

Another Opportunity
for
Personal Development



Robert Lindsey

paperbytes

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paperbytes@paperplates.org

www.paperplates.org

Another Opportunity for Personal Development

WHEN FERGUSON returned home, people sometimes asked which part of London he had stayed in.

“Oh, Hampstead, that general area,” he’d reply.

In fact, as Ferguson knew, the house he stayed in was in *West* Hampstead, a neighborhood in every way off to the side and downhill from Hampstead proper – no sprawling Edwardian architecture over that way, no starlets in Jags or film producers walking their labs. Ferguson dreaded the day he might run into someone who actually knew the difference: “Hampstead? Love the place! Which street?”

And of course, Ferguson had other reasons for not wanting to go into the details of his visit.

When he first arrived in London, standing in the hallway of Tom's place, taking things in, Ferguson decided to keep the smart remarks to himself.

His brother had lost weight and was nursing a cold. Tom showed Ferguson up to the third-floor room where he would be staying. When he switched on a lamp, Ferguson noticed again how gaunt Tom looked, slightly wasted away. From the side, his profile gave him the appearance of an older, sick version of himself, or of someone slightly resembling Tom. Tom said he had taken up a new diet, that he had dropped all salt, dairy, and meat products. The diet had done a lot of good for his insomnia and sinuses and allergies.

"Well, as long as you're able to believe it, that's the main thing," Ferguson said. He was annoyed Tom hadn't bothered to meet him at Heathrow. Working, he said. Ferguson had taken the tube into

London, made a wrong connection, and wound up in Battersea.

“Find the place all right?” Tom asked.

“No problem.” After he noticed his mistake, Ferguson had sat heavily in his seat through several more tube stops, sweating and clutching his suitcase, wondering if the other passengers suspected his blunder. Finally, pretending to recognize an upcoming stop, he got up and slowly made his way to the door, at his own leisure, whistling. The train shot through the station, not even stopping until the next one. When it did stop, Ferguson was on the wrong side of the carriage, and had to scramble with his luggage across to the opposite exit.

“Great directions,” he said. He was twenty, overweight, and had a knack for getting into what he called certain situations.

Tom said he had an appointment he couldn't get out of. Dinner would be at 7:00, when the others got back home.

“Do you always eat together?”

“Usually.”

“I’m not sure I know who these others are.”

“Melanie, Philippe, Jane,” Tom said matter-of-factly. “I’m sure I’ve mentioned them before.”

Had he? Tom had been living in London for two years. Ferguson thought back to the infrequent postcards he had received. Postcards, never letters. He couldn’t recall anything about these housemates. And as for the postcards – written in a large cursive hand, five or six lines apiece – they barely left any impression at all. Banal salutations, general reference to business, exclamation marks all over the place. They had been dashed off.

“Tom, I’m not clear, exactly, what it is you’ve been working at over here.”

“What do you mean, working at?”

“Well, what your job is.”

“Job?” He tilted his head slightly, and studied Ferguson with an

expression of mild concern.

“Drop it,” Ferguson said.

After his brother had gone, Ferguson went to the window and studied the street. Brick row houses packed together, each with a tiny paved yard out front. The overall effect, Ferguson decided, was one of overpowering brownness.

Ferguson would be staying here in Tom’s room while Tom used a spare downstairs. The room was cold. He went out into the hallway, found the thermostat, and turned it way up. Returning to the bedroom, he closed the door and had a good look around.

There were several hours to go before dinner. Ferguson had in mind a full espionage agenda – journals, personal paraphernalia, those easily-overlooked but all-important little details tucked away under sweaters at the bottom of drawers. He was quickly disappointed, however. Apart from a night table and a small bookshelf, the room was bare. The night table contained only a pad and pencil. Along the bookshelf, a

few reference books, a French course, several novels by Ayn Rand. The closet was hardly more promising: one raincoat, a stack of plastic storage bins, all empty. Within five minutes Ferguson had picked the place clean, and hadn't turned up one interesting item. The reason for this was simple, of course: it wasn't Tom's bedroom. It wasn't anyone's bedroom – not even an obsessively neat person kept a bedroom that sterile.

