that circumstances might change at the last minute – it was just 'very, very unlikely'. Needless to say, I'd teased him about this the entire weekend. Every time a phone rang I said, 'You'd better get that. It could be Kseniak.' By the time Monday rolled around and he still hadn't heard from her, he was climbing the walls.

Then disaster struck. I returned to my hotel at 4 p.m. on Monday after a long, boozy lunch with Alex to find the message light blinking in my room. Kseniak had called while I was out. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this,' she began, 'but it's not going to be possible to accommodate you tonight. There just isn't enough room. The Los Angeles fire marshals have said that no more than 300 people are allowed to come. I'm terribly sorry.'

I rushed over to Alex's room in a state of high dudgeon, only to be greeted by a grinning, dancing fool. He, too, had been

called by Kseniak while we were out, only his message had informed him that, provided he arrived no earlier than 11.30 p.m., he could come. The little bastard had been given my place on the guest list!

I was devastated. Up until this point, I'd been exaggerating how much I cared as a way of needling Alex. In common with most intelligent, educated people, he considered it incredibly uncool to get excited about the prospect of hanging out with celebrities. 'Who wants to jump through a series of hoops just to rub shoulders with Michael Caine?' he drawled when it looked as though he wasn't going to make it on to the list. Among my peer group, admitting that you were dazzled by movie stars was on a par with confessing to having a soft spot for the Royal Family – it simply wasn't done. Celebrities were just the trained monkeys of the entertainment moguls who ran the media-industrial complex and sophisticated people like us weren't supposed to be impressed by them.

In reality, of course, Alex was no more capable of resisting the allure of movie stars than a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl. The attitude of all my friends towards celebrities was completely phoney. They might claim to be indifferent, but they became forelock-tugging serfs the moment a famous person entered the room. They worshipped at the altar of celebrity just like everyone else; they were just too embarrassed to admit it. Consequently, I made a point of erring in the opposite direction. I hammed up my obsession with A-list stars as a way of letting my friends know I found their pretence at insouciance totally unconvincing. If Sylvester Stallone graced me with his presence, I liked to say, I'd drop to my knees and unzip his flies. But this was just a way of shocking people. At least, I hope it was. I don't think I would have been *that* bowled over by the *Rambo* star.

However, now that I'd been categorically excluded from the party, I began to get a little frantic. This was partly just a natural human reaction: I wanted what I couldn't have, particularly now that it had been snatched away from me and given to Alex.

But I was also starting to buy into the general mystique that had grown up around the party. *Vanity Fair*'s party planners had done their job well: this was the only game in town. If everyone else was clamouring to get on the list, who was I to say it wasn't a privilege worth fighting for? Now that I'd been made to jump through a series of hoops, the prospect of rubbing shoulders with Michael Caine seemed very appealing. There was no way I was going to come this close, only to be excluded at the last minute.

One way or another, I would go to the ball.

At 11.30 p.m. on the dot, I straightened my bow tie one last time, summoned up as much self-confidence as I could muster and pushed my way past the police barrier until I was face to face with the clipboard Nazi. Two enormous bouncers loomed on either side of her.

'Can I help you?' she asked, looking me up and down as if I was a homeless man who'd just emerged from a crack in the pavement.

'Alex de Silva, *Daily Mail,*' I replied, thrusting out my hand. 'I'm on the list.'

She ignored my outstretched paw and went through the motions of checking the guest list. She was clearly unconvinced that a balding, British hack in a rented dinner jacket had any place on Mount Olympus.

'Your name's not on *my* list,' she said. 'I'm going to have to ask you to move on. We need to keep this area clear.'

I could hear a few titters from the crowd behind me. Watching pushy young men like me getting their comeuppance was all part of the evening's entertainment for them.

'There must be a mistake,' I spluttered. 'Beth Kseniak called me only this afternoon to tell me I could come.'

'Look, if Beth told you you could come your name would be on my list and it's not here. You're going to have to move along.'

By now, the titters had turned into jeers and catcalls. The

crowds outside these events are referred to by people on the inside as 'looky-loos' and their devotion to celebrities is matched by their hostility towards those they consider interlopers. I was just a civilian. I didn't belong on the other side of the velvet rope. I belonged behind the police barrier with them.

The bouncers began to eyeball me suspiciously.

'Could you please check one more time?' I pleaded. 'I'm sure my name's on there somewhere.'

The clipboard Nazi ran her eye over the list again, this time even faster.

'Not here,' she concluded. 'Bye, bye.'

What was going on? Had Kseniak forgotten to take my name off and replace it with Alex's? I couldn't very well tell her to check under the name 'Toby Young' now that I'd identified myself as Alex de Silva. I was fucked.

At that moment I sensed a commotion behind me and turned to witness the arrival of Anna Nicole Smith accompanied by a retinue of half-a-dozen hangers-on. This was her 'conga line', an essential accessory of any celebrity, however minor.[1] The crowd erupted, while the clipboard Nazi shoved me to one side and lifted the velvet rope. Suddenly, from being a ferocious gatekeeper, she morphed into an obsequious maitre d'.

'Miss Smith! How good of you to come!'

'I'm with a few friends,' said the *Playboy* centrefold, motioning to her entourage. 'Is that a problem?'

'Don't be absurd,' laughed the clipboard Nazi, as if stopping anyone from entering the party was the furthest thing from her mind. 'Go right in.'

