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Jonathan Coe was born in Birmingham in 1961. He is the award-winning, bestselling author of fourteen previous novels, which include *The Accidental Woman*, *What a Carve Up!*, *The House of Sleep*, *The Rotters' Club*, *The Rain Before It Falls*, *Expo 58*, *Middle England*, *Mr Wilder and Me* and *Bournville*. He has won the Costa Novel Award, the Prix du Livre Européen, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Prix Médicis Étranger and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize, among many others. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. His work has been translated into twenty-two languages. *Suspended Moment*, an album of his musical compositions recorded live in Italy, was released on the British Progressive Jazz label in 2023. Jonathan Coe lives in London.

The Proof of My Innocence

JONATHAN COE



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The detective soon picked out her suspect in the midst of the crowd at Paddington station, even though it was a busy Tuesday morning and the concourse was thronged with passengers. She watched the scuttling, furtive figure cutting a path towards Platform 5 and boarding a train to Worcester.

Joining the train herself, she found a seat that was close to the suspect, but not too close. One carriage away. She could remain unseen here, and still have a good view of her quarry, if she leaned forward and peered through the glass doors between the two carriages.

The train eased itself into motion exactly on time. As it picked up speed and moved through London's western suburbs, an announcement came over the speaker system:

If you see something that doesn't look right, speak to staff, or text British Transport Police on 61016.

We'll sort it.

See it. Say it. Sorted.

There was something profoundly annoying about the announcement, although the detective couldn't have said exactly what it was. She knew that the suspect would be getting out at Moreton-in-Marsh station – a journey of about ninety minutes – and she had been hoping to use that time to organize her notes on the case. But every few minutes her thought processes would be interrupted by this infuriating message.

If you see something that doesn't look right, speak to staff, or text British Transport Police on 61016.

We'll sort it.

See it. Say it. Sorted.

It was the word 'sorted' that was so irritating, she decided. The faux-demotic of it. Did anybody really use the word like that? In their attempt to strike an inclusive, non-elitist note, did the person who had composed that message really have to make it sound like something out of a mockney gangster movie?

She tried to stop thinking about it. She tried to focus her mind on the case and to put her finger on the one element – whatever it was – that had still not fallen into place. She was ninety-nine per cent convinced that the person she was tailing was the guilty party. But she would not feel truly comfortable until that one per cent of doubt had been removed.

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We'll sort it.

See it. Say it. Sorted.

The stations flashed by. Reading. Oxford. Hanborough. Charlbury. Kingham. And it was at this point, with only five minutes to go before they reached their destination, that the clouds suddenly cleared, and the detective realized that she had found the thing she had been looking for. She picked up her phone and a few seconds' clicking and scrolling took her to a page which confirmed her suspicions. Confirmed them exactly. The one per cent of doubt had disappeared. The moment had come to put caution aside, and to take decisive action.

The white-haired detective, dressed entirely in black, got out of her seat and made her way into the next carriage. Her body swayed with the motion of the train. Soon she was standing over the suspect, who was bent over the screen of a smartphone. It was showing a live broadcast from the steps of Number 10 Downing Street. As the detective's shadow fell across the screen, two wary, questioning eyes were slowly raised to meet hers, and she saw the flame of recognition start to burn in them. She spoke the suspect's full name and said, 'I am arresting you for the murder of—' before once again being interrupted.

If you see something that doesn't look right, speak to staff, or text British Transport Police on 61016.

