Hearts and Minds

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Extract

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Chapter 1

On the basis of these data it can tentatively be contended that . . .

But could it? And if the contention was unfounded, labelling it 'tentative' would hardly make it less so.

Sighing, Dr Martha Pearce glanced away from the stubborn half-paragraph before her on the screen and down at her wristwatch. Three fifty-two, she noted in mild frustration. But far worse were the small inset letters and digits which reminded her: SEPT 23.

The accommodation required to refocus her eyes from computer screen to watch face took more effort than it would once have done – more effort than it should. That was one further unwanted thing she would have to contrive to jiggle into her complicated diary over the next week or two: a visit to Dollond & Aitchison. Martha removed her reading glasses and laid them down on top of the scatter of papers on her desk. With finger and thumb she massaged the soft indentation at either side of the bridge of her nose. The skin here – unlike that underneath her chin, for example – was still tender and elastic, and felt fragile to the touch; when she closed her eyes, a small vein fluttered just beneath the surface.

The students would be here in a few minutes, at four o'clock, and she was still wrestling with the pivotal central section of her

article, which she had promised would be with Professor Styles by tomorrow. It was really a personal kindness that he had saved a slot for her in next quarter's *Review*; she could not possibly let him down. As for facing the students, Martha was not sure she had the stomach for the fight, not just at the moment.

It had been the Bursar's idea to bring forward the annual room rent review for the following academic year from mid-November to the pre-term meeting of the Finance Committee on 26 September. No doubt Kate had been trying to save Martha from confrontation: the very confrontation which was about to ensue in eight – no, six – minutes' time. But as college Bursar Kate Beasley was not so close to the lives of the undergraduates as was Martha as Senior Tutor. Kate was not to know, as Martha did, that Karen and Deepa, president and vice-president respectively of the St Radegund's College Student Union, did not live in college accommodation but shared digs in a private house. They were therefore not thrown out of their rooms in the Long Vacation to make way for revenue-generating conference delegates; the privilege of occupation and the responsibility of rental liability were theirs in vacation as much as in term. This meant that they were on hand to check their college pigeonholes on a daily basis – there to discover yesterday the Finance Committee agenda with its accompanying papers, including the Bursar's relentlessly upward-curving graphs. Now Karen and Deepa would note the change of timetable and smell subterfuge, and Martha would be tainted with its odour. Student representation on college committees, with full voting rights, was something Martha herself had fought for, two decades ago. Naturally it remained for her a given, now that she sat on the other side of the table. But she had to concede that sometimes it did make her job more difficult.

Martha saved the tangle of her half-written article and clicked to quit the file. In two minutes the students would be at the door, and in five days *he* would be arriving at St Rad's. She had just eight days to update the term's lectures, as well as to finish writing the sixteen new ones she had to give because of Jane Billington's sabbatical leave. Eight days before the new intake of freshers would arrive, requiring the annual round of introductions and greetings, and bringing with them a whole new set of tutorial headaches as yet unguessed. And everything would be different this year, in a way which Martha could not quite succeed in picturing. One of the introductions – which she must remember to fit into the draft induction programme lying next to her article on the hard disk – would be *him*.

The knock at the door, though expected, made Martha start. She rose from the swivel chair at her desk as she called to her visitors to come in and then invited them to sit down. Instead of resettling herself in her swivel chair, back to desk, Martha pulled over a footstool and sat down, waving Karen and Deepa towards the two ill-matched armchairs. Never arrange the seating so that you are higher than the students: she had once read this in a counselling manual, and had taken its symbolism to heart. The footstool, oddly sloping and heavily carved (left in the room no doubt by some previous occupant, who had used it to rest her swollen feet, or perhaps as a prie-dieu), was topped with red velvet, and was not prohibitively uncomfortable if you crossed your legs in front of you. Deepa hovered uncertainly between one armchair and the floor before choosing the former; Karen plumped uncompromisingly into the other armchair.