After Anna Nicole Smith and her six friends had filed past, the clipboard Nazi replaced the velvet rope and turned her attention back to me. She gave me a look as if to say 'you still here?' I decided to give it one last try.

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[1] As a general rule, the more insecure the celebrity, the larger their 'conga line'. When Jennifer Lopez appeared on BBC1's *The National Lottery Stars* on 16 December, 2000 she was accompanied by an entourage of 72 people.

'Would it be possible to check with Beth? Alex de Silva from the *Daily Mail*.'

'Okay,' she sighed, 'but it won't make any difference.'

She unclipped a walkie-talkie from her belt and asked to speak to her boss. There was no reply. I checked my watch: 11.35 p.m.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice: 'Toby? Is that you?'

It was Alex.

From what I could tell he was standing behind the police barrier, but I didn't dare turn round. I looked imploringly at the clipboard Nazi, but her attention was focused on Alex. He piped up again.

'Toby, if that's you, will you tell that nice lady to tell this nice policeman that I'm on the guest list? He's refusing to let anyone through without an invitation.'

'D'you know that guy?' asked the clipboard Nazi.

I pretended to be miles away.

'I'm sorry, what?'

'That guy over there. D'you know him?'

I shot a glance in Alex's direction.

'Oh, *that* guy. Yeah, he's a notorious gatecrasher. Tries to get into everything. I wouldn't let him anywhere near the place if I were you.'

By now Alex knew for certain it was me.

'Toby, why won't you acknowledge me, you prat?'

The clipboard Nazi continued to stare in Alex's direction.

'Look, could you try Beth again?' I pleaded. 'I'm not making it up. She phoned me this afternoon to tell me I could come.'

Without taking her eyes off Alex, she summoned her boss once again on her walkie-talkie. This time she got a response.

'This is Beth. Go ahead.'

'I've got a young man here called Jack Silver from the *Dayton Mail*.'

'ALEX DE SILVA,' I shouted, leaning into the walkie-talkie so Kseniak could hear me. 'From the *Daily Mail*. You left a message on my hotel voicemail this afternoon.'

Before she could reply, Alex started screaming.

'HE'S PRETENDING TO BE ME. I'M ALEX, NOT HIM. HIS NAME'S TOBY YOUNG. DON'T LET HIM IN.'

Did the clipboard Nazi hear him? I couldn't tell.

The walkie-talkie crackled back into life.

'Yeah, I remember. Okay, he can come in.'

Still staring at Alex, she absent-mindedly lifted the velvet rope. Against all the odds, I'd made it.

'A word of warning,' I said, just before heading into the party. 'One of that gatecrasher's favourite tricks is to pretend to be someone else. Don't believe a word he says.'

It wasn't long before I got an inkling of what the remainder of the evening held in store. In order to actually enter the party you had to walk along a red carpet with velvet ropes on either side while television crews, journalists and dozens of paparazzi all craned their necks, squinting to see if you were anyone important. Even Barry Norman was there, clutching a microphone. When Anna Nicole Smith had set foot on the carpet, pandemonium had broken out. People in the crowd started screaming out her name, the cameramen switched on their powerful spotlights and she responded by thrusting out her breasts and batting her eyelids into the glare. My turn to run this gauntlet coincided with the last member of Smith's entourage slipping into the party and, as a result, I had everybody's full attention. That was unfortunate. Still, it couldn't be helped. I stuck my chin out, threw back my shoulders and took the plunge.

It was at this point that one of the looky-loos behind me decided to get his revenge.

'Who is it?' he cried.

I felt several thousand pairs of eyes scrutinising me at once.

'Ah, it's *nobody*,' he concluded. 'Just some bald guy.'

A moment later the area was plunged into darkness and I was almost swept off my feet by a powerful blast of air. For a second I thought a small tornado had caused a power cut. Then I realised what had happened. On discovering that I was

a nobody, not only had all the cameramen switched off their spotlights, but all the paparazzi had lowered their telephoto lenses simultaneously, thereby creating a gale-force gust of wind. I ended up stumbling into the party like a drunk on the deck of a North Sea trawler.

The first thing that struck me after my eyes had adjusted to the light was the sheer number of movie stars. Everywhere I looked, there were rows of white teeth, wheat fields of expensively coifed hair and acres of glowing, sun-kissed flesh. It was like walking into the pages of *Hello!* Within seconds of arriving I spotted Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Leonardo DiCaprio, Sharon Stone, Ralph Fiennes, Alex Kingston, Liam Neeson and Natasha Richardson – and that was just in the bar area. Elsewhere, I later discovered, the guests included David Copperfield, Claudia Schiffer, Kurt Russell, Goldie Hawn, Prince, Anjelica Huston, Gabriel Byrne, Shirley MacLaine, Kirk Douglas, Rosie O'Donnell, Gore Vidal and Nancy Reagan. It's not an exaggeration to say that in the party as a whole celebrities outnumbered civilians by a ratio of 2:1. No wonder I had difficulty getting in. It was nothing short of miraculous that so many huge egos had managed to squeeze into such a small space.

It was disconcerting being at an event at which I knew everyone and no one knew me. Who was I supposed to talk to? I decided my first priority was to get a drink. I edged my way towards the bar, receiving a sharp jab in the ribs from the Oscar Holly Hunter had just won for her role in *The Piano*, and asked the barman for a Black Label on the rocks. As he was getting it, I noticed an extremely attractive woman in her early twenties standing on my right, apparently on her own. It was Amanda de Cadanet, the ex-*Word* presenter, wearing a ridiculously low-cut dress. Her tits were popping out like two scoops of ice cream.

