

LBRIS

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books

Pauline Melville

EATING AIR

A Novel

TELEGRAM

Part One

I am drawn to peoples in revolt ... because I myself have
the need to call the whole of society into question.

Jean Genet

Chapter One

Let me introduce you to Victor Skynnard, the mixed-ability parasite, radical socio-irritant and spiritual bomb-thrower who came into the café that day.

After leaving the Head in the Sand café Victor headed straight home and sat in front of the computer in his study. The thin academic and scribbler leaned back and picked up the cheque that his father-in-law had given him, examined it and placed it back on the desk. The cheque was for less than he had hoped.

The house where he lived in Camden Town was part of a terrace of down-at-heel, white-painted houses with steps leading up to the front door and paint flaking off the portico pillars of the porch. Enter almost any such dwelling and you are likely to come across one of those pale utopian spectres from the mausoleum of seventies radicals. Enormous uncurtained windows let in the baleful light of morning. Skynnard's complexion in the pitiless daylight was tallow. His greying hair formed a cobweb of light frizz so pale as to be almost colourless, like a dandelion puff-ball. His forehead, high enough to have been elongated by a distorting mirror, puckered with concentration on nothing in particular. The room was high-ceilinged and draughty. A sepulchral white marble mantelpiece overhung the gaping black square of an empty grate and an old sofa stood in the centre of the room covered with a damson chenille rug. Around the room, on the wooden floor and sofa, enough books were strewn to make you think a library had vomited. In the midst of it all reposed Victor

Skynnard in the full bloom of his obscurity. In a city teeming with venture capitalists, business magnates and hedge-fund managers there he sat, a communist wrong-footed by history. The world had not gone the way he had planned for it.

What is a revolutionary to do when there are no revolutions? How to overthrow the state when nobody else is inclined to do so? Victor continued to wrestle with a complicated mass of ideological problems which most of the world had long given up trying to solve. He picked up the cheque again and stared at it for a while, his pen twitching faintly but uselessly between his fingers like a divining-rod.

‘Oh, what’s the use?’

He groaned and shoved the cheque back in the desk drawer. Then he threw himself full length on the sofa, put his feet up on the arm and grabbed a bag of crisps from the small table at his side. He shut his eyes and munched half-heartedly. The current plan, from his hatchery of bad ideas, was to take the medieval legend of Parzival and rework it into a modern play. Until such time as revolution was in the air again, Victor had decided that theatre was the fashionable powerhouse of radical ideas and creativity. Some years back he had written his PhD on Parzival, tracing the legend through Cuchulain and Adonis all the way back to that radiant stranger Dionysus himself. He would transform the material into a biting comment and social satire on the state of society today. It was settled. He would become a political playwright of great savagery and international renown.

The gods thought otherwise.

However, beneath Victor’s high-domed brain-pan there did exist a rich interior life. Victor settled down to the comfort of one of his daily reveries. He would join the Labour Party. He would join it solely in order to undermine it from within or to resign from it in a blaze of publicity. He imagined himself rising to his feet to address the local members in some room or other – he had no idea where these people met.

‘You stupid, hypocritical and murderous shites,’ he would begin.

'The Labour Party has embroiled us in tragic wars and drowned us in debt.' He could see before him the startled faces of the local activists and held up his hand to show that he would brook no interruption. At that moment a potent mixture of real indignation and hatred for the government lifted Victor off the sofa and on to his feet. He put down the packet of crisps and started to pace around the room. He was not sure how he would continue his speech but he had the advantage of infinite rehearsal in these one-sided flights of oratory. When he got stuck he rewound the fantasy back to the beginning. He needed to make sure of his facts. Victor's memory was an area where the real, the half-remembered and the totally imagined all shuffled around together.