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PROLOGUE

2nd–5th September 2022

Phyl leaned forward on the garden bench and felt a shiver run through her body. It was twenty to eight, the sun was already setting and the evenings were starting to feel colder. The privet hedge, tall and perfectly trimmed, was casting its long shadow across the lawn which her father had mown into neat stripes a few days earlier. From the depths of the lily pond, Gregory the ancient and alliterative goldfish rose occasionally to the surface and blew indifferent kisses in her direction with his bulbous lips. Birds she could not have identified were singing their sunset songs from the branches of trees she could not have named. Clouds punctuated the reddening sky and between them in the distance she could make out the silver glint of an aeroplane making its slow descent to Heathrow. It was a scene of lovely tranquillity, which left her completely cold. She had solved today's Wordle in three guesses and, checking her stats, discovered that she now had a streak of sixty-eight. That meant that today, Friday 2nd September, marked sixty-eight days since she had left university. Sixty-eight days since her father had driven up to Newcastle in the new Toyota of which he was so proud, crammed her possessions into the back and carried her away for good from the filthy, mouldering, rat-infested house where she had spent the happiest year of her life. Away from the six friends whose annoying attitudes, banal conversation and gross personal habits she missed more than she could ever have imagined. Away from all that and back home to the comfort, quietude and stultifying affluence of her ageing parents' daily existence. She shivered again.

Seventeen minutes to eight. Time seemed to pass so slowly when she wasn't at work. For the last three weeks, Phyl had been working nine-hour shifts at a branch of a highly successful chain specializing in Japanese food. The branch was located in Heathrow Terminal 5, about fifteen miles from her parents' house. This chain's USP was the novelty of having miniature trays of sushi winding

between the customers' tables on little conveyor belts. Most of the dishes were put together on the premises so Phyl spent her days chopping up vegetables and covering tiny briquettes of rice with thin layers of smoked salmon. She had started to learn the difference between the various Japanese kitchen knives: the wide-bladed *usuba*, which was used for vegetables; the *yanagiba*, best suited for slicing raw fish into sashimi strips; the heavier, thicker *deba* knife, used for cutting through bones. It was hard work, and after nine hours (with a twenty-minute lunch break) she would finish up with glazed eyes, an aching back and legs, and fingers smelling indelibly of fish. However, the mindless boredom of this job helped her temporarily to forget the mindless boredom of her home life, and the long, complicated bus journey from the airport back to her parents' town gave her time to think about her plans for the future, or rather lack of them: because she had no idea what kind of jobs to apply for next, or what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Apart, that is, from one thought which had implanted itself recently, but which was so private, and so . . . audacious, that she didn't dare share it with anyone, least of all her mother and father.

She was thinking of writing a book.

What kind of book? A novel? A memoir? Something in the hinterland between the two? She didn't know. Phyl had never written anything before, even though she was an avid reader. All she knew was that since coming back from university – no, before that: she'd first noticed it in those few long, languid weeks after her finals – she had felt a growing impulse, a growing *need* (the word was not too strong) to create something, to put words on a screen, to try carving something shapely and full of meaning from the dull block of marble that made up her inert and formless experience.

She didn't know what it would be. But today, she had decided upon one episode that would definitely form a part of it. It was something that had happened to her a few hours earlier. A small incident, but one that she knew was going to stay with her.

When her shift had ended at three o'clock, Phyl had made her way to the lifts and waited for one to arrive. Terminal 5 was quiet. The lift had to come from four floors below and then you had to wait a while for the doors to open. There was a button to call the lift

and a button to open the doors but Phyl had realized by now that these were only for show and everything was done automatically. There was literally no point in touching them. Shortly before the lift arrived on her floor, a man of about her own age approached and stood beside her. He was carrying a sports bag and wearing shorts which showed off his tanned, muscular, hairy legs. (Since working at Heathrow, Phyl had been surprised by the number of men who wore shorts when travelling by plane.) He stood next to her and jiggled his leg impatiently as the lift arrived. Phyl was standing closer to the buttons, but she didn't touch them. She knew that the lift doors would open automatically after ten seconds. She had been through this every day. After nine seconds, though, the man's impatience got the better of him. He wasn't going to have his journey delayed by this passive, helpless female. He leaned across her and pushed the button and, sure enough, one second later, the doors opened. They both stepped inside.

As their descent to ground level began, Phyl knew exactly what this man was thinking. He had saved the day. Without his swift, decisive action, they would still be standing on the fourth floor waiting for the doors to open. The self-satisfied vibe coming off him was so strong, it was almost as if he was waiting to be congratulated. But she wasn't going to congratulate him. Instead, by the time they had descended one floor, her feeling of irritation was so strong that she had to say:

'They were going to open anyway, you know.'

