



# Scrundle: A Historical Novel

ALISON LYNDE



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# Dedication

*To*

*A.C.*

*A.S-L*

*&*

*A.Z.*



## Acknowledgments

Miss Lynde was privately educated in Switzerland before devoting her time to her gardens in Dorset and Normandy, playing music to her friends and writing this, her first novel. In the process she has been touched by the many kindnesses extended to her and would like to thank the following: Anne and Professor Chris Wortham for initial inspiration and suggestions; Dona Haycraft and Roger Coombs for salutary criticism; Allen Packwood, Gordon Wise, Aoise Stratford and Gail Pryor for additional encouragement; Averil Condren for acute reading; Dr. John Golder for impeccable editing; and Conal Condren for turning her modest prose into fustian. She had considered thanking the narrator of this tale, but he has been paid.



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# Prelude

At last, a reader! I've been waiting long enough to take someone into the tumbled strata of this story, through the confusions of time, place, plot and personality. Keep going and between us we will dig a hole so deep you won't reach the bottom. When you think you have, leaning, so to speak, upon your shovel, you'll turn a page and find I've long since left you to help some other poor sod into the pit. Nothing personal, I'm a professional, narrated heaps of stuff. That's why she hired me. I won't let you down, but take you down to rummage in the detritus of more brutal times, now simplified to a pile of books and bones.

Mind you, and strictly *entre nous*, we could have gone back to where it all began, to the sound of the grey sea, old even at the dawn as it paws and pushes the luscious black hull of a tiny boat towards the shore. The rheumy water sucks a race of pebbles, mumbling sibilant hisses to seductive sounds, the music of dire action. Yet, with one last muted roar, it spits the craft, like some indigestible insect, onto the salt-foamed shingle. The vessel dips, lurches and grinds to a halt, awkwardly angled, catatonic, a carapace glistening in the first light beneath the screech of the wafting gull. I would, in short, have started with the primal glow of that fateful day and the arrival of our innocent band of musicians, damp but diligent, on the East Anglian coast. As they crunch over the steep strand of beach, pulling the parts and paraphernalia of their instrument behind them, they leave a ribble of lines and footprints, like some indecipherable, evanescent score. They pause for breath and look for welcome over empty undulations of land, but only the invisible tide of the Black Death runs up fast from London to greet them. The year is 1348.

Then again, perhaps that is all a little florid. There is a sound case for starting in 1660, with the fine-boned and sensitive young man translating the story of those players and their fangdangled artifice of noise. He is the scholar who flees in fire from a terrible fate, who kills with ire and fakes his estate and . . . Well, you get the gist. Indifferent to murder he may be, but that earlier story survives only through his words and because of his determination to unearth its secret meaning. So why not start with minstrels filtered through a membrane of misdeed? Why not, indeed? But where are we? We're stuck where she put me as your guide, precariously on the top stratum of narrative, as the twentieth century crumbles into the twenty-first, and I'm not even given a proper year for you. So participate. Think of a number around 2000 and make the most of me while you can. The sooner I set the scene, the sooner we can get going.

We are flies upon the shabby curtains of the meeting room adjoining the Master's office of Sundall Hall, Cambridge, England. The Master, Dr. Clytemnestra Seathrough, is chairing a gathering of the College Fellowship. With us flies, they'd fill up a respectable park bench or two. Since Sundall was re-founded fifteen years ago, the Mastership has been un-gendered. This is fitting, for Dr. Seathrough was, before the operation, Dr. Clement Seathrough-Marten, quietly proud descendent of the notorious Henry Marten (1602-80) and lecturer in semiotic accountancy. Dr. Clement was the College's first Master since the unfortunate happenings in the seventeenth century, on which more anon. Now re-elected on a technicality, Dr. Clytemnestra, senior lecturer in post-modern accountancy, considers her risqué pedigree from a regicide and whoremonger superfluous to requirements, hence the purification of her name. The meeting is the routine financial emergency one, for Sundall Hall is distinguished for being undistinguished, the smallest and poorest graduate college in the University. Lack of achievement means no money, and thus a further spiral down the ivory tower to floor level. Being re-founded at a bad time by a quixotic benefactor, Sir Gervaise Mayne, meant little chance from the outset. We'll meet the kindly geriatric later, if he lasts that long. We'd best

press on. Meanwhile, in the College, money must be saved, productivity increased. So, hours are spent in committees acting out this aspect of the contemplative life.

But wait, I sense a premature rush of judgment. This is no satire of Oxbridge privilege and snobbery, written by a disaffected cast-off. That's all been done to death. These are but preliminaries, so listen as the good Master summarizes again the main points, in hope that someone is paying attention.

"Reluctantly, I'll hold off from closing the kitchen, though, as I said, Cook is so demoralized he's allowing the staff to bring in their own food. We'll re-visit this after I've seen the V-C to beg a little more from the consolidated share-out. But I must impress upon you that there is real pressure to show the Government that the University is serious about economic reform. You know how I've pressed the point before with Heads of Houses, that the cost of a week's wine at Trinity during the emptiness of the summer break would keep us afloat for a month. But it is possible in the present climate that they'll let us sink. It could mean effective disestablishment, and to be frank, of the luminaries around me only Dr. Hill would be picked up for a fellowship in another college."