'What were you nominated for?' I asked, struggling to make myself heard above the din. 'Best Supporting Dress?'

She gave me a blank look.

'I wasn't nominated for anything.'

'I know. That was just my way of saying you look great.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

She turned her head so her left ear was next to my mouth.

'YOU LOOK GREAT IN THAT DRESS.'

'Thanks,' she said, recoiling. 'Will you excuse me? I've just seen someone I know.'

Before I could respond, she bolted to the other side of the restaurant. That hadn't gone very well. Still, perhaps that was because she was such a D-list celebrity. The smaller the star, the more standoffish they are, I told myself.

I picked up my drink and surveyed the crowd, searching for a bigger target. My eyes immediately lighted on Kenneth Branagh. His wife, Emma Thompson, had been nominated in two categories that year – Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress – but she was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, as far as I could tell he wasn't talking to anyone. I gulped down some Scotch and made my way across the room.

'Toby Young, the *Daily Telegraph*,' I said, planting myself squarely in front of him.

He nodded and looked at me expectantly. What was it I wanted? Clearly, he was in no mood to make polite conversation with a member of the British press. I desperately tried to think of something funny to break the ice.

'So, how many unlettered Hollywood executives have come up to you this evening and said' – I put on my thickest American accent – 'I jes lurved you in that Shakespeare thang?'

He tilted his head quizzically.

'Which Shakespeare thing?'

Evidently, he hadn't heard me properly. I could feel a wave of panic rising up from my abdomen. I couldn't remember a single one of the half dozen or so adaptations he'd starred in. I slipped back into my normal voice.

'Er, *Hamlet*?'

'That wasn't me. That was Mel Gibson.'

'God, what am I on about?' – I slapped my forehead – 'I mean *Prospero's Books*.'

'That was John Gielgud.'

I took a slug of Scotch.

'This isn't going very well is it?'

'No, it's not.'

'Can we start again?'

'Only if you can tell me the name of my most recent Shakespeare *thang*.'

He spat out the last word as if it was a cyanide pill. I racked my brains. It was no good. The only film of his I'd ever seen was *Dead Again*. When it became obvious that I wasn't going to come up with anything he dismissed me with a little shrug. Reluctantly, I turned round, tucked my tail between my legs and crawled back to the bar.

I ordered another Black Label on the rocks. This wasn't nearly as much fun as I'd anticipated. I'd imagined that the usual chasm that separates celebrities from ordinary mortals would disappear in an atmosphere of alcohol-fuelled informality. Hadn't Tom Cruise actually introduced himself to Alex at Swifty's party? Looking at Tom Cruise now, receiving courtiers like some all-conquering Renaissance prince, it struck me that Alex was almost certainly lying about this. If anything, the rigid Hollywood pecking order was even more pronounced than usual. I may have been standing only a few feet away from some of the biggest names in show business, but the distance between us had never been greater.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone who looked almost as out of place as me: the figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. This beautiful, 24-year-old girl had shot to fame the previous January when she'd been clubbed on the knee with a 'retractable baton' – that's what the press called it – by an unknown assailant while practising for the 1994 Winter Olympics. When it emerged that the man was associated with Tonya Harding, a rival figure skater, the whole saga became a huge tabloid news story.

'Pretty impressive crowd, eh?' I said, flashing her my most winning smile.

'Absolutely,' she replied, smiling back. 'I feel like I'm watching a movie or something.'

'Me too. I just asked the barman for some popcorn and a large Coke.'

To my astonishment, she burst out laughing. At last, I'd found a receptive audience!

'Toby Young,' I said, sticking out my hand. 'I'm covering this event for a British newspaper.'

'Nancy Kerrigan,' she replied, clasping it in both of hers. 'Great to meet you.'

My self-confidence came flooding back. I began fantasising about taking this mouth-watering slice of American cheesecake back to my hotel room. I'd knock on Alex's door on the way to my room with this goddess on my arm and bid him goodnight. *Talk about a Kodak moment!*

Then, out of nowhere, I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder.

'Excuse me, sir, but can I have your name?'

It was a bouncer.

'Not again,' I protested. 'I've just been through all this with the woman at the door.'

He laid one of his enormous mitts on my shoulder.

'If you follow me, sir, I'm sure we can resolve this matter to everyone's satisfaction.'

I looked back at Nancy. Her eyes were wide with alarm as if I might at any moment whip out a 'retractable baton' and start pounding away at her knee.

'Let's go,' said the bouncer, tightening his grip. 'RIGHT NOW.'

How had I been rumbled? I looked over his shoulder and, sure enough, there was Alex with a huge grin on his face. Somehow, he'd managed to persuade the clipboard Nazi not only to let him in, but to empower him to have me thrown out as well. He always had been a smooth-talking bastard.

'Okay, okay,' I said. 'I'll go quietly.'

Thirty seconds later I was back on the other side of the police barrier, indistinguishable from any of the other looky-loos. Luckily, none of them recognised me.

*

Reflecting on the evening back in my hotel room, I'd like to say I came to the conclusion that this brave new world wasn't worth conquering. I would have saved myself a great deal of trouble. But the truth is my bitterness about being thrown out of the party didn't last long. I was overawed by the sheer spectacle of it. The sight of all those celebrities under one roof, besieged by journalists and photographers, had been overpoweringly seductive. Even the looky-loos had their role to play. It was like a scene out of *La Dolce Vita*. This was the life I'd fantasised about as I sat in my bedsit in Shepherd's Bush.