He looked up from his phone. 'Uh?'

'The doors. They would have opened anyway.'

He looked at her blankly.

'You didn't have to push the button.'

'Well I did,' he answered.

'But you didn't have to.'

'I pushed it,' he said, 'and they opened. Seems a weird coincidence.'

'But they would have opened anyway.'

'Yeah, but you don't get lift doors to open by just standing there.'

'As a matter of fact you do,' said Phyl. 'With these doors, that's exactly what you do.'

He shrugged and went back to his phone.

'I use these lifts every day,' she continued.

'Good for you,' he answered, without looking up. And after a pause: 'That's a lot of flying. Think of the carbon footprint.'

'Hilarious,' said Phyl. 'I work here, actually.'

'Look,' said the man, reluctantly glancing up from his phone and clearly intending to put a stop to this conversation with a deranged woman. 'If it wasn't for me, we'd both still be standing up there. Just admit it.'

The lift came to a halt and the doors opened.

'Well, what do you know?' said Phyl. 'They opened. Without either of us having to touch a button.'

'Get a life,' he said, storming off in the direction of the taxi rank. 'Fucking loser.'

She stood motionless, watching his receding back. She was stunned – stunned and paralysed, and for the next few hours she could not get the man's last two words out of her head. She had thought about them on the bus journey home, and she was still thinking about them even now. In fact there was a danger that, unless she did something decisive, she would carry on thinking about them all evening and all night, until she went to sleep, whenever that was likely to be. (Insomnia being one of her many problems at the moment.) So she did what she so often did at moments of stress. Skirting the garage where her father was looking for cardboard boxes, and the study where her mother was working, she made her way briskly upstairs to her bedroom and lay full length on the bed. EarPods in place, holding her phone in the air above her, Phyl went onto Netflix and scrolled down, looking for an episode of *Friends* to watch. This, for her, was a regular televisual comfort blanket, one of the most reliable ways of beating a temporary retreat from the world. She had already seen every episode more than a dozen times, so these days it was really just a question of spinning the wheel. Today she hit on Season 1, Episode 21: *The One with the Fake Monica*, in which one of the characters had her identity stolen by a credit card thief. It was a strong episode, Phyl thought, not least because the fraudster herself turned out to be so engaging. At the end of the show she went to prison and Phyl was always sorry that

she never reappeared in any further episodes. She would have liked to know more about her: what was so bad about her own life that made her want to steal someone else's identity and reinvent herself? Such a tempting idea, in so many ways. To disappear, to vanish into thin air, leaving behind a lifetime's worth of mistakes and embarrassments, and then to re-emerge in an entirely different guise. Reborn . . .

Of course, there were the other subplots to enjoy as well: Ross's quest to find a new home for his pet monkey, Joey's attempts to decide on a new stage name. For Phyl, the whole appeal of the *Friends* universe was the charming predictability sustained throughout every one of its 236 episodes. When this one was finished she felt (as she always did) much calmer. The hurtful tang of her encounter at the lifts was wearing off, leaving just a lingering sense of fury at the man's arrogance. She was more certain than ever, though, that to write about it would prove cleansing, and cathartic. She just had no idea how to begin. Perhaps she should simply dive in and tell the story, start putting it into words, and see where that process took her. Was that how writers did it?

She decided to look in her father's library for inspiration.