Ferguson removed the driftwood statue from his suitcase. He stood there looking at it awhile, wondering if this was quite the right thing. In the meantime, the room was warming up nicely. He got into bed with his clothes on, put his hands behind his head, and slept.

“Regrettably, there has been a ... mishap with the heating.”

“Oh?”

Philippe, one of Tom's housemates, was studying Ferguson from his place at the head of the table. Tom and Ferguson sat across from each

other, Melanie to Tom's right, Jane beside Ferguson. The dinner table was set with thick earthenware plates, a jug of water in the centre.

"Yes," Philippe said, shaking his head. "The thermostat was turned all the way up to maximum." He was neatly dressed with short hair parted to the side. Odd accent: European via North London, a bit of Oxbridge thrown in.

"Really?" Ferguson said. He remembered that he had spoken to Philippe before. In the weeks leading up to his visit, he had called the house several times, and each time Philippe had answered. No one else ever seemed to pick up the phone.

"The entire upper floor was red hot!" Melanie said, glaring. She had long black hair and intelligent eyes but a sulky, put-out expression.

Ferguson guessed from the seating arrangement that she and Tom were a couple. No wonder Tom looked depressed.

"Oh, a little too hot, was it?" Ferguson said.

"The heating systems in these old buildings." Philippe raised his

arms slowly in an expression of mild exasperation. “I hope you weren’t too uncomfortable up there.”

“Not at all.” Ferguson said.

“Tom mentioned you were at university,” Philippe said.

“I’m taking the year off.”

“A year *off*?” Philippe inquired.

“For self study. I thought I’d take up Russian, actually.” Ferguson had no intention of studying Russian, or anything else for that matter, but somehow the phrase popped up.

“I see,” Philippe said.

Tom was staring at his vegetable stew. His hair was cut in the same tidy, clean style as Philippe’s. And he was dressed in much the same way: Oxford shirt, chinos. This Blockbuster Video clerk look was new for Tom.

“I understand from Tom that you have some sort of band.”

“More or less,” Ferguson said. He was a founding member of *Pablo*

Picasso and His Food Mart Attendants. For some time he had a feeling that the band, like everything else, was headed for a breakdown, some sort of spectacular disappointment. What he had in mind were snapped E strings and mangled chords, a grand finale, harsh words and a fistfight on-stage performing in front of their small but discerningly sarcastic coterie. But this was just wishful thinking. Most likely they'd just go on practicing in their drummer's rec room, playing Open Mike Wednesdays at Varsity Pizza.

“And you? What do you do, Philippe?” Ferguson asked.

“What do I do??”

“What is your profession? I'm just not clear on what everyone –”

“I studied statistics.”

That figured. But he hadn't really answered the question, and as Ferguson was brooding over this, Tom explained that he had work to do before he turned in, and would Ferguson mind being left on his own? The others announced they had work to do as well. There was a

small office off the main hallway, and immediately after dessert, Melanie and Tom disappeared there. A few moments later, Ferguson could hear the clacking of keyboards.

Jane slipped away upstairs.

Philippe was staring at him. “Is everything all right?” he asked. And there was that look again, head tilted to one side, an expression of mild concern.

“Fine,” Ferguson said. He had noticed that there weren’t any paintings on the dining room wall. The room was empty except for the table and chairs.

Turning towards the living room next door: glass-topped coffee table, cabinet with lamp, black chairs. One framed watercolour reproduction. *High late dentist office* verging on *motel suite*. The whole place, spic and span, as though recently renovated.

“Incidentally, how long have you four been living here?”

“*Living* here?”

Ferguson suddenly remembered the driftwood statue. His gift to the household. He had wanted to present it to the entire group. But if he brought it down now, he would have to give it to Philippe. Philippe was still staring, head tilted to one side. Maybe he was *expecting* a gift.

Ferguson got his jacket and went out in search of a drink.

SINCE TOM always seemed to be working, Ferguson found himself alone most days. He quickly settled into a routine. In the mornings he left the house as quickly as possible, exploring the city on foot, walking several miles alone before circling back around to West Hampstead and the Twin Moore Arms.