Why did I find this world so appealing? In part, it was because I knew I wasn't supposed to. People from my background – I come from the class that Keynes called 'the educated bourgeoisie' – are expected to see through this tawdry, showbiz glamour. My father, who died in 2002, was a member of 'the Great and the Good', a public-spirited intellectual who was made a life peer in 1978 for his services to successive Labour governments, including setting up the Open University. My mother had written a prize-winning literary novel and edited an educational magazine. Attending the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party would have been their idea of hell.

At Oxford, even people my own age thought this kind of 'Hollywood bullshit' was beyond the pale. Popular culture was strictly divided between the stuff it was okay to like – independent films, alternative rock, any form of cultural expression associated with minorities – and the mindless pap produced by the American entertainment industry. In order to pass muster, something had to be 'real'; it had to have 'an edge'. Mainstream popular culture was 'plastic' and 'safe'. If it was enjoyed at all it was strictly in a spirit of camp condescension. *Baywatch*, for instance, was regarded as 'hilarious' because it fell into the 'so-bad-it's-good' category.

I balked at this. I turned this hierarchy on its head, rejecting anything that was considered remotely authentic in favour of pure, escapist entertainment. I liked popcorn movies; my favourite actors were Charlton Heston, Clint Eastwood and

Arnold Schwarzenegger. When it came to music, I was more interested in disco than reggae. Commercial pop music, the kind that was played on FM radio stations all across America, that was the stuff I liked. Unlike most of my contemporaries, I didn't read *The New Musical Express* or *Sight & Sound*; I read *Smash Hits* and *Playboy*. Mainstream popular culture was my religion and Hollywood was my Mecca.

In this light, being at the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party was like attending a rally of fellow believers. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who thought as highly of Hollywood blockbusters as I did. (The winners that year included *Jurassic Park*, *The Fugitive* and *Mrs Doubtfire*.) Of course, I was dimly aware that, for these people, claiming to like big-budget, commercial movies wasn't a way of advertising their hostility to the liberal intelligentsia; no, these people actually *liked* them. But somehow that didn't seem to matter.

Still, that was only part of the reason I'd been blown away. In addition, being in such close proximity to all those movie stars had left me feeling strangely elated. Seeing Tom Cruise in the flesh, no more than ten feet away, had had an almost narcotic effect. I felt like Alan Clark did when he came face to face with Margaret Thatcher in 1986: 'At the end, when she spoke of her determination to go on, and her blue eyes flashed, I got a full dose of personality compulsion, something of the *Führer Kontakt*.'

In the past, I'd rationalised my enthusiasm for various Hollywood celebs by telling myself it was just a way of letting my snobbish friends know what I thought of their aloofness. *Unlike you, I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm just an ordinary, common-or-garden fan*. But deep down I really didn't think I'd be *that* impressed if I happened to be in the same room as them. Well, being at the *Vanity Fair* party had put paid to that. My first impulse on spotting Tom Cruise had been to genuflect. When it came down to it, I was just another salivating star-fucker, a looky-loo who'd managed to get past the police barrier.

It was a world away from my bedsit in Shepherd's Bush. Even

by West London standards, W12 is a fairly sleazy neighbourhood; compared to West Hollywood, it's a Third World ghetto. Indeed, Britain as a whole seemed a bit shabby and second-rate after that night. What celebrities do we have to compete with the likes of Tom Cruise and Sharon Stone? Next to them, the cast of *Coronation Street* look like a bunch of contestants on *Stars in Their Eyes*. We're no more of a global superpower in popular culture than we are in international politics. The Brits have lost an Empire and failed to find a role – unless you count being cast as villains in Hollywood movies. Contrary to Harold Macmillan's hope, Britain has never succeeded in playing Greece to America's Rome; Ancient Britain to their Rome is more like it.

Sitting in my hotel room that night, I made up my mind up to try and seek my fortune in the New World. Many Brits who've elected to ditch the old country have described how constrained they felt by their humble class origins. In my case, it was almost the other way round. Back in London, in spite of my immersion in mainstream popular culture, I'd never been able to entirely escape my parents' clutches. I'd always had a sense of them looking over my shoulder, shaking their heads in disapproval. Perhaps in America, 3,000 miles away, I'd finally be able to expunge the guilt I felt about not doing something more worthwhile with my life, like working for Oxfam or setting up a shelter for the homeless. My idea of heaven was being able to roll around naked in a huge pile of money with Anna Nicole Smith *without feeling the slightest pang of conscience.*

Of course, I didn't admit that the reason I wanted to come to America was because I wanted to plunge headfirst into the cesspool of celebrity culture. I told myself that the world I'd just glimpsed would make a great subject for a comic novel or a satirical play; that as a writer I had a duty to capture it in all its tacky splendour. That's why I wanted to live in the States: for the *material*.

In reality, though, being at the party had had a strange effect on me. Some form of transference had taken place and I'd ended

up fully embracing the belief-system I'd only flirted with before. In some weird sense, I became an American. I didn't want to move amongst these potentates, notebook in hand, recording their excesses for posterity; I wanted to be one of them. I had no burning desire to write a book that would offer the looky-loos a glimpse behind the velvet rope; I wanted them to prostrate themselves before me. I couldn't wait to strut about in my Armani dinner jacket, waving around the gaudy symbols of my success for all the world to see. *Check out my Rolex! Get a load of the tits on my girlfriend! Am I cool, or what?*

My time had come. I wanted to be a SOMEBODY.