The vicarage at Rookthorne was a late-Victorian building, like the church, and – like the church – it was defiantly unattractive, but what it lacked in charm it more than made up for in size. The ground floor alone comprised an enormous vaulted kitchen, a dining room, two reception rooms, the study where Phyl's mother worked on what her daughter referred to as her 'vicar stuff' and one further sitting room which had been given over to her father's ridiculous collection of books. 'The library', her parents called it, and it was testament to a bibliomania that had long since spiralled out of control, with shelves running the length of all four walls and filled from floor to ceiling with many thousands of books, most of them eighteenth- or nineteenth-century volumes bound in leather, interspersed with a few thousand more recent works of history and biography and a smattering of modern firsts. There were also three comfortable armchairs, with their backs turned towards the light admitted by the sash windows, and it was in one of these chairs that Phyl's father, Andrew, was sitting now, straining his eyes over

the tiny print of some forgotten Victorian novel or other. He was surrounded by cardboard boxes, and also by piles of books, stacked up in a number of precarious towers, which he seemed to be sorting according to some system of his own. Looking up when his daughter came in, he said:

'Everything OK, love?'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' she answered. She took in the organized chaos of her father's situation. 'What are you doing?'

'Having a clear-out. We've got an overflow problem.' He looked around him and sighed, seemingly daunted by the work still to be done. 'Difficult process, actually. I've got to choose fifteen feet's worth of books and pack them all up.'

Phyl took a paperback from one of the piles and glanced at it mechanically, without real interest.

'Then what will you do with them?' she asked.

'Take them to Victor, I suppose, and sell them, very reluctantly.'

She could not think who 'Victor' was, at first: then remembered that he was one of her father's London friends, an antiquarian bookseller he sometimes did business with.

Andrew was craning to see the cover of the novel she'd selected. 'What's that?'

Phyl looked at it properly for the first time. It was a hefty volume, more than five or six hundred pages long. The title was *Lilliput Rising* and the author was called Piers Capon. Both the cover design and the typeface seemed to belong to a far-off era. She checked the publication date and saw that it was 1993.

'Can't say I have any recollection of buying that,' her father said.

Phyl was reading the publisher's blurb. 'Wow. Listen to this. "*Lilliput Rising* is an epic satire on the madness of modern life, spanning continents and generations, which shows one of our most brilliant young novelists working at the height of his powers. It is without doubt destined to become a future classic."'

Her father gave a dry laugh. 'Well, that didn't work out too well, did it? If even someone like me can't remember who this guy . . . Piers Capon . . . was. Put it on the pile for the charity shop, will you?'

Phyl took the book over to where he was pointing, placed it on top of the pile, and then stood looking down at it for a moment, lost

in thought. A weird, inexplicable sadness came over her at the realization that once, almost thirty years ago, an author had been assured by his publisher and by reviewers that he had written a classic novel which would be admired for generations to come, and now he was quite forgotten, completely unread. He might as well not have bothered writing at all.

On top of the next pile was a book she did recognize, although she had never read it: *Money*, by Martin Amis. Despite the fact that her father was constantly telling her it was a masterpiece, the idea of it had somehow never appealed to her. She opened it at the title page and noticed that it bore the subtitle 'A Suicide Note'. That was intriguing, in a way. She was also struck by the plain, pale blue cover of this paperback copy, which bore no adornment apart from the title, the author's name, and the words 'Uncorrected proof copy. Not for quotation or for resale.'

'What does this mean?' she asked. '"Uncorrected proof copy"?'

'Oh, that's an industry thing,' said her father. 'When the first proofs come in, the publisher will sometimes bind them up and send them out to magazines and reviewers and so on. The thinking is that editors are more likely to read them if they look like a real book.'

'But won't they have mistakes in?'

'Sometimes,' said Andrew. 'That's why they can be valuable on the collectors' market. I'll take that to Victor next week. He can tell me whether it's worth anything.'

Phyl replaced the book and picked up a nice hardback first edition of *Titus Groan* by Mervyn Peake instead. This one brought back some good memories. She remembered reading it when she was about sixteen or seventeen, getting happily lost in its maze of Gothic narratives and identifying fiercely with the character of wilful, solitary Fuchsia. Expecting to get a delicious nostalgic rush from the opening page, she sat down in one of the armchairs and started reading, but found that even here she couldn't concentrate. This mood of aimlessness, of dissatisfaction, could not be shaken off. She put this book to one side as well, and found herself staring glumly into space.

Before long the question recurred, more insistent and more unanswerable than ever. She sighed heavily.