The undue emphasis on "picked" was considered. Seathrough's gimlet eyes have focused on a fat, spotty figure at the end of the table. He looks about fifteen, though is some years older, and has been doing what bored fifteen year olds do, picking his nose. No one else has looked up. They are concentrating on where else they'd like to be. The Master continues: "So I will confirm the economies. First, only articles for publication, responses to rejections, applications for grants or jobs elsewhere will be sent at the cost of the College. All other post is deemed personal and you pay for your own stamps. All putatively official post will be given directly to Mr. Boot" (this, Reader, is the Head Porter, Mr. Bostic Boot), "who will decide on such matters. Second, the senior common room will keep only *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. And no, Dr. Hill, there is no case for the College paying for *The Star* and *Mirror*. You will have to purchase page three for yourself."

On hearing his name, Hill rises from his solipsistic reverie and takes the bait; the timbre of his voice is high, the accent flat, Midlands or somewhere like that, it matters not, you know the type.

“It’s the racing page, Master. Sub me and I’d make us some cash, like it’s a piddling investment and about all *The Times* is good for”, he said, looking our way, “is swatting flies.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hill, I did get the point, but out of the question. Anyway, these, to repeat, are the economies I propose to take to the V-C.”

The Master moved to terminate the meeting. She stood in graphite grey, elegant as a pencil, but for massive hands, built for engulfing pianos and apt to quake at frustrations. She paused, the hands still: “Of course, I nearly forgot. In the meantime, I will seek clarification on the archaeological excavation proposal. We should be able to get some compensation for this dreadful noise from the supermarket extension, and if Dr. Lazarus is right,” she added, nodding in the direction of a dank and wispy theology fellow, bald of pate and with a slipped halo of greasy ringlets around his ears, “we may be able to interest that B.B.C. television show in filming us. If there is no other business . . . ?” She stood for a moment waiting, but uninviting.

I should explain, fly, that the College was built roughly, and also partially on the site of the original foundation. After its destruction (I said we’d come to this) the land reverted to the University and on some of this there is now a supermarket, a small link in a nation-wide chain. For publicity reasons, the University and Chain have agreed to allow a televised archaeological dig. Excavation for that might be extended onto College precincts. The partial demolition of the supermarket has just begun and the disruption is scheduled to go on for some time. Cracks are already appearing in a Sundall building (a metaphor for the novel, one wonders?). The construction company is likely to accept responsibility for the ominous signs of damage. It would then have, either to repair, or else demolish and rebuild. Curiously, the more expensive option of demolishing a little of the College would have an advantage in making access

for its heavy plant much easier. Thus, either way, there is an opportunity to reveal the foundations of the original Sundall Hall. It seems to be what is called a “win/win situation”. And here, if Game Theory were adequate to the complexities of the world, the whole book might end and the cracks around us get no worse. But it isn’t, it doesn’t and they do. Before it does end, I need not labor how destroying the new to recover some ruins from the old could, in this age of television, result in publicity, short-term celebrity status and even filthy lucre. The possibility is bound to appeal to the ironic sensibilities of a post-modernist accountant—self-deconstruction maketh money, as it were.

Yet academic paranoia also makes Dr. Seathrough wary of supping with the supermarket Satan, notorious for its expansionary lust. Moreover, the University itself might prefer to display for tourists the rubble of a defunct college, rather than prop up the rabble in a dysfunctional one. The issue was as nicely balanced in the Master’s mind as that last Gibbonian sentence is in our author’s, but Dr. Seathrough felt honor-bound to take the matter further. No stone, even if foundational, must be left unturned in the search for financial security.

Well, fly, scene set, and there being no further business, we’ll let the dispirited lot shuffle out in their own good time. Dr. Lazarus gets up first, wanting to return to his paper on the Lollards and the Vocist heresy. As he unbends himself, he reflects that the future of the College is in the lap of the gods; though, as a good theologian he reminds himself that only some gods have laps. Peter Sharp (moral philosophy) sits contemplating ways of getting round the new austerity regime. He will have to continue buttering-up Boot—in a fairly literal fashion, for little Peter Sharp supplies the Head Porter with the finest Normandy butter exclusive to his local corner shop. Bear with me for a little. The butter is brought in from France, where the shop owner has a cousin by marriage farming a rare breed of prime milking cows. No one else seems to buy the butter. Sharp cannot afford any for himself and dubs it dyspeptically “noble churn”; but the Head Porter assures him it is worth the money Sharp pays and, in return, a Boot doth press upon and bendeth College rules.

Reconciling himself to additional expense, Sharp sits, head down, hands folded in his lap, as if he is about to catch his nose. As well he might, for he is cursed with a proboscis given to roseate excess. No one ever mentioned the fieriness in his face, obviously. But he knew they thought of nothing else. Taking his small graduate seminar had become agony. As a moral philosopher concerned with the syntax of statements including the word *good*, he was too highly specialized to take any interest in the vulgarities of practical ethics. Yet, such being his increasing sensitivity, he had resorted to finding a newspaper article raising some ethical question for each meeting. This enabled him to hide behind it, reading slowly, while the students interspersed their comments. On a good day he might spend most of the hour thus sheltered, teaching incognito. Today, however, had been a bad day. The meeting called by the Master had made it necessary to re-schedule the seminar at an ungodly hour. In the rush he had forgotten to buy his usual newspaper, and there had been no ethical issue in the only one he could find, Dr. Hill's day-old copy of *The Star*, and missing page three. He had instead to make do with a review of a new production of *Hamlet* (two lines on the arts page). One student's comment on Hamlet's "nosing" Polonius on the stairs was crushing, as he had later confided to Bostic Boot, while passing over a small pack of butter. Sharp had fled back to his room, where he had taken just one glass of sherry to recover from the nastiness and another to steel himself for the Fellows' meeting: a mistake. Rosy-fingered lunchtime did her shining work. It was all so horrid. They were all so horrid, except the Master, and Sharp was sure that, when Hill rubbed his hands together, it was to fain warming them at the ruby epicenter of Sharp's face.