1

'MILLIONS ARE TO BE GRABBED OUT HERE AND YOUR ONLY COMPETITION IS IDIOTS.'

It was the afternoon of 8 June, 1995 when I finally got the call.

'This is Dana Brown from Graydon Carter's office. Is this Toby Young?'

'Er, yes.'

'One moment please.'

Pause.

'Toby? It's Graydon. How'd you like to come hang out for a month?'

This was it, the one I'd been waiting for. Ever since the night of the *Vanity Fair* party fifteen months earlier, I'd been assiduously cultivating the magazine's editor. I'd written three pieces for him at this stage and whenever I bumped into him on one of his regular jaunts to London I'd done my best to charm him. The fact that he was offering me no more than a month's work was largely academic. It was a one-month trial and, provided I didn't screw up, it would lead to a full-time job. I felt like Boot being summoned by *The Daily Beast*.

To me, *Vanity Fair* wasn't just another glossy New York magazine. It was a link to Manhattan during its golden age, the era of the Algonquin Round Table. During *Vanity Fair*'s

first incarnation, from 1914–36, its contributors had included Dorothy Parker, Edmund Wilson, Robert Benchley, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Colette, Cocteau, Herman J. Mankiewicz . . . the list is endless. Even Houdini had written for *Vanity Fair*. It had been resurrected in 1983 by S.I. Newhouse Jr, the billionaire owner of Condé Nast, and from 1984–92 it had been edited by Tina Brown, formerly at the helm of *Tatler*. Tina was thirty when she received the call from Si, as he's known, and she went on to edit *The New Yorker*, the most prestigious job in American journalism. Under Tina, *Vanity Fair* had become the monthly bible of the Jet Set, an eclectic combination of Hollywood glamour, high society and true crime that Tina referred to as 'the mix'. It wasn't exactly the highbrow, literary magazine it had been, but it was still a damn sight more sexy than any of its British rivals.

I first met Graydon in 1993 at a *Sunday Times* lunch about a year after he'd succeeded Tina. I was twenty-nine at the time and had already worked for a wide cross-section of British publications, from the *Literary Review* to *Hello!*, but I'd never encountered a magazine editor quite like him. With his threadbare, Savile Row suit and slightly dog-eared Jermyn Street shirt, not to mention his eccentric hairstyle, he had a slightly raffish air, more reminiscent of the *Spectator* than one of the glossies. When he spoke, though, he sounded like a Chicago newspaperman of the old school, spitting out one-liners like a character in *The Front Page*.

For instance, after a few glasses of wine I suggested that *Vanity Fair* should run a photographic feature on 'literary London' featuring headshots of Britain's most distinguished authors in their favourite pubs. The idea was to illustrate the connection between alcohol and London literary life.

'What, are you kidding?' he responded. 'It'd look like a fucking dental textbook.'

The impression he gave was of a man who'd gone to a great deal of trouble to cultivate a particular image – a faintly bohemian Wasp with literary aspirations – but was only too

happy to contradict it the moment he opened his mouth. As far as I could tell, his stream of seditious wisecracks, punctuated by expletives, was a way of letting you know that he was on your side even if he appeared to be a member of the Establishment.

I hoped it was true.

Every Fleet Street hack I know has, at one time or another, fantasised about working for a New York magazine. Getting that call from Tina Brown or Graydon Carter is the equivalent of the telegram Herman J. Mankiewicz sent Ben Hecht from Hollywood in 1925:

> WILL YOU ACCEPT THREE HUNDRED PER WEEK TO WORK FOR PARAMOUNT PICTURES? ALL EXPENSES PAID. THE THREE HUNDRED IS PEANUTS. MILLIONS ARE TO BE GRABBED OUT HERE AND YOUR ONLY COMPETITION IS IDIOTS. DON'T LET THIS GET AROUND.

In my case, the call came at just the right time. Exactly two weeks earlier I'd taken the decision to close *The Modern Review*, the magazine I'd been editing for the last four years, without telling my co-proprietor Julie Burchill. 'Toby has no future here,' she thundered in *The Times* when she found out. 'He'll have to leave the country, like everyone else who falls out with me.' Julie and I had quarrelled after she'd left her husband, Cosmo Landesman, for Charlotte Raven, a 25-year-old contributor to the magazine. Charlotte, a bisexual feminist, had re-awakened Julie's radical conscience and Julie wanted to make her the editor. Together they were going to turn it into a cross between the *New Statesman* and *Spare Rib*. I felt like an old-fashioned Labour MP facing a takeover of his local constituency party by the Militant Tendency. I'd decided to close the magazine rather than let it fall into enemy hands and the upshot was that I was now unemployed.

By rights I should have been depressed: *The Modern Review* was my life. Julie, Cosmo and I had founded it in 1991 and in the intervening years we'd produced twenty issues. The original idea was to provide a forum for journalists and academics to write long, scholarly articles about the likes of Bruce Willis and Stephen King – the magazine's motto was 'Low Culture for Highbrows'. The point, of course, was to champion the kind of mainstream schlock that the chattering classes regarded as beneath contempt. Today, there is less of a division between respectable and unrespectable popular culture, but in 1991 writers in the broadsheet press still treated Hollywood blockbusters and bestselling novels as the equivalent of junk food. *The Modern Review* set out to *épater* the educated bourgeoisie.