There was no need to ask, as was Martha's usual habit, how she could help her young guests. Kate Beasley's paper on room

rent increases lay on the arm of Karen's chair, annotated (unreadably, from Martha's lowly position) in bullish red. It was the Student Union president who opened the bidding.

'We are very concerned about these proposed rent increases, Dr Pearce.'

Dr Pearce. Martha had always been Martha to almost everyone in the college, staff and students alike (with the notable exception of the Head Porter). Her colleagues only ever addressed her as Senior Tutor in committee meetings if they were about to shoot her down in flames. Similarly, if Karen chose to address her by title and surname it could only be in order to create distance. In these negotiations, clearly, the college authorities were to be Them – which was particularly needling to Martha, who liked to think of herself very much as Us.

'This is the third year running that college rents have gone up by more than inflation,' Karen was continuing in her best shop steward voice. 'As you know, the value of the student loan has risen only minimally. How are the students supposed to be able to afford the increase?'

All the sound financial logic of the college's position sprang to Martha's lips without the need for reflection.

'I am afraid that student rents have historically been held at a level which is increasingly unrealistic, given the economic environment in which we are now living. Fee income from the government has fallen rapidly, and we cannot hope to make up the whole gap with increased conference revenue. The simple fact is that we can no longer afford to continue what has in effect been a generalised subsidy of students' living costs. We must move gradually towards room rents which reflect the hidden "sunk" costs, that is to say, the capital which the college has invested in the land . . .'

God, I sound like Kate, thought Martha, suddenly hearing herself through the students' ears. But how to say what she really felt, without giving offence? That she had come to believe that it was an unjustifiable use of the college's charitable endowment – held for the furtherance of education, learning and research – to subsidise the rents of the comfortable majority of undergraduates who came from affluent middle-class homes? She gazed impotently at Karen, whose vowels were pure *EastEnders* but whose parents were in publishing and who was herself the product of a prestigious north London girls' grammar school; at Deepa, who was from a stratum of Bengal society entitling her to take tea and jalebis with the Nobel Prize-winning Master of another college and to address his wife as Auntie. They didn't even live in college; the parents of both could clearly afford to pay a market rent for their daughters' accommodation twelve months a year. A quick resentment flared, but was as quickly suppressed. Of course, they were speaking on behalf of others, Martha reminded herself, and not for themselves.

Abandoning the detached reasonableness of the bursarial arguments, Martha leaned forward on her stool with palms open on her crossed denim-clad knees and strove to engage the students, to get them on side.

'But at the same time we must cushion the increase for those in greatest need. Don't worry, nobody's going to go hungry or get into serious debt. The college will not allow any student to suffer real hardship as a result of the rent rises. Yes, we are moving away from general subsidy, but I am determined to ensure that at least part of the extra income generated is used to increase targeted subsidy to poorer students.'

Deepa was gazing at her from earnest brown eyes, but Karen

was studying the opposite wall, clearly already planning her next assault. Martha knew that she was losing them but plunged on regardless, for lack of any better plan.

'We already have the college hardship fund. I want to create alongside it a specific fund for rental bursaries . . .'

Chapter 2

James Rycarte hoped very much that it was not a portent when he missed the college the first time. The signboard announcing St Radegund's College to the passing motorist in reassuringly unfeminine black capitals was all but obscured by foliage, which seemed to have been allowed to burgeon unpruned since his last visit in February. But then, of course, he had arrived by taxi from the station. Having hailed the cabbie with the words 'St Radegund's porter's lodge', he had been free to sit back and worry about the ordeal ahead: trial by fire, water and the massed ranks of the St Rad's Governing Body. This time was different: he was bringing his own car up from London, along with the personal effects which he had not felt safe in entrusting to the removals men sent by the college. Spotting the half-hidden sign only at the last moment, Rycarte had checked his mirror and wisely decided against the sudden application of his brakes, continuing instead as far as the next convenient side road before executing a U-turn and coming back. From this direction the college entrance was more obvious; he slowed safely and turned into the small car park.