He had not progressed much further than 'hypocritical and murderous shites' before the fantasy ground to a halt. He repeated the phrase several times and assured himself that he would work out the rest later, outlining in painstaking detail the follies, past mistakes and hopeless future of the Labour Party. Not that he wanted any of the other parties either. They were all as bad as each other. He saw himself returning to his place at the meeting amidst the awed silence of the audience. Or perhaps cheers would be better. No. He plumped for silence. Gradually, people would rise to their feet and confess to their short-sightedness and their mistaken commitment to whichever policy he happened to be attacking. Somehow, in his imagination, the occasion became confused with the sort of meeting held by Alcoholics Anonymous or the Quakers.

Having single-handedly destroyed his local branch of the Labour Party, Victor got to his feet and went down to the kitchen to look for a plum. He took one from the bowl of fruit on the dark wooden kitchen table and returned to his study to stare with morose irresolution out of the window. There had been a downpour earlier and a ghost rain hung in the air. A few orange leaves from last winter lay like sodden cornflakes against the railings of the small park opposite. He watched a squirrel move across the wet grass with the jerky arthritic movements of an old 16 mm film. Victor frowned. He was in debt. The bills had been mounting up since the collapse

of his last venture which was to set up a desktop publishing house on the internet called Dot Communism. It was the most recent in the motorway pile-up of his hopes. It occurred to him that should capitalism collapse it might sweep him away with it, dependent as he was on his well-heeled father-in-law.

Just then his wife Mavis, a thin woman whose every variety of smile managed to express anguish, popped her head round the door.

‘How’s it going?’ she cringed slightly as she enquired.

‘Fine.’ He continued staring out of the window as if she had interrupted him at a crucial point of creation. Mavis waited for a few respectful moments and then discreetly withdrew.

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As soon as Mavis left the room Victor turned away from the window and went to study his father-in-law’s cheque once more as if the amount might have increased. It had not. For a few minutes the master-builder of imaginary solutions was stumped. He spent a while hoping that Vera Scobie, his close friend and a woman for whom he had much affection, would die suddenly leaving him a shed-load of money. Vera was his political mentor, advisor and co-activist.

Since his youth Victor had moved in and out of various political groupings, all of them radical in one way or another. Rumour had it that in the seventies he had been a member of that mysterious cadre in Bradford which everyone had heard about but nobody could find and which always produced the most astute revolutionary analyses of current events. At a time of strikes, mass unrest, police raids and urban bombings their manifestos were published in a highly prized but irregularly produced newsletter. In fact, Victor had never been a member of that group, but had assiduously promoted it and had greatly admired it without really knowing anything about it – although he had been quietly gratified once when a young woman, a complete stranger, accosted him, assuming he was one of the founding editors, and screamed accusations at him that the same newsletter had ruined her life.

After flitting from one revolutionary group to another, he finally ended up becoming associated with an obscure caucus affiliated to some Situationists who lived in Woking.

This particular splinter group was best known for insulting everybody. They got furious at the least little thing. They expelled everybody – it was all in tune with some idea of keeping themselves politically as pure as crystal. They hoped to build a society which would be a shining example of this crystal ideology – although, naturally, they would be the first to put the boot into any such edifice. One of them was an architect – a utopian architect, you understand – he never built anything, obviously. That would have been entirely against the ethos of the group. He only made plans. He was expelled though, in the end, because a friend of his built something. Anyway, nobody could keep up with the level of purity demanded by the group. In the end there were only three of them left. They were against work. No-one was allowed to work because it contributed to the capitalist economy. They were supposed to live on their wits. The girlfriend of the leader did earn some money. She did horoscopes for horses and greyhounds and sold them to racing magazines so punters could see whether or not the animal was having a lucky day. The remaining three quarrelled with everybody at the drop of a hat. Victor was used as a sort of dogsbody. He himself was expelled after he had been unable to come around to the leader's flat and help him mend a fuse.

'I was printing the pamphlets,' apologised Victor.

The leader screamed at him, 'You think I can't recognise people like you who would betray us at the decisive moment?'