In the first issue we published authors like Nick Hornby, Pauline Kael, Mark Steyn and James Wood on such important icons of our time as Adrian Mole, Kevin Costner, Michael Caine and Hannibal Lecter. Typical articles included a bibliography of Arnold Schwarzenegger by the magazine's literary editor and a piece by a young Cambridge don wondering if Paul Gascoigne was suffering from Tourette's Syndrome: 'Wazza mazza wiz Gazza?'[1] It even contained a book review by an unknown Cambridge graduate called Chris Weitz who, along with his brother Paul, went on to make *American Pie* nine years later. After flicking through it for the first time, Julie described it as being like an issue of *Smash Hits* edited by F.R. Leavis.

The magazine got off to a flying start when Robert Maxwell applied for an injunction against it. It was the autumn of 1991 and in the course of putting together the first issue I smuggled my staff into the offices of the *European*, a newspaper that was then owned by the socialist millionaire. We needed to use its

[1] 'One can see why wealth and fame might induce anyone to drink and screw around a bit, but Gazza's indiscretions – swearing, gesticulating, pulling faces, lunging – are so trivial and so sort of pleasureless that it is easy to wonder why anyone would persist in them unless he had to.' David Runciman, 'Wazza mazza wiz Gazza?', *The Modern Review*, Autumn, 1991.

high-tech production facilities to prepare a camera-ready copy of the magazine for our printers. No one was around – it was the weekend – and we would have got away with it if we hadn't left some page proofs lying about to be discovered by the paper's staff. Even then Maxwell might not have minded, but I had insisted on including his name in the list of people we thanked on the contents page, an act of mischief that would cost me dear. According to the managing editor of the *European*, Maxwell 'completely lost it' when he saw this, claiming it was 'like burglars leaving a calling card'.

It wasn't long before a letter from his solicitors was winging its way to my bedsit in Shepherd's Bush. It accused me and my staff of breaking the law and said that unless I gave a 'written undertaking' that the first issue would be shelved they would 'apply to the High Court tomorrow for an injunction to restrain publication of *The Modern Review*' and 'report the matter to the police'.

After several glasses of whisky, I got up the courage to tell Maxwell to piss off. He was a James Bond villain and I wasn't about to pulp the first issue just because we'd injured his vanity. Still, it was a high-risk strategy, not least because the magazine could ill afford an expensive legal battle. In its first year, *The Modern Review* had to limp along on an initial investment of just £16,666.50. Over the course of its four-year life, the total investment in the magazine was £42,683 – roughly half of what Graydon Carter spends on limousines in a single year. It only managed to survive by having very low overheads. It wasn't so much a cottage industry as a bedsit industry, being produced out of my flat in Shepherd's Bush. The 'office' consisted of two Apple Macs and an Amstrad telephone/fax. When people called up and asked for the 'subscription department' I simply handed the phone to Ed Porter, the deputy editor. He and I were the only full-time employees and we paid ourselves a grand total of £3,000 a year. No one could accuse us of being in it for the money.

Luckily, I was used to putting out magazines on minuscule

budgets. I'd produced my first magazine in primary school – the *Outlaw* – and went on to launch another at William Ellis, the grammar school I'd been to in North London, and then another at Oxford. Since all undergraduate magazines were named after rivers – *Isis, Cherwell, Tributary* – I had called mine the *Danube*. My thinking went like this: the bigger the river, the bigger the magazine.

It folded after two issues.

I was twenty-seven when *The Modern Review* launched, but all this experience enabled me to joke that I'd been in the magazine publishing business for seventeen years. In fact, beyond the nuts and bolts of laying out pages, I knew almost nothing about running a magazine.

Towards the end of 1991 things were looking bleak. Maxwell's application for an injunction against *The Modern Review* had been rejected, but he'd brought a civil case against me personally and that was looming. In the meantime, the lawyers I'd hired to fight the case had presented me with a bill for £17,132.53 and were threatening me with a lawsuit of their own if I didn't settle it immediately. I'd never seen *that* on *LA Law*. Then, just when it looked as though I was going to have to take out a second mortgage on my flat, something happened on the other side of the world that completely changed my fortunes. I first heard about it from my friend Aidan Hartley, a journalist based in Nairobi, who called me at 4 a.m. on 5 November. He'd just seen something on the wire he thought might interest me.

'This better be good,' I said.

'It is. Robert Maxwell's missing at sea.'

Maxwell's death put an end to his lawsuit. As for *The Modern Review*'s solicitors, they reduced their bill to £14,100 and agreed to let the magazine pay in instalments. We never heard anything from the police.

Having got over that hump, *The Modern Review* survived for another four years. Nothing ever happened to match the

excitement of those first few weeks, but there were some highs. In the summer of 1992 I dispatched an undercover female reporter to Cornwall to receive some personal instruction from D.M. Thomas on the art of erotic writing. As expected, he misbehaved himself. In 1993 the magazine published the unexpurgated transcript of an increasingly acrimonious fax correspondence between Julie Burchill and Camille Paglia that ended with Julie calling the Humanities Professor a 'crazy old dyke'. You can still find the whole exchange on the Internet. My proudest achievement was persuading Rob Long, an executive producer of *Cheers,* to write a regular column in which he documented his strange relationship with his agent. The columns formed the basis of an hilarious book – *Conversations With My Agent* – which made it on to the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller list.