Once installed at the Twin Moore Arms, he ordered up the curry Luncheon Special (£3.50, excellent value), laying down a solid foundation for an afternoon of drinking. Periodically, he glanced over the copy of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* he carried around

everywhere. A gift from his girlfriend. Everyone else had read it, and she figured it was high time he clued himself in. His visit with Tom would be a good opportunity to get into personal development mode. Ferguson had started out with a sincere intention to read this book, but every time he tried, he found his mind overpowered by a powerful mental fog, particularly when it came to the diagrams. Nevertheless, held at a certain angle, it provided a convenient device behind which he could sit all afternoon, drinking and studying the other patrons of the Twin Moore Arms.

Ferguson had not chosen the Twin Moore Arms carelessly. Several other pubs had been researched before working his way down the list to the Arms. Ferguson liked its crummy, hopeless sports paraphernalia, the somber light, the heavy bar with its sentimental ornate flourishes – the only decent bit of furniture in the place, a real centrepiece signalling that serious drinking went on in here, that drink was the organizing principle. And there was another reason why he settled here. He

had never spoken in the Twin Moore Arms. He ordered by pointing to taps and curries. Later, Ferguson would recommend this technique to all foreigners wishing to improve service in British drinking establishments. If you keep your mouth shut, it's possible to pass for a local. Of course, things could get complicated.

After a few visits to the Twin Moore Arms, the bartender tried to engage Ferguson in conversation. Ferguson pointed to his mouth, shook his head, and shrugged. "Can you hear?" the bartender said mildly, leaning forward, over-enunciating. Ferguson nodded. "Sorry," he said. "There's just no way to know, is there? You just don't expect that, do you?" Ferguson nodded reassuringly. You certainly didn't. This was the most courteous treatment he had received since arriving in London, and he wasn't about to ruin things now. There were free drinks, extra portions of curried lamb. Within a few days, the management were clearing away other guests from "this gentleman's table" whenever Ferguson arrived to find someone else sitting there. On the whole,

Ferguson considered the level of service to be quite satisfactory.

Back at the house, Tom always seemed to be hurrying out the door, or locking himself away in the main floor office. One morning just after breakfast Ferguson brought the driftwood sculpture downstairs, and stopped him in the hallway.

“How’s it going, Tom?”

“How is it *going*?” he said, studying the sculpture with a puzzled expression.

“Mind if we talk a minute?”

“There’s the phone.”

“You seem to be working non-stop, Tom. Why don’t you arrange a day off? I thought maybe we could spend a day together, go to Camden, hang out.”

“Hang *out*?”

Ferguson took the sculpture back upstairs. The only other opportunity to speak was over dinner, but Philippe, Melanie, and Jane were

always there, putting a damper on things, making conversation impossible. Then, towards the middle of his visit, Tom abruptly announced that he had to make a short two-day business trip to Brussels.

“So I’ll see you when I see you,” Ferguson said.

He spent the intervening time staying as far away from the house as possible, filling out the afternoons at the Twin Moore Arms, making desultory progress through *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Ferguson thought about writing his father a letter, but that was a bit complicated. He wasn’t even sure where, exactly, his father was – traveling on business, Ferguson gathered. His father hadn’t filled Ferguson in on the itinerary, and Ferguson hadn’t received one of his e-mail Updates for a while. Ferguson received these e-mail Updates a few times a year. It was the same e-mail that went out to all his other relatives, colleagues, old school chums – *Hi there!* – the equivalent of those generic mimeographed letters people sent back in the 60s and 70s. In the end, Ferguson decided the whole letter home concept was a bit flawed.

Returning to the house from the Twin Moore Arms just after closing time, Ferguson always went straight upstairs, turning the thermostat up to maximum (a comforting zone helpfully indicated on the dial by a warning strip of bright red), getting under the covers, and gloomily studying the driftwood sculpture warming up over by the radiator.

This item, this *work of sculpture*, was beginning to get on his nerves. His reasons for bringing along this asinine piece of furniture now puzzled and disturbed him. What had he been thinking? It had cost too much, weighed about 20 pounds, and caused an embarrassing scene on the flight over when he tried to cram it into the overhead compartment. He had purchased it at the lake where he and Tom spent their childhood summers, hoping Tom would get a kick out of it. But now he could see that Tom would not get a kick out of it. It was an ugly piece of shellacked wood with a knot in the centre which, examined from a certain angle, resembled a face of freakish maladjustment and alarm.