But despite the vagaries, fluctuating fortunes and now near extinction of the political left, Victor had never quite been able to rid himself of the simple idea that capitalism was unjust. The great capital cities of the western world, London, Paris, New York, seemed to him like illuminated ships leaving harbour, the more fortunate immigrants clinging to the sides for the journey as the spangled vessels departed leaving untold millions behind in the darkness. And at times when he was sitting on his own in front of his computer,

he was troubled by the change that had taken place in the world since the days of his youth. A system which he believed to be the cause of much suffering seemed now to be accepted as the only way of conducting economic and political affairs and it was spreading everywhere. The revolutionary ideas of his own youth were to the current generation a puzzling and ghostly manifestation of some long lost period of history. Capitalism was widely taken to be as natural as the air that people breathed and it saddened him that people mistook it for freedom.

The upshot was that Victor became anguished by the loss of any ideal by which he could live. He was confused by the pony-tailed hedge-fund managers and punk investment bankers who were hang-gliding to work; the global head-hunters with aviator dark glasses and red braces who sang gangsta-rap lyrics in their lunch breaks and exchanged high-fives with street gangs as they roller-bladed into the City. Whenever these people flaunted the Orwellian slogan 'Hey, business IS socialism', somehow he did not believe it to be true. He was politically lonely. Politically forlorn. There was no party to which he could attach his name. And so he worked away on his own in that chilly Camden room refusing to settle for existing evils and working out how to replace them with new ones of his own design.

It was at times like this that Victor turned to his mentor. One of the few people with whom Victor shared a political framework was the actress Vera Scobie. Considerably older than him, she was his most illustrious contact in the world of theatre, a celebrity whose political activism was known throughout the country. He had met Vera when he was a student at Cambridge, a contemporary of her son Mark, whom he had come across once or twice before latching quickly on to his mother. Vera had taken Victor under her wing and encouraged his political development and forays into playwriting. Despite the generational difference they became staunch allies. She had even appeared in one of his plays. One factor in particular bound them together.

Some years earlier, in the late eighties, Vera had divulged to him a great personal secret. It happened during an intense period

of rehearsal. She had invited Victor to her house in Kent for the weekend so that they could work on the text together. When he arrived, the cleaner told him that Vera was in bed suffering from a migraine. The cleaner was clearly worried although, in fact, like many actresses Vera was as strong as a horse.

Upstairs, Victor found her in bed. The bed-head was piled with cream lace-edged pillows that matched the duvet. Dried flowers, a half-drunk glass of wine, scripts and a pen were on the bedside table. Her glasses were on her nose. Victor looked at the famous face resting against the pillows. She had good bone structure and paper-fine skin over which stretched a crazy paving of lines. She leaned back against the pillows and patted the bed for him to be seated.

‘Victor, I’m sorry about this. I’ve had a terrible shock.’ She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. ‘I’m very upset about something. Come in and sit down. I think I can trust you.’ Her husky gut-bucket voice had a catch in it. ‘I’m sure I can. After all, you were a member of that famous Bradford group in the seventies that was so wonderful, weren’t you.’ She took his hand. ‘You must never tell anyone about this.’ She took a gulp of last night’s unfinished wine.

Vera’s first marriage had been to a high-flying left-wing barrister who went on to become the Attorney-General. They had one son, Mark. In the seventies Mark Scobie became involved with the revolutionary politics of the times and had been active in a clandestine group of saboteurs and urban bombers in Britain. Although Vera held up her son as a paragon of revolutionary virtue, Victor gained the impression that she was secretly rather afraid of him. The urban guerrilla group operated in England and was linked to, amongst others, the Brigade Rosse in Milan. In August 1971, when the international police hunt for these bombers was at its height, an unexpected visitor from the intelligence services turned up at the Attorney-General’s office and asked to see him as a matter of urgency. The short, squarely-built young man with a pink complexion had just started his career in intelligence. He was clearly uncomfortable.