No, Reader, I do not digress, for you will have to know all this eventually. Meanwhile, there curled on a chair is a minor thread in this story's rich tapestry, concentrating his slowly dimming nasal glow down towards his lap, while others rise around him. He is yet to check his mail box, where, alas, awaits him an anonymous list of the twenty-eight plays in which Shakespeare makes reference to the nose.

Hill gets up and rubs his hands together with a leer. And, interesting this, von Aardvark—curiously an Italian, but with the story now moving, I’ve no time to explain why—starts sliding his way to Hill’s side, to have a word. They make an odd couple in almost all respects. Dr. Atlas Hill, in old jeans, tea-shirt (no, not a spelling mistake, consider the stains) and fraying jacket, a figure . . . but I’ve been through that; and, in contrast, the tall, slender grace of von Aardvark in his second-best Zegna suit, sharp as a pair of walking scissors. Hill, unless communing about his work, flaunts a boorish ignorance, leavened only by a puerile sense of humor; while von Aardvark, with little work to talk about, is humiliatingly correct and idiomatic. He is the connoisseur of all things, to wit, according to the notes provided by our author, a charlatan. Hill, a mathematician and engineer, bored by engineering, is now preoccupied with the history of mathematics, and the holder of a substantial British Academy grant to nurture his obsession. Appointed by mistake to Sundall, and with no real desire to be in Cambridge, he passes his time until a prodigiously well-funded chair in the United States falls his way, his guess is “Freedom!” in a matter of months: von Aardvark, just possibly a medieval musicologist, is desperate to renew a terminating non-stipendiary position, hardly for the money, but to provide himself with standing and a chance of repairing his fortunes with his rich and rancorous old uncle in Rome. You will not be meeting him. But I digress.

The smooth one is presently *persona non grata* with Uncle Cornelio, having been caught *covetous interruptus* by the housekeeper, as he shamelessly rifled through a desk for the old gent’s will. He’d merely pointed to the drinks cabinet and suggested she help herself as he eased open another draw. It did not go down well. The drink, in fact, did not go down at all. The housekeeper was one of those rare creatures in Italy, a convert to that bulwark of temperance and tambourines, the Salvation Army. This too will play a small part in our Author’s story. So, let me return to my digression. Hill, then, is the social liability, von Aardvark the one forever beyond the threshold of embarrassment. Join them. The story is about to start.



## CHAPTER 1

# Collaborating

“Atlas, my dear chap, might we have a word?”  
“What about? The demolition, or the newspapers?”

“Well, neither really, though the building work is a concern. You know how close my room is.”

“Cheer up. If the archaeologists get digging, you could have a trench through the bloody middle.”

“Quite, but no. I’ve made a serious discovery. Look, let’s get away from this cacophony. Do let me buy you some coffee.”

As the post-prandial rumbling around the supermarket began, von Aardvark placed a respectful hand to the strangely brown elbow of Hill’s jacket and removed him into the relative quiet of the street.

“Trying to avoid the Ecos?” Hill asked, innocently.

“Oh, it is impossible! The discordance! I’m on edge even when it goes quiet. Noise is the horror of unpredictability.”

“Right, but . . .”

von Aardvark continued with enthusiastic intimacy: “Do you know, this morning, during an hiatus, believe it or not, a blackbird near my window bravely started up, head back, throat pulsating, so sad.”

“No, I mean the Ecos. Right? Get it?”

“What? Oh, very droll, but yes, it can be a little difficult sometimes.”

Fellow fly-person, Reader, I must intervene with a word of explanation concerning Dr. Hill’s pun, for such it was. The “Ecos” is the College nickname for two graduate students, Catriona Massingmouse and Elvira Pongebeam: collective noun, the “Mousebeam”. They are cousins and are physically so

alike you must think of them as little more than virtual doppelgangers, although only one wears a full polka-dot skirt. Between them they carry some of the burden in our author's song and so she has arranged for you to meet them shortly. Each young woman is writing, with grinding sedulity, a thesis on the work of Umberto Eco, an Italian with a proper Italian name (thus Hill's pun on echo at last explicated). Each is also trying to use von Aardvark as an intermediary with the great man, whom von Aardvark knows, though not vice versa (thus von Aardvark's distaste explained). And each young woman, unbeknownst to the other, is writing *At This Very Moment to Umberto Eco* himself, to seek advice and inside information on what "She" (the other) is doing.

Dr. Hill and Mr. von Aardvark, having arrived at a café and having courteously paused long enough to get you up to speed, continue.

"For all the crowds, Cambridge is a dead-and-alive hole." Hill sat down heavily. "Why is it we have to walk so bloody far for a coffee?"

"I'm sorry, Atlas," commiserated an attentive Amadeo (von Aardvark's first name). "You are so right. Just look at it, every shop around merely a link in a great chain, the same everywhere," he smirked at his impending wit, "chains to the mouth of international capital, to borrow from Lucian."

In his youth Amadeo von Aardvark had been some sort of socialist, like all good young Italians, and still carried a garnish of its rhetoric as a lingering sign of a national identity. He ordered two cups of coffee, *macchiato* for himself, with, he insisted, just a single spot of warm milk, a large cup of black coffee for Hill, that would do, and two Portuguese custard tarts.

"No," said Hill, "make it three, love those little yellow bug-gers. Did you nick the chain image from Lucian or Hobbes?"

Amadeo was caught off-balance; backfiring one-upmanship was a warning sign. Atlas was not quite the blob of barbarity he'd assumed, so handle with care.