His next dilemma was a tricky one. The car park was marked out to left and right with spaces for half a dozen cars, leaving enough room in the centre for taxis – or the merely lost – to swing round and turn. Two spaces were vacant, but which to

select? That to the left, close to the steps leading up to the porter's lodge, was designated 'Mistress' by a discreet wooden notice; that to the right was signed 'Visitor'. Rycarte knew what he ought to do, what they would all expect of him, but could not quite bring himself to do it. He pulled the wheel round to full lock and nudged the nose of the Alfa up close to the word 'Visitor'.

A twist of the ignition key silenced both the engine and Bach's Mass in B Minor, but when he opened the driver's door a barrage of noise assailed him. It was coming from above. The row of elegantly pollarded limes which screened the perimeter of the car park was alive with screeching. For one dizzying moment Rycarte had the impression that the trees themselves were chattering and cackling over his arrival, before his eyes homed in and he saw that they were full of starlings.

Shooting the central locking from the hip, he pocketed his keys and mounted the steps to the lodge two at a time, feeling the bore of dozens of imagined eyes, human as well as avian. The Head Porter was understated in his welcome, for which Rycarte was grateful, although it would have been heartening if his 'Good to see you again, sir' had carried just a little more conviction. The formalities took an inordinate amount of time. Swipe cards, key codes and keys themselves more numerous than it seemed possible could be necessary were located, activated, logged, and handed out with unhurried method by the bowler-hatted Head Porter, while Rycarte tried his hardest to listen to what they were all for and not to shift too visibly from foot to foot. Were Cambridge porters, he wondered, the last men in England to wear bowler hats? He could not recall having seen one since watching *Mr Benn* on television when Paul was a toddler.

During the interminable procedure, a number of students

drifted by on their way in or out of college, individually or in twos or threes, some casting upon him their incurious gaze, others ignoring him completely. A junior porter entered the lodge with a large pile of mail for distribution to the Fellows' pigeonholes arrayed behind the counter. The newcomer, who was introduced as Terry, acknowledged Rycarte with a grunt and a nod before beginning the sorting and dispatch of his envelopes. Somehow, none of this was quite how Rycarte had imagined it. In his nightmares he had pictured himself like the unnamed young heroine in *Rebecca*, facing a welcoming line-up of the entire college staff in their Sunday best, with the Head Porter in the role of Mrs Danvers. The more mundane reality was, of course, a relief. He wanted nothing more than to slip in quietly. And yet he found himself prey to a curious sense of anticlimax. Apart from anything else, did none of these people watch television?

Finally, the reception process complete, the Head Porter turned to more domestic matters.

'The Mistress's Lodging should be ready for you. The Bursar had the maintenance department give the central heating a blow through yesterday, just to take off any damp, even though college heating is not normally switched on until the second week in October. And housekeeping have put fresh linen on all the beds.'

Rycarte made appropriate noises of approval and obligation.

'And, er, it might be better to move your car round to the lodging, sir.'

The Head Porter's tone made it clear that Rycarte's choice of parking space had not gone unnoticed.

'There's a garage there,' he added, indicating a small silver key on one of the formidable bunches. 'The driveway to the lodging

is the third on the left, sir, if you go back to the main road. You can't miss it.'

Back in the car park a moment later, Rycarte clicked open the central locking. He was surprised to find the Alfa's door already slightly tacky to the touch from the lime trees' secretions. It would play hell with the paintwork; he would have to wash the car tomorrow. Or perhaps there would be staff whose functions included this task. Somehow he doubted it. The juxtaposition of limes and car park made him suspect that trees, in general, were held in higher regard than motor vehicles in these parts. Fastening his seat belt and running the windscreen wipers for a minute or two to remove a tenacious deposit of starling excrement, he engaged reverse and backed out.