There were also some lows. I was threatened with another lawsuit in 1994, this time by Elizabeth Hurley. She'd got wind of the fact that I intended to print some semi-nude photographs of her and hired the firm of Schilling & Lom to put the frighteners on me. I thought that was a bit rich considering she'd posed for similar photographs in GQ, *Esquire* and *Loaded*, but then that was before she'd become famous for wearing *that* dress to the premier of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Elizabeth Hurley is the first actress in history who didn't get noticed until she put her clothes on.

The biggest low by far was my quarrel with Julie Burchill. I first met Julie in 1984 when she left Tony Parsons and moved in with Cosmo Landesman, a 29-year-old American journalist who happened to be my next-door neighbour. Julie became – quite literally – the girl next door and we instantly turned into New Best Friends. I think she liked the fact that I was so obnoxious. I was a 20-year-old Oxford undergraduate at the time suffering from what I diagnosed as 'negative charisma' – I only had to walk across a crowded room in which I knew nobody and nobody knew me and already I had ten enemies. Julie probably took to me because detesting me would have been far too obvious. She always liked doing the opposite of what was

expected of her. Whatever the reason, I was grateful for her friendship. I was desperate to break into journalism and in spite of being only twenty-five Julie was one of the most famous journalists in the country with columns in *The Face, Time Out* and *The Sunday Times*. I remember one occasion, a few months after meeting her, when I stood on the window ledge of Cosmo's fourth-floor flat and said she only had to give the word and I'd jump: her friendship meant that much to me.

'Go on then, jump,' she giggled.

Rather sheepishly, I climbed back into the room.

Nevertheless, she was supportive in her own way. When she got bored of doing her *Time Out* column she suggested that I ghost it and we'd split the money. This arrangement only produced one piece but she was so pleased with the result she included it in *Love It or Shove It*, a 'Greatest Hits' collection of her journalism.[1] She also kept up a stream of sisterly advice in letters to me while I was still at Brasenose, my Oxford college. 'How do you convince women you are not merely a cuddly teddy-bear surrogate, with that 12-year-old's nose of yours?' she wrote in 1986. 'Cosmo says the answer is sodomy – no woman can fail to take a man seriously after being sodomized. For a liberal democrat he can be very BASIC at times.'

Julie could be very funny. She was once at a dinner party with Katherine Hamnett when the designer announced – with the air of someone making a profound observation – that the young poor were better dressed than the young rich. 'Only because they can't afford your clothes,' quipped Julie. Cosmo called her 'my Queen' and there was undoubtedly something regal about her. She had a natural authority, which was rather surprising given her cartoonish appearance and squeaky, high-pitched voice, but few dared to contradict her. Like Evelyn Waugh, she had the effect of making people want to please her. It had something to do with her journalistic reputation as a ferocious attack dog – no one wanted to get on her bad side.

[1] 'Waiting for the revolution', *Love It or Shove It* (London: Century, 1985).

She only had to refrain from attacking someone in order for them to feel immensely flattered. Seeing her at a party, usually seated with a glass of champagne while the great and the good lined up to kiss her ring, you had the impression she was one of the great personalities of the age. At the time I thought of her as having 'movie-star charisma' but I've met dozens of movie stars since and none of them have had her force of personality.

The reason this is all in the past tense is because I haven't seen or spoken to Julie since 1995. Our quarrel began when the *Guardian* expressed an interest in buying *The Modern Review* in March of that year. Several newspapers had incorporated elements of the magazine into their make-up – *The Sunday Times* based its 'Culture' section on *The Modern Review* – but none had offered to buy it before. However, the *Guardian* made it clear that the magazine's original formula – smart writers on dumb things – would have to be updated if they were to remain interested. Too many broadsheet journalists were now pulling the same stunt. It no longer gave us a distinctive editorial identity.

I convened a series of meetings with the magazine's staff to discuss what direction we might take it in. I thought they'd all be delighted that I'd managed to find a newspaper interested in buying it. Proper wages at last! What I hadn't anticipated was that the possibility that *The Modern Review* might be moved out of my flat meant that someone else might edit it. A focus of opposition soon emerged and, to my astonishment, that person was Charlotte Raven. Charlotte was only twenty-five. She was a lively, intelligent writer, but she'd never edited anything before in her life. Her main task in the office was typing! However, she had an advantage that the other potential candidates lacked: she was sleeping with Julie Burchill.

Then several things happened at once. As quickly as it had arisen, the *Guardian*'s interest in *The Modern Review* fizzled out and Wallace Kingston, the magazine's ad salesman, was struck down by a mysterious illness. (Diabetes, it turned out.) He confessed that he'd only managed to sell £1,147.50 of space

in the next issue, a figure somewhat short of his usual average of £10,000. Suddenly, the magazine was in the throes of a financial crisis. Faced with the prospect of my kingdom falling into enemy hands, and with nothing left in my treasury, I was sorely tempted just to torch the place. The more I thought about it, the more the idea appealed to me. *The Modern Review* had entered the world in a blaze of publicity – why not leave it that way too? I decided to consult a lawyer friend of mine. Was I legally entitled to close it down, given that Julie owned half the voting shares?

'Strictly speaking, no,' he said. 'But you'd probably get away with it.'