For his part, Atlas showed supreme indifference to any response. He continued casually, edging a finger into his nostril:

“Trouble is, only the chains can afford the rents: voracious fucking colleges, bloody-well killing the city, even when they’re not re-building it.” Digit removed, examined.

“Atlas, you are so right, so right. The noise of development is the trumpet of destruction. In Italy we would have passed half a dozen proudly independent little cafés serving excellent espresso. Beer, ale, you have mastered here, I grant. Coffee, however . . . you are weighed down by American tastes, chains from the mouth of Uncle Sam.”

“Why aren’t we in a pub, then?”

“Outstanding thought!” The Italian, in the process of sitting down, stood up, his chair shrieking as it was pushed over the floor. “Let’s go, I’ll get you a pint.”

Atlas stumbled upright, his chair toppling like a drunk, comatose against the wall. He didn’t need asking twice. He barely heard, and Amadeo merely dismissed the strangled protest from the young girl behind the espresso machine who, yet to be paid, had just so punctiliously measured one drop of milk froth onto the top of a tiny glass containing coffee as thick and dark as Fenland mud. A retired schoolmaster, hired by the coffee-shop company to check and report on standards of service at its outlets, sat unobtrusively in a corner. He had before him a file of negative reports he would later send to the Café Surveillance Department at Gamelan House, London WC11. He opened it and put a cross in a box on a sheet of paper coded to the young girl’s name, Wendy Bell. I provide this detail only because, once she has been sacked, Wendy will be free to play a tiny but crucial part in our tale.

A few minutes after leaving the café, Atlas and Amadeo were settled in the corner of a pub near St Bene’t’s Church. Reasonable ale despite the faked-up collegial atmosphere, striped scarves, college crests and rowing sculls, an effective barrier against students. Hill held his glass to the light to judge clarity and color, nosed the top.

“Cheers, mate. Thanks.” His companion cautiously sipped a glass of chilled white wine. Australian chardonnay was all they had. He winced. Its saving grace was in being numbingly cold.

“Atlas, I need your help on an extraordinary project. In the course of my research I have gained access to a description of a lost musical instrument. Enough, I think, for it to be rebuilt.”

“What, like a piano or drum-kit?”

“No, no, a majestic, extraordinary instrument, an architectural tour de force. Its very existence has been written out of the history of musicology.”

“You’re joking.”

“This, Atlas, is like recreating a living dinosaur from—well, the DNA of a parchment. Listen, I can explain the conspiracy of silence, rewrite the history. A hundred years ago an Australian composer, Grainger, may have seen the manuscript. I think he traveled once to where it is held. He traveled so much (presumably to escape the wine), but he did try to put together a picture of part of it. We can go much further.”

“We?”

“So I trust. Atlas, your skills can help bring it back, and fill the concert halls with a sound unimagined for centuries. This will make your name, my friend.”

“Sounds bloody noisy.” Hill leaned forward, placing the now empty glass meaningfully near von Aardvark’s hand. Quietly he said, “I’ve got a name, living with it since school, sort of acronym of my middle initials F.A.G. ‘Fucking Awful Genius’—AFAG for short, which I am, of course.” He leaned back, ruminating as he stared through his empty glass. “Bloody names. Inflicted to satisfy the grasp of fading rellies. No thought for the poor bugger who has to carry around a sackful of useless letters. Anyway . . .”

“I do so sympathize, and perhaps am more fortunate. In our family the first son is always Amadeo, the second Cornelio. A sound tradition saves so much trouble.”

“Well, if you don’t have names to worry about, you might concentrate on replenishing my pint. Can we get some pork scratchings? Bring me the papers. I’ll have a look, tell you if it can be done, which is good of me, really. Bigger fish to fry and in any case I’m tone deaf, sort of musically objective. Amazed you want to add more noise to the world, given the bloody demolition.”

“Thank you, I really don’t mean to impose, but . . .” Amadeo was decidedly discommoded at Hill’s patronizing indifference and offhand demands. A little beer, he reflected, seemed to be going a long way fast. And surely it should be his round? Perhaps in Hill’s world they drink so much, rounds go in doubles. He stood to go to the bar, but hesitated. “Please, I only seek cooperation from an expert, and this is about music. It is because I love it that I find the noise we suffer from the supermarket so, so insupportable.”

A shrug of a brown shoulder. “It’s all music to me, mate. The jackhammers could have been nicked from an orchestra. You know, concerto for the instruments of industry. They can use anything that makes a noise for music, bugged if I know which is which. Heard a saw being played on the box once. Maybe the demolition would sound all right if we had to pay to hear it.”

Uncertain of any irony in what was threatening to become a lugubrious ramble, Amadeo smiled deferentially. “I’m dreadfully sorry about your . . . your affliction, Atlas. Mathematicians are usually so musically sensitive.” He reached forward to take the tiniest, commiserating sip of wine.

Seemingly oblivious, Atlas continued his own line of thought. “Actually the physics of sound is quite interesting, but distinguishing noise from music? Principles of development or something? Some birds, your blackbird this morning, musical, right? Thrushes musical but, don’t repeat, others noisy. But that’s only how we hear it. They don’t try to make music.” He lifted his empty glass, moving it to draw attention to its distressed condition, with its desperate claws of foam sliding slowly to the bottom. He pinged the rim and seemed to concentrate on the ringing sound it made.

“Actually, Atlas, that’s an A, the note orchestras tune to. Without the initial noise, no music.”

“Presumably not on an empty pint glass.” Ping.