Yes, a little re-thinking in the old giftware department was in order.

And something else was worrying Ferguson. For as long as he could remember, Ferguson had been the acknowledged black sheep of the family. Certainly it was a role for which he was eminently suited, and he had always risen to its requirements with both the enthusiasm and the effortless style of one possessed of a natural genius for screwing up big time. But now here was Tom threatening to horn in, clumsily aspiring to the same honour, upsetting the familial equilibrium. If Tom became what is known at family gatherings as a slight disappointment – and there was every indication that he was well on the way to doing that – where would that leave Ferguson? You can't have two black sheep in one family. That just made a family of rejects, a different thing entirely, and not *quite* what one had in mind. To be a successful black sheep, you needed a predictable, successful group of relatives to act as counterpoint, all the better to set off those brilliant flashes of mutiny and disaster. Tom didn't seem to appreciate this fine balance.

At this rate, if he kept up his expat nutcase routine, sooner or later, he might even overtake Ferguson, and like it or not, Ferguson would begin to assume the mantle of the wiser, more prudent sibling. He gloomily considered such a future for himself. Almost certainly, he would have to lose weight and apply himself to study, possibly even become courteous. The whole idea was too depressing. It was time Tom bucked up.

When Tom didn't show up two days later, Ferguson stopped Philippe in the hallway to question him about this.

"As I think I mentioned, Tom decided to stay in Brussels another day. He'll be back tomorrow evening."

"You didn't mention anything of the kind."

Philippe ignored this comment. He was studying the book in Ferguson's hand.

"Ah, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*." He nodded approvingly. "Good choice."

That did it as far as *Seven Habits* was concerned. On his way to the Twin Moore Arms, Ferguson carefully placed it under the wheel of a large truck.

TOM ARRIVED early evening the following day. The household had just sat down to dinner – vegetable stir fry – when Ferguson noticed that Philippe was giving him a cold stare?

“I’m afraid I have to report,” he said solemnly, as though declaring the outbreak of hostilities on the edge of town, “that we are still experiencing problems with the thermostat.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that,” Ferguson said. “It’s usually turned to the lowest setting.”

Across the table, Melanie and Tom were glaring at him. It occurred to Ferguson what awful complexions everyone had. The air? The cold? Fatigue? Something much worse?

“As I think I’ve mentioned before, I’d prefer it if you didn’t tamper

with the thermostat,” Philippe said.

Ferguson was still feeling the effects of an afternoon of private study at the Twin Moore Arms. “Just a matter of turning the thermostat back up to the proper level.”

“The proper level?” Melanie asked.

“Room temperature, as opposed to cold and damp.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t tamper with the thermostat,” Philippe repeated.

“Busy day in the office, gang?” Ferguson asked.

“We are all a little tired, yes,” Philippe said, giving his mouth a neat wipe of the napkin, sighing, and going upstairs. A few minutes later, Ferguson took Tom aside.

“Okay, Tom. It’s time you and I had a talk.”

“Go right ahead.”

“Not here. Alone.”

“I’m afraid I’ve got a lot of – ”

“Don’t give me that.” Ferguson practically pulled him to the door, handed him his jacket, and in a moment they were walking down Fortune Green Road.

“Tom, who are these people? And before you begin responding with a bunch of rhetorical questions – don’t. I want to know. Who are these people? How did you get mixed up with them?”

“They’re friends.”

“And what exactly are you doing every day?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. That is one of the things I’m worried about.”

“We’re business associates.”

Business associates. Ferguson turned the phrase over in his mind. “What kind of business?”

“Investment. I’m sure I mentioned all this before.”

Equivocation was something Ferguson knew a thing or two about,

was in fact quite the authority on, and he was quick to detect it in others.

“What does this investment involve?”

“Right now we’re trying to diversify. It’s too bad Philippe isn’t here. He’s the one with the most technical knowledge. He’s really the best person to ask.”