'Mistress's Lodging', reflected Rycarte a short time later, was perhaps not such a misnomer, given the interior decor of the place. The phrase 'tart's boudoir', indeed, rose unbidden in his mind. It was not simply that the fittings and colour schemes reflected a feminine touch. Nothing here would have been to his ex-wife's taste – hers had run more to the primary and minimalist – and Rycarte had never had a mistress you could really call the name. The public reception rooms downstairs were not so bad: in the dining room there was in fact a very fine oak refectory table and a set of twelve dining chairs with understated sepia upholstery. But the curtains were richly sprigged with rosebuds, and elsewhere in the house the rosebuds had been allowed to ramble and blossom wholly unchecked. Worst of all was what Rycarte enjoyed the irony of thinking of to himself as the master bedroom. Here were frills and flounces so garlanded that the room could have served as the set for a school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is where his predecessor, Dame

Emily, had presumably slept for the fourteen years of her reign at St Radegund's. The idea was an incongruous one. What he had seen of the august lady (at his previous visit and in snatches on television) had left an impression of corduroy trousers and bicycle clips – or perhaps, on the most formal occasions, a crumpled linen suit. To uncover this predilection for flowers and furbelows felt like the glimpse of a secret vice, like an uninvited peek into her underwear drawer.

Careful investigation revealed that this was the only bedroom with en suite facilities. Of the remaining five, the least pink and floral was a narrow mezzanine off a small landing at the final turn of the stairs. It contained only a single bed and an old-fashioned leather-topped desk, and appeared to have escaped the ravages of Dame Emily's decorative tastes. As the Head Porter had promised, this bed, like all the others, was made up in readiness for his arrival, and Rycarte sat down upon it tentatively. Quite why he might want six bedrooms all equipped with ready-to-use beds was clearly not a question it had entered anybody's head to ask. No doubt in Dame Emily's day the place had been constantly filled with house guests: homeless research students, impoverished visiting scholars, and archaeological volunteers recruited for her next Assyrian dig. Rycarte suppressed an unexpected wave of homesickness for his untidy and overbrimming London flat. Even one of the anonymous hotel rooms in which he had spent much of his early professional life would have been preferable just then. At least in a hotel bedroom there was always a television, but none had been apparent anywhere in the lodging. Still, tomorrow the removal van would arrive, with one or two pieces of his smaller furniture, his clothes, his books and music, and his television. Squaring his shoulders, Rycarte returned to

Dame Emily's bedroom and Dame Emily's ruched and valanced bed, kicked off his shoes, and lay down.

At around the same time that evening Martha Pearce was finally thinking of going home. The article for the *Review* was finished – though not greatly to her satisfaction – and dispatched to Professor Styles with a contrite note about its tardiness, and she had spent the afternoon mapping out her sixteen new lectures on Microeconomic Theory for Part I of the Tripos. It was years since she had lectured in Part I, and recently she had even ceased to supervise the St Rad's first years, confining her teaching to her own specialist topics in Part II. Getting up this material was going to be a lot of work, she had realised, when she began to look over the syllabus, her old notes and the gaps between the two. She really should have said no, when the secretary of the faculty's Teaching Committee had asked her to cover Jane Billington's lectures this term. She had more than enough on her plate without it – her college responsibilities, even without the arrival of a new Head of House, were more than adequate grounds for her to have declined the invitation. But Jane was a friend, and people had to be able to take up their entitlement to sabbatical; Martha was nothing if not a collegial being.

Anyway, how could she possibly refuse any request which the faculty might choose to make of her, this year of all years? When her college appointment was due to come to an end – having indeed already been extended by this one further academic year beyond the expected period of tenure in order to see in the transition to James Rycarte's headship? The annual round of faculty lectureship appointments was due in February and, by all accounts, posts would be few and hotly contested: probably just

three openings – and one of those specifically for an economic historian, a description which Martha could not possibly spin her CV to fit. The other two posts were likely to be open as to subject area. But would she be able to sell herself as a desirable product in the current market? To compete against the latest generation of bright young scholars, with their shiny new PhDs on electronic money and the other sexy subjects of the day? In the ten years since her research had been relegated to second place behind her duties as Senior Tutor of St Radegund's, Martha's subject had altered beyond recognition. Her own brand of liberal Keynesian theory, and her particular specialism of women in the labour market, were decidedly out of fashion. Everything now was neoclassical econometric method: far too many equations and not nearly enough words for Martha's liking.