“No, oboe.” Amadeo continued briskly, acknowledging the glass pushed before him, brimming with echoing emptiness. But he was determined to re-fill it only when progress had been

made. “Atlas, the manuscript is in English, partly in verse, blank verse and prose, though of no intrinsic merit.”

“Well, merit is partly it, isn’t it?” said Dr. Hill, still intent on noise and music. “I mean, if we like it—music!” He flicked the rim of the glass again. “Well maybe not.” He paused for a siren in the street, and poked his thumb towards the window, suddenly smeared with transient vermilion. “Timing! Fire alarms, don’t want them to be music, like them to work, right? Noise clears the way (pointing again to the window), interesting. Then again . . .”

“Atlas, please!” Amadeo straightened up, as if about to go to the bar. “This is a chronicle, distinctive, I suspect, unfinished, or unpolished from the seventeenth century. The original pages are bound in, terribly difficult to decipher, fourteenth-century Humberside, I suspect. But this is hugely important with reverberations, so to speak, beyond music.”

“Reverberations?” Ping!

“Well, you know Lazerus, working on the Lollards?” Amadeo sat down again and lowered his voice meaningfully.

“Vaguely.”

“A religious sect, persecuted by Henry V. Lazerus thinks they were responsible for the Vocist heresy.”

“The what?”

“It was the belief that all musical instruments were evil. I suspect the heresy was earlier and a reaction to the whole point of this instrument, which was to unify sound.”

“Right,” said Atlas, his pale piggy eyes focused with interest and amusement, “a sort of big bang theory of musical creation. Weird. I’m with the Vocists—and it’s in this manuscript? Mine’s a pint, please.” Ping! “But hold the oboe.”

“Surely we can work together? This will be hugely important. Yes, I’ll get you another and a packet of those . . . things.”

“Yeah, right, scratchings. God’s own deep fried fat.”

Hill tried to imagine the abstract concept of a noise, but he could not get beyond a sort of mental silence. He looked up, the seat opposite was empty.

Nothing more was said until Atlas Hill was deep into his second pint. “Thanks, that’s better. Now, you were speaking

of ‘hugely important’. This is what I call ‘hugely important’.” He ripped open a packet of pork scratchings. “Bugger!” Half the packet fled across the table, several feral scratchings made for the floor. “You know of Fermat and his last theorem, yes?” Amadeo nodded, but his companion was intent on getting things in proportion. “The square on the hypotenuse,” he chanted from under the table, grabbing an escaped morsel, “is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides.” There was a percussive punctuation as the tabletop quaked. “Shit!” Atlas emerged chewing an escapee and rubbing his head. “This is true only if the integer is 2, that is for the triangle, another musical instrument, so they tell me.” He paused, dipping his finger into the glass and writing on the table in beer  $Xn + Yn = Zn$  by a drunkenly slumped right-angled triangle. “Why this should be has been the puzzle, the holy grail of number theory, and Pierre de Fermat, a French lawyer, scribbled down in passing, obviously not in beer, that would be in pissing. Right?”

Amadeo looked momentarily blank.

“Get it?” said Atlas, sweeping up a handful of stranded scratchings. “Pun, piss is slang for beer, as in piss pot, getting pissed, on the piss . . .”

“Yes, thank you . . .”

“Pint of piss, piss artist (a drunk), piss-hole, or pissier, aka pub. We’re in one.” He grinned in mock surprise at his surroundings.

Amadeo winced, staring into the pale yellow liquid in his glass.

“Oh well, suit yourself mate. You stick to the girlie drink. Here, have some out of the bag, they’re mostly dead.”

Amadeo’s body language declined for him.

“Anyway, Fermat, where was I, about 300 years ago, Fermat scribbled down that he’d solved the problem, but was too busy to work it out—though *I* know he did.”

“Yes,” said Amadeo, struggling to get the conversation back on track. “That was about the same time as my translation. But I thought his problem had now been solved?”

“Yes and no. There is *a* solution, but I wanted *his*. There’s the rub, see?”

Amadeo nodded. He would have to listen in order to bring Atlas back to the manuscript.

Atlas continued, regardless, staring down at, but oblivious to the three scratchings, stoically awaiting the inevitable by his improvised beery diagram. “*If*, Fermat had solved it, he needed to do something seriously original. But, and here’s the catch, if we go beyond the known maths of his day to find his solution, how do we know we’ve got it? A paradox, right? Bummer. What we reconstruct as a truth we can’t know to be true. With me?”

Amadeo’s head bobbed up and down.

“And you offer me the chance of rebuilding some prehistoric triangle. Fuck me. Sorry to bang on, but I’ve not talked to anyone since I’ve been here. First drink anyone’s bought me.”

“No, no. Naturally, I understand. But you never know, our two enquiries could be related.”

“Hardly think so, Number One Son Amadeo. Unless your instrument is a bleedin’ great triangle after all.”

“No, my point is serious. It was a smaller world then. Everyone knew, or knew of, just about everyone else, and they made connections where we build walls. Your French lawyer was also a mathematician. Now life is like living in an orchestra: we are all consigned to an instrument in a section.”

“So maybe your instrument is a triangle after all—figuratively speaking, right?”

Amadeo smiled, and risked further distraction with a dangerous invitation to digression. “How did you get interested in this?”

“The beginning? Usual thing, accident really. Work going nowhere and came across attempts to square the circle by a seventeenth-century philosopher called Hobbes. Big name . . .”

“Yes, in political philosophy, but mathematics as well. Sang very badly. Perhaps he had your musical deficiency. You see connections.”