“Yes, well right now Philippe isn’t here, thank God. And anyway, Philippe isn’t the point. Forgive me if I’ve missed something along the way but – what exactly is your role in all this investment business?”

“I handle the research side of things.”

“I see.” Ferguson decided that, at the earliest convenient moment back at the house, a little redoubled effort on the espionage front was in order. For several days, he had had a feeling that Tom had joined an organization, a group – that there was some sort of structure below the surface here.

“Tom, are you happy?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’m not trying to interfere. But try to understand if I’m a bit confused. You take a semester off university to bicycle around Europe, and never come home again. I get a few bits and pieces by postcard, but you’ve never really explained, clearly explained, what it is you’re doing. You’re been living in London for two years, and yet you never seem to go anywhere here, do anything interesting. No museums, no music. The only place you seem to have been outside that house of yours is *Brussels*. You haven’t been to Paris, Tom. You haven’t even been to *Chelsea* – but Brussels: no problem. In the meantime, you’ve lost weight. With all due respect, and I mean this in the kindest possible way – you look like shit.”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“And then there’s the crackpot diet. May we speak about that diet for a moment? You *say* it’s doing wonders for your insomnia and sinuses and allergies and a bunch of other problems you never really

had in the first place, but all it seems to have done is make you look like you won't spend enough on a decent meal."

"That's ridiculous. It was a traditional, heavy diet that caused the problems in the first place."

"Maybe. But what are your plans? To go on living in that vegetarian nuthouse? What about your degree – you must have thought about finishing that."

"What about *your* degree?" Tom snapped. "You said yourself you were taking time off."

"That's right, I am."

Well, not taking time off, exactly. Not voluntarily, anyway. Ferguson had been kicked out of university. To be fair, he had had plenty of warning.

Long before the fatal expulsion, he had received a letter – a Letter of *Censure*, as it was known – from the Dean of Academic Affairs. This letter wished to call attention to certain irregularities in his grades, and the

concept of a Grade Point Average minimum. And indicating subtly but unmistakably through various subordinate clauses that, while it was within his discretionary authority as Dean to waive the college rules concerning minimal GPA standards, he also had the power to enforce them. This Letter of Censure delighted Ferguson so much he carried it around everywhere in a protective plastic sleeve, reading excerpts of its more spectacular pomposity aloud at Varsity Pizza. Things might have ended there if he hadn't, one insomniacal night, succumbed to the temptation of replying to that letter. The Dean responded swiftly with an expulsion for "reasons both scholastic and attitudinal (*sic*)."
Ferguson enclosed that one in a protective plastic sleeve, too.

"So you're going to study Russian? On your own?"

"That will be my *principal* area of research," Ferguson said vaguely.

Actually, his principal area of research would be Varsity Pizza, participating in arguments and other social occasions with the rest of *Pablo Picasso*.

“That’s quite an ambitious program you’ve set for yourself,” Tom said.

“Be that as it may,” Ferguson said. “We were discussing your situation. Which brings me to my main point. Why are you staying in that house? Just what sort of hold do they have over you?”

“You exaggerate things. I can leave if I choose.”

“But interestingly, you never do. And that’s the really peculiar part. It’s not as though the set-up is all that appealing. Why *is* Philippe so stingy about the food and heat? I assume it’s Philippe who handles the money, and the rest of you just follow the orders?”

Tom stared at his brother, his face reddening. He was about to say something, but before he did, they heard footsteps hurrying towards them from down the street.

“Ah, gentlemen. May I join you for a bit of fresh air?”

It was Philippe, of course.

THE FOLLOWING morning Ferguson woke early, unable to fall back asleep, a headache sawing away mid-cranium. He felt fat and hung over. After his usual medications of aspirin and water – he kept these by his bed now, with breakfast always following much later, at the crack of 11 or 12 once equilibrium had been restored – he went out for a walk.

A turn off Mill Lane brought him into a tangle of streets with classical allusions: Orestes Street, Narcissus Road, Achilles Road, Pandora Road. His headache hadn't retreated any, and in his irritation he imagined a lower ranking city official at the turn of the century, a classics enthusiast, hunched over maps of the soon-to-be completed West Hampstead suburb, filling in those lofty names as though he were completing a crossword.