What lingering doubts I had were swept away when Julie threatened to break a commitment she'd made to put in an appearance at a *Modern Review* seminar at the Design Museum. Several thousand pounds of sponsorship money were riding on her attendance: if she didn't turn up, the magazine wouldn't get the cash. Why wouldn't she come?

'Because I never want to see your ugly little face again,' she explained, matter-of-factly. 'You've been an embarrassment to me for years.'[1]

Click. Dial-tone.

Okay, I thought, you've asked for it. I held an emergency meeting of those members of staff who were still loyal to me – all three of them – and told them what I wanted to do: close the magazine down in secret without telling Julie or Charlotte. Miraculously, they agreed to help. Over the next two weeks we secretly put together a 'Greatest Hits' issue and smuggled it down to our printers. I wrote a 2,000-word editorial announcing that this would be the last ever issue of *The Modern Review*

[1] This comment seemed to come out of nowhere. Relations between us weren't particularly good at this point, but I was totally unprepared for such a cold-hearted dismissal. It was as if my mother suddenly decided to headbutt me. Until this point, it never would have occurred to me that our friendship could be dissolved by a single, cruel remark – but it could and it was.

and described the dramatic circumstances that had led to its demise: Julie was having a lesbian affair with one of the contributors. On the cover were the words: 'That's all Folks!'

As soon as the issue hit the newsstands, the press went nuts. According to one media critic, my dispute with Julie received forty-eight yards of column inches, making it the second biggest story of the week after Bosnia.[1] The press first reported it as a news story then followed up by asking whether a spat between two journalists should have received so much coverage. In some ways, I wished it hadn't. The publicity was far from favourable. I joked at the time that there was only one thing worse than being talked about and that was being Toby Young. Among other indignities, I was compared to Hitler in the *Independent on Sunday*.[2] During the week the scandal raged I lost half a stone – the public humiliation diet!

Julie's line, repeated in endless interviews, was that I had thrown some sort of tantrum and destroyed the magazine in a jealous rage. 'He has acted like a spoilt child whose favourite toy is in danger of being taken away,' she told the *Evening Standard*.

She had a point. I'd half-killed myself to produce *The Modern Review* and this was the thanks I got? How dare members of the magazine's staff, people I'd personally plucked out of obscurity, turn on me? Did they really think that Charlotte had the energy, the patience and the talent to put

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[1] 'One of our researchers has been up all night measuring the Burchill/Young coverage and has come up with a figure of 1,705 inches, or 48 yards, second only to Bosnia.' Stephen Glover, 'Such a small earthquake', *Evening Standard*, 7 June, 1995.

[2] It was Charlotte Raven who made the comparison. 'I have been cast as the bimbo from hell, the typist with misplaced ambitions who would stop at nothing, least of all the ensnaring of the affections of the proprietress, in order to build up my empire,' she was quoted as saying. 'What can I say? It is a case of Toby's paranoia and obsession with us. It is Hitler in his bunker, flailing about.' Quoted by Decca Aitkenhead, 'Two's company, but three's an interview', *Independent on Sunday*, 4 June, 1995.

out a new issue of the magazine every other month? What ingratitude! *Harrumph!*

But it was Julie I felt most betrayed by. How could she reject me for Charlotte? I believed in the oath we'd sworn again and again, whenever we got drunk, in which we'd promised undying loyalty to each other. There was something absurdly sophomoric about it – I'd lost count of the times we'd sealed this pact by piercing our thumbs and pressing them together – but it had seemed real to me. *An oath is an oath, damn it!* When she turned on me, casting me out as she had done all the other people she'd ever cared about, I felt as if she had broken a sacred covenant.

Why did she behave as she did? Boredom, no doubt, played a part. Julie seems to suffer from a compulsion to turn her life upside down every ten years or so. At sixteen she'd run away from home; at twenty-five she'd left her first husband; and now, at thirty-six, she was abandoning Cosmo and starting a new life with someone else. At each stage she'd burnt her bridges. She had a scorched earth policy towards her friends and family: once they started to bore her, she lit the blue touch paper and stood well back. BOOM! For those of us who loved her, it was a painful experience.

I was nervous when Graydon Carter called. How should I play it? I desperately wanted the job but I didn't want him to think I was some lapdog who'd come running whenever he whistled.

'How much money were you thinking of paying me?' I ventured.

Graydon was incredulous.

'How much *money*? Who are you, Woodward fucking Bernstein? Are you telling me you won't come over here for a month unless I pay you a ton of money? I thought you wanted this? Listen, I shouldn't be telling you this, but Si wants to meet you. He doesn't ask to meet a lot of people, you know.'

Oh my God! Si Newhouse Jr wanted to meet me! What had I said? I started back-pedalling furiously.

'Well, gosh, yes, that is an honour. I'd *love* to meet Si. I don't care what you pay me. In fact . . .'

'Look, I'll pay you $10,000, okay?'

Now it was my turn to whistle. If I managed to parlay this offer into a full-time job I'd end up being paid $120,000 a year. That was four times as much as I'd earned in 1994.

'When d'you want me to start?'

'How about July 5?'

That was four weeks away. The idea of uprooting myself from London in less than a month was, frankly, ridiculous. Apart from everything else, there was my girlfriend Syrie Johnson to consider. Syrie had a full-time job. Would she be prepared to drop everything and come to America with me? I doubted it.

'No problem,' I said.