“Very funny. Basically it was all silly, but it showed me that the people who said he was an idiot at the time, were actually doing quite interesting stuff. Admittedly, some was loony, magic, alchemy and maths as a score for the music of the spheres. Yet they had logs. for navigation and some thought the more elegant

a proof could be, the closer to silence, the better. A sort of minimalist music, see? Anyway, that's how the Fermat connection came up. His number one son Samuel was collecting his dad's papers. Young Samuel was also a friend of Hobbes, and sent him a copy of his dad's solution in a letter, to show how important real maths was.<sup>1</sup> That's how I knew Fermat really thought he'd done it. The frustrating thing is Hobbes probably burnt that letter with other stuff, and the proof is not in the papers Samuel had published, in the *Opera*, if you want to know."<sup>2</sup>

"I'll take your word for it, Atlas."

"And if the crucial letter was burnt, how do I know about it, do I hear you ask?" He picked up and crunched two of the last three scratchings from the table. "Record of it is here, of all places, I reply. You see, Samuel F. also had a mate here at Sundall Hall, a Dr. Theophilus Troughenough. So I came to Cambridge to check out his papers and found a letter from Samuel, part of which, he says, repeats what he'd written to Hobbes. Latin, obviously, but it ends in rather stilted English by saying he has put on a separate sheet 'My Father, his proof of the triangle.' But it's not there. That's when the fellowship came up."

He examined the last scratching with touching tenderness and said to it: "As you've been so good and attentive, I've left you 'til last." He then bit it in half.

"And? About the papers?"

"Another bloody fire, of course. The bloke here, Troughenough, went up in smoke when Sundall burned down."

"Oh, of course. *That* fire."

"The very that. But his papers were in with those of a friend of his at Jesus. They've been ignored because no one thought they made sense, though Dr. T was on the right lines, sort of. But I'm nearly fucking there, and I need to put it aside for a bit. I'll give your idea a go, cos I'm nice. Might even be a connection, right? Must be nearly my round, I'll get us some scratchings."

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1. See Noel Malcolm ed., *The Correspondence of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), vol. 2, in which the letter from Fermat should have been included (Author).

2. *Diaphanti Alexandrini arithmeticonum libri sex*, and *Opera varia* (Author).

A lone twist of deep-fried pork skin, hiding in a shadow by the table leg had been reprieved, but as we will see, only for a while.

\* \* \*

Listen; there is an Eco on the stairs. Catriona Massingmouse has left her small room in the College and, with the caution due to vertiginously high heels, is making her way down to the Porters' Lodge. At the close of the meeting she had been told of the economies, and had hurried to her room to write the respectful letter she had been planning, in order to open up communications, before SHE did. It read as follows:

Dear Professor Eco,

I am a postgraduate at Sundall Hall, Cambridge, as you will see from the heading. I am excited about writing a doctoral thesis on your semiotic theory. But I have two problems. First, I don't know if my work overlaps with anything else being done on you. Naturally, I have checked with completed studies in a range of indexes, but any help here on current research that you know of would be appreciated.

Secondly, a substantive puzzle relevant to my second chapter. Your metaphor of a rhizome for language is intriguing, but how far can one take its implications? Does the image suggest that any precise theory of semiotics is doubtful? Is the search for precision itself misguided? Or is it just reliance on a metaphor that makes it seem impossible? Can you help, or have I got it all hopelessly wrong? So many questions! I'm sorry; but I much look forward to hearing from you,

Yours sincerely etc.

Catriona had thought it would have to do, but it had taken far longer than it should have, as she had been unable to find her earplugs. Still, she prided herself on being able to filter out

intrusions and this was OK; business-like, respectful and not sycophantic, he'd hate that. It also evidenced a confident critical edge demanding respect. As she teetered on the final stairs, Catriona rehearsed what she needed to say to get the letter posted and how. That meant smiling. It was, she thought, her own fault, really. Like everyone, apparently, she couldn't stand Boot, and was always, well, a bit superior. He was a College servant, something he needed to remember, but which she, for the moment, needed to forget. Tossing her keys to him the other day had not been sensible. At least she wasn't as rude as HER. A bit of charm wouldn't be too much, and more than SHE could manage. Catriona opened the door to the Lodge, its plaintive creek forewarning Boot of the need to move.

He sat mountainous on a chair behind the counter, his copy of *Football Weekly* before him, propped against an ancient and cord-frayed electric toaster. It was still warm from its enslavement to the process of changing cold, damp, white bread into something irresistibly crisp, golden and aromatic. Its dedication never seemed appreciated. The protean magic, the mysterious metamorphosis it managed to effect from nothing more than taking bread into the alambic of its wired metal mouth, never elicited applause, or even thanks. There was just the expectation of more: Boot simply fed the old toaster doughy bread and gobbled the results anointed with the finest Normandy butter other people's money could buy. It was, frankly, dispiriting for the toaster. But to be fair, Boot was frequently interrupted when he might have been on the point of saying "Thank you, Toaster, I don't know how you do it," or side-tracked at the very moment of philosophical reflection on the instability of identity, the potency of heat and the literal truth of the sacrament of the slice. Certainly, by the recitative of the door hinges, this could have been just such an occasion. Expressionless, Boot's eyes bored into Catriona's face, as she opened the squeaking door.

Boot's own face was plump and polished, with a slug-like moustache, stuck in the process of using his upper lip as a conduit from one rosy cheek to the other. He sat aglow, as if occasioned by some massive expenditure of effort. He stood

up for the second time in five minutes, fastidiously brushing a toast-crumble from his black waistcoat.

“Hello, Mr. Boot. I’m so sorry to trouble you, but I really need some advice.”

A pause laden with suspicion. “We’re here to help, Miss.”