Having made depressingly little progress on her lecture notes, Martha decided to check her e-mails one last time and then call it a day. It was already well past seven thirty, and she had promised to cook supper for Douglas and Lucia tonight – that they would sit down together, the three of them, the way they used to do, like a proper family. She had picked up some mushrooms for a risotto at lunchtime, but already now she would be coming in on the run, as too often before. Martha ran her eye down the inbox, clicking to delete unopened the dozens of University circulars and external spam messages which had accumulated since her last visit. Still nothing from Karen about the rent situation, she noted with unease. The Finance Committee meeting on Monday had ended in bitterness, with Karen and Deepa stalking out angrily after the rent increases were voted through, the situation helped not at all by the Bursar's self-justificatory crowing. Really, Kate Beasley knew her stuff financially, but she could be

so bloody *managerial* sometimes, so blind to the reality of what the shared life of a college was all about. To Martha, of course, fell the task of attempting to heal the breach, and she had invited the students to come and see her to talk things through. But to no response: it seemed that Karen was not answering her e-mails. Oh well, she would just have to resort to the old-fashioned method of a note in her pigeonhole. Shutting down the computer, she reached for a pen and a sheet of college notepaper.

As she crossed First Court towards the mail room which housed the undergraduate pigeonholes, Martha's mind was already on her risotto. As well as the fresh mushrooms in her bag she was fairly sure that there were some dried porcini left from their last trip to Italy. They were never quite as good without a nice long pre-soak, but that could not be helped now. And there was certainly still plenty of the good Arborio rice in the cupboard. What a pity the flat-leaf parsley in the pot by the back door had died for lack of regular watering; she should have picked up a bunch when she bought the mushrooms.

All Martha's guilt – professional, familial and horticultural – was banished in an instant when she entered the student mail room. The noticeboards which covered the wall opposite the entrance were usually awash, once term approached, with posters of all shapes, colours and sizes, advertising forthcoming plays, gigs, debates and speaker meetings, but tonight the wall had a strikingly monolithic air. It was papered from top to bottom and side to side with multiple copies of one single, red A3 poster. It bore the logo of the St Radegund's College Student Union, and out from the surrounding text leapt two belligerent words: RENT STRIKE.

Martha stepped closer, extracted her spectacles from her bag

and read the rest. The message was unequivocal: college rent rises in real terms for the third consecutive year and now nearing market levels; students unable to afford the rises without hardship; the time having come to take a stand. The tone was all Karen. Never mind the obvious (to Martha) objection that the increase the students had been outvoted in opposing in Monday's Finance Committee was not due to take effect until next October – in protest at which they were planning to withhold rents agreed peacefully last November. Why had Karen refused even to meet Martha again, to give her a chance to outline further her plans for a rental bursary scheme? Why was she seeking confrontation? Why this year – why now?

But of course she knew the answer to that. The Student Union had made no secret of their opposition, last year, to the election of a male Head of House. Room rents merely gave them an excuse to stir things up, to make life difficult for James Rycarte even before his formal investiture. Certain now that her note would go straight in the waste bin as soon as it was opened, she deposited it in Karen's pigeonhole regardless and went back outside. Before turning towards the Fellows' bicycle shed to make her way home, she paused and looked through the archway in the direction of the path to the Mistress's Lodging. He had been due to arrive this afternoon; he was probably there now. She could check with the porters whether he had signed out his keys. She wondered whether anyone had thought to instruct housekeeping at least to put a pint of milk in his fridge, or lay out a few guest sachets of coffee from the conference office, and maybe some soaps in the bathroom. Perhaps she should go over herself now, just to bid him welcome, check he was all right, see if there was anything he needed?

No, she told herself firmly: she had her own priorities. Even as things were, she would not be home much before eight fifteen. Lucia would probably have grown impatient and devoured most of the loaf from the crock. Douglas would have opened the wine without her and be on to his third glass. Home was where she needed to be; James Rycarte would just have to fend for himself.