It was during these ruminations that Ferguson looked up to see Tom crossing the intersection ahead. Tom didn't see him. He was walking towards his house, from the direction of the local tube stop. Ferguson checked his watch: it was a little after 7:00 in the morning.

He was just returning home.

A few minutes later, Ferguson rapped at the door of Tom's office.

When he answered, it was clear Tom hadn't slept the night before. "Tom. Thought you might like to join me for coffee." Tom was blocking the way, but over his shoulder Ferguson could see a desk with several telephones, a spreadsheet glowing on a computer monitor.

"No, thanks."

Someone hurried up the stairs. A woman Ferguson hadn't seen before.

"That's Karin," Tom said.

"Just how many people live here?" Ferguson asked.

"Are you normally this suspicious?"

"Yes."

"Karin's just staying for a couple of days. She'll be going back to Belgium at the end of the week."

"Why are people constantly travelling back and forth to Belgium?"

Why doesn't anyone stay here? Or there, for that matter. And by the way. I saw you coming in earlier. Just where did you spend the night?"

"Highgate."

"Highgate? Why did you stay in Highgate?"

"As I think I mentioned before, we recently bought another house over there."

Had he said anything about another house? Ferguson didn't think so. And there was that disturbing Philippism creeping in, that "as I think I mentioned before" guff.

"Another house? What for?"

"I have some important research to do," Tom said.

"Ah, yes. The research."

Tom closed the door and Ferguson heard the click of the lock. A phone rang and he could hear Tom answer, speaking in a low solemn voice. Ferguson stood there for a moment, the closed door about one inch from his nose.

Upstairs, Karin was unpacking in Jane's room. Ferguson introduced himself. This time around he decided he wouldn't start right in with the attitude. Evidently, Karin hadn't spoken to Philippe or any of the others since her return. No one had had a chance to warn her off him yet. When the phone rang, she excused herself and went down the hallway to answer. Ferguson had a closer look at Jane's room. Sparse, a few books on a neat shelf. The books all had something to do with either diet or Ayn Rand.

Every room he had snooped through in the house had the works of Ms. Rand. Was that what these idiots were up to? Some sort of demented Ayn Rand work cult? But not even Ferguson was quite paranoid enough to buy that one. Still. He picked up a booklet sitting among the clothes Karin had unpacked.

Turning to a paragraph underlined in faint pencil lines, he scanned the words quickly. "In our work together," "the Next Phase," "extraordinary untapped potential."

“May I keep a copy?”

Ferguson wasn't sure how long Karin had been watching him from the doorway. She took the booklet, still studying him, and put it her purse. But she seemed to be thinking things over. Before Ferguson left, she offered to give him a copy after dinner. Ferguson thanked her, and went downstairs. He could hear Tom, locked in the office, muttering on the telephone. Jane was hurrying out the front door. No one else seemed around. At the end of the hall was Philippe's room. Ferguson let himself in and closed the door quietly behind him. On the bookshelf, a collection of the usual natural medicine quackery he had come to expect from every bookshelf in the place, a copy of the *I Ching*, several Ayn Rand novels. A chest of drawers, but few clothes in it.

Ferguson concluded that Tom had joined a cult. If people joined these things because they were adrift and in need of a tightly knit organization, a replacement family, Tom fit the profile all right. As a matter of fact, Ferguson had to admit, so did he. The last time he

received one of his father's e-mail Updates, he couldn't help noticing – he really couldn't help noticing that he was on the cc line. Just before Ferguson left for London, his father called to apologize – in advance – for missing his birthday, coming up a few days later. Good old dad, always planning ahead.

His father couldn't send a card, and wouldn't be able to call on the day itself, but wanted Ferguson to know that he'd "be in his thoughts." Oh, well – in that case.

Ferguson returned to his search of the room. *Clinic modern*. Bare walls. A night table, empty except for keys. In the closet, one suit. Again, he had the sense that it wasn't a real bedroom. More of a guest room of some sort, or a bedroom that, like all the others, had been thoroughly stripped of personality.