“I know, thank you. It’s about the new mail directive from the Master. Thinking about what I was told after the meeting, I was a bit confused, and I really don’t want to break any rules.”

“Quite understand, Miss.”

“My research is on a very important theorist, Umberto Eco.”

“Ah yes, that would be the one who wrote the Sean Connery film.”

“That’s right, actually *Il nome della rosa*.”

“Wonderful stuff, I thought. Made you think, even in the English.”

“Oh, you are so right, Mr. Boot. I do so agree, though, of course, my work is on much more than that. It is all rather technical, I’m afraid.”

“Quite so, Miss.”

“The point is, it wasn’t clear to me if writing to him about my work came, well, within the terms of official correspondence. It would help if it had an official College stamp, you know, to let him see that my work is serious. But the Master didn’t actually specify, and, well, you are in charge, so I need your judgment.” Now came the hard bit, a brief and helpless smile.

Bostic Boot took the letter and carefully examined the address through narrowed eyes. Slowly, he turned the envelope over, judged its weight, and then turned it again to read the address once more. He pondered, frowned and fractionally nodded his head. “Strictly speaking, Miss, it is probably outside the guidelines, but, as I say, we’re here to help. Handmaids to scholarship we are, and I know you young researchers have a hard and lonely time.”

“Thank you.”

“Leave it with me, Miss. I’ll put it with the official stuff, what it should be, and any more like it. Don’t worry, official it is. Enough said.” He tapped his nose with a buttery finger.

“Wonderful, such a relief.” Another smile, easier now, and Catriona turned to leave.

To her back, Bostic Boot continued: “After all, Miss, we need consistency. The other Young Lady has just pleaded the same case.”

BITCH!

As he spoke, he arranged the letter carefully on top of one also addressed to Professor Eco. The ‘Mousebeam’ epistles lay neatly near the toaster, as if in silent communication; they were close enough to crumbs and smears to insure they would not be overlooked, but sufficiently remote to remain nearly pristine for the post. If, metaphorically speaking, we delve down past Catriona’s letter and through the neatly embossed College envelope beneath it, we shall uncover what her cousin had written at more obsessive length, and what, for your sake, needs a little editing.

Dear Professor Eco,

I do appreciate how busy you are, but I hope you will find time to help a fellow scholar, albeit a very junior one. As you will see from the envelope and headed paper, I am a graduate student at Sundall Hall and I am beginning a thesis on your work. I fervently hope there is a genuine distinctiveness in what *I* am doing, by avoiding the obvious, the semiotic theory, interesting as it is.

Instead, I am concentrating on your wonderful novels. My research shows that you have actually set the action of *Il nome della rosa* at the very time when there is no knowledge of what Ubertino da Casale, who, of course, you place in the novel, was actually doing. To insert a whole novel in a biographical crevice is ingenious, or was it just fortuitous?

Another point arises from the theological commitments of the Spiritual Franciscans, like Casale . . . Are you hinting that your hero Baskerville is not really one of them? Has he really been influenced by Marsiglio of Padua? . . . A clue, surely, is dropped as the narrator, Adso, refers in passing to

Alison Lynde

his friend Marsiglio. You even set the novel at the very time the Emperor Lewis of Bavaria—with Marsiglio as a principal advisor, no less—invaded Italy to chase the Pope from Rome!

The novel, with hardly a mention, has these cataclysmic events as its backdrop! Brilliant! This is especially audacious, as you make them and Marsiglio almost absent, nothing but a looming trace, just the missing treatise by Aristotle the book is ostensibly about, but which didn't exist! Is, indeed, Marsiglio's *Defensor* the book behind the book, the thorn, if you will excuse the allusion, in the rose!? I so look forward to hearing from you.

Yours most sincerely,  
Elvira Pongebeam.

\* \* \*

Some time has passed and now we are allowed into the Master's office. Matters grind slowly in the processes of university deliberation, but eventually the Vice-Chancellor had been reassuring. It was appreciated how little scope there was for economizing; a college kitchen should never be closed. It was the very hallmark of collegial status. There would soon be a meeting of college heads to consider some redistribution of funds, though the issue was, as always, difficult. The engineers had reported that the cracks were superficial and the construction company had reiterated that it was happy to make good any minor damage. Nothing was said about demolishing the building and starting again after the heavy plant had finished its work for the super-market. The construction company was managing despite the awkward presence of bits of Sundall Hall standing in the way of progress.

You see, Reader, a lot has happened, and I hope you realize just how much time I'm saving you. The author actually wanted all the university politics left in, but I said to her, I said: "Think of all the trees you'll save; don't distress the patience of your Reader. Now you've got one, stick to the point, and the Reader

will stick to you.” Well, words to that effect. But I admit we need the next bit.

The problem, you see, had been with the television production team of the archaeological show *Dig England*. Every week they are somewhere turning up the sod, finding stuff then sodding off somewhere else. Very popular. Dr. Seathrough could do little better than leave messages with assistants, and the assistants could only assure her, in the absence of a regular assistant of her own, that the messages had been conveyed, and as soon as some of the team could get up to have a look and check against extant plans and drawings, they would. It was a question of coordination, and seeing if there was really going to be enough on the College side of things to justify and find room for likely trenches. It couldn't be hit and miss, like real archaeology. They always had to find something, usually at the last minute. Viewers expected it. And at last, a message. A group had come up, and checked out possibilities (how did they get past Boot?). The producer was coming to Cambridge in any case, and would pop in to fine-tune things. A time being agreed, Dr. Seathrough awaited the arrival of (she was already late) Ariadne Threadneedle.

Read on, McDuff.

“Hello?”

“Enter.”

“Dr. Seathrough?”

“Yes.”

Ariadne Threadneedle floated, gossamer-light and carelessly petaled in the delicacy of shimmering silk. She looked a little lost, still in search of the missing secretary who might have taken her hat and sunglasses the size of dinner plates, and who should have opened the door. But Ariadne was resourceful. She had turned the handle for herself.

“Secretary's day off. Noise is trying for her. Welcome, do sit.”

The producer flashed a ravishing smile and began to seem more at home. She sat, looked around, removed her sunglasses, and now that she could see, looked around afresh.

“Thank you, this is so nice! And all so exciting! So new to me!”

“Well, yes, Cambridge is a strange place for most people, a little baffling to begin with. A rather specialized lifestyle, I fear.”

“Oh! Don’t I know it! Daddy insisted I go to Trinity, now they let in girls. It was his place. All that time here and I’d never heard of Sundall. Dreadful of me!”

“How long were you here?”

“Oh, just three years, reading history. But of course, this is a graduate college! We lived in a different world, far less work and far more fun, alas. Even now I get exhausted just thinking about it—and, as they say, if I can remember it, I probably wasn’t here. So TRUE!”

“Well, you know what they also say, Miss Threadneedle?”

‘Post-graduates come to work,  
Undergraduates to play,  
Last chance before they run the country, anyway.’”

“Oh, you’re right. I’d not heard that one! But do call me Adne—or do you think we should be terribly formal? We’re on your territory after all.”

“Well, I believe we are, but Adne it is.”

“Good, now this is what we can do. We can manage a teeny trench. It looks as if it will have to be roughly where we think the old library was. That could be good. From accounts (you see, I do a little homework) it would be nearby where that dreadful fire all started back in 1659 or ’60, depending on the calendar.”

She flashed a smile of knowledgeable satisfaction and carried on. “But seventy per cent of the dig, and time (well, seventy-five per cent) will be devoted to the Supermarket side. I’d simply love to give you more exposure, but that is where there’s pressure of time, so working mostly there gives a real zip to things. And frankly, you know they have such a bad press about their food, predatory pricing policies, treatment of staff, salmonella, and everything. Anyway, Gilgamesh Gamelan has seen this as a real image-rectification opportunity, and will hire an executive espe-

cially to be so enthusiastic and supportive on camera. Genuflection to heritage, and generosity to the community. You know the sort of thing. Of course, we'll stress that it was all once Sundall Hall—though did you know, there is some confusion over the original name? So important to get names right.”

“Yes, I did, there's a little pamphlet. It's been called everything from Scrundle to Sundial, everything but Scandal, apparently.”

“Oh, of course you know, silly me. Anyway, we'll have people rush through to look at the trench this side three times, and at some stage, we'll have a teeny discussion on camera about the need to put a trench through on your side, but we'll also need to say that there is doubt about whether you'll give us permission.”

“But why, that's what we want?” The hands began to tremble, and fled down to a desk draw: open, close, open close.

“Ah, but the viewers! They want some tension: will the crucial part of the dig be extended? Will the College co-operate? Will it all be done in time? That sort of thing. That's why our people run around so much—for the urgency. Archaeology's so static, all little bottoms up, heads down, dabbling in the dirt. Running about makes it all so dramatic, much more effective than just cutting from scene to scene: scrape, scrape, scrape, brush, brush, brush. You must have seen us. It's the same every week.”

“I don't use the television, I'm afraid, Adne.” The hands reappeared with a steady pencil.

“Oh!” But Ariadne did not need wind in her sails to glide on regardless: “and, in any case, they have their views of Cambridge. Silly, I know, but it is supposed to be a bit closed and standoffish. Adds to the mystique, has more impact when you agree.”

“Are you saying it's all orchestrated?”

“Oh no, not the finds, that's all real, usually. But people don't follow; they need a format, poor dears. It inoculates against perplexity. I call it Format's last serum, just my little joke. And if you are too keen to be involved, it will make you look, well, awfully poor. Trinity wouldn't even have the *Chariots of Fire* people in the main quad, you know, where that wonderful race

was. Had to be filmed at Eton. Not interested in the money; it was just ‘Go away, go away.’ So rich, you see.”

“But Adne, unlike Trinity, we do not own half the country. We are not rich, Adne. That’s why, Adne, I’m so pleased you’re here, Adne.” The pencil unaccountably snapped in two and Ariadne, staring at it with slightly raised eyebrows, heard nothing to interrupt her soothing flow.

“Exactly, but you mustn’t look skint, if you want good exposure and cred. They,” (she waived vaguely in the direction of the building work) “need to look generous and caring. You have to look aloof and austere, at least at first. Now, you have an archaeology fellow here, or an expert on the College history?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Oh, good, you can provide someone for the role. Perhaps you might be the one? And we’ll provide the questions and our people will look, well, very with it. Sorry, too long in Knightsbridge.”

“It all sounds, well, as I said, a bit orchestrated.”

Ariadne sat back in the chair, and opened her eyes in innocent, hurt surprise.

“My format works. I’ve thought it through so carefully. I’m even prepared to waive fees. This is why we are so popular. This is why I’m here: because you need us. For just a little collaboration we give you free exposure, nationally, internationally. You give us some burnt offerings from under the turf. Not a lot to ask?”

“No, yes, I realize that. Sorry, Adne.”

“Good. I’m so glad we understand one another. I’ll have my people draw up a formal memorandum, copied to Gamelan’s Supermarket people. Do you need one for the University?”

“No, we are an independent college of the University. But I’ll drop the V-C a letter to keep everyone in the picture.”

“Wonderful, so nice. Must float.”

And she did.

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