Much later that day, around 5:00, Ferguson heard Tom go out. No one else seemed to be around. The office door was locked. He went back to Philippe's room, got the keys out of the night table, and tried

one after the other until the office door opened. Inside, a table with several telephones, three computers, a stack of printouts. Ferguson flipped through the printouts. Everything was alphanumeric; it made no sense. Against one of the bare walls, a metal file cabinet. He began going through the top drawer. Inside each file, spreadsheets. And in one, correspondence with a bank, and yellow *Stick-It* notes attached to the file itself, apparently recording points from a telephone conversation. Ferguson had just turned the file sideways to read the handwriting when the door opened.

“Oh,” a voice said. It was Karin. Ferguson stared at her a moment, not exactly sure what the correct procedure was. A letter from the file he was holding slipped loose. Ferguson watched it flutter sideways and hit the floor.

Hey! Way to go, home team! Looking *good!*

“Pardon me,” he finally said, cramming the file back in its drawer, any which way.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s all right, thanks,” Ferguson said brightly. “Found it.”

Karin came over and closed the file drawer.

“Found what? What are you doing here?” He’d never get a copy of that booklet now, whatever it was.

Ferguson was already by the door. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid I really must be going,” he said in his High Commissioner voice, a little of the old nasal intake, very lordly. He returned Philippe’s keys to his room. When he came back down the hallway, Karin was still standing in the doorway, watching. “Very kind of you.” Recent promotion, Chancellor of the Exchequer speaking now, striding down the hallway, throwing open the door. “Really must hurry along.”

THE REST OF the evening, naturally, was spent at the Twin Moore Arms. It was time to regroup, take stock. Tom had joined some sort of cult, organization, call it what you want. They had money, but

where it came from wasn't clear. They had a leader, at least on the local level, in Philippe, and a philosophy undoubtedly so fatuous that it had to be carefully hidden from scrutiny. They travelled back and forth between London and Belgium.

Beyond that, Ferguson knew no more than he did when he arrived. He looked at his watch. It was after 8:00. Somehow he didn't think he'd be welcome back at the house for dinner. He decided to clear his head with some more curry and beer, and went up to the bar, pointing in his usual mute way, not really paying attention, still thinking about what had just happened back at the house, turning the event over and over in his mind.

The bartender smiled. "Have a seat, sir. We'll bring them over."

"Great. Thanks."

The bartender nodded and had just put his hand on the tap of Courage when he stopped. "What did you say?"

Ferguson looked at him, snapping out of it.

“You just spoke. I heard you.”

There was nothing to be done but improvise. “Yes – I said thanks.”

“But you can’t speak.”

“Of course I can. I finally got over that throat condition.”

“Pint of Courage,” the bartender said snippily, slopping foam all over the place.

That evening, Ferguson’s status as official mute dignitary of the Twin Moore Arms came to a swift end, all executive privileges suspended.

While he was in the restroom, his table fell to a hostile party. He ended up exiled to the wobbly table near the door. The curry, sloppily ladled out and appearing only after a long delay, arrived with an unmistakable rude clatter of dish on tabletop. As he was leaving, he noticed the bartender leaning over to have a quiet word with a customer, and the two of them observing him carefully, nodding.

It was already dark outside. When he returned home, Ferguson brought the driftwood sculpture downstairs and out to the backyard.

Now, it would have been nice, it would have been very helpful, if it had just fit into the garbage can. But we are talking about a very special piece of sculpture, and turn and push it as he might, it just wouldn't go quietly. Ferguson jostled the can around, but nothing doing. How very awkward to have one's failed present looming out of a garbage bin. What might Emily Post have advised under the circumstances? There was a shovel leaning against the house, and Ferguson let it have it with that. In the end, it went in all right, though Ferguson doubted anyone would ever manage to get it back out.

Walking towards the back door, he noticed a light on the first floor. Philippe was watching from the kitchen window, smiling.

Phillipe was on his way upstairs when Ferguson stopped him.

"Oh Phil, I've been meaning to ask you."

He turned. "It's *Philippe*."

"Just curious, Phil. But what's the scam?"

"The scam?"

“Just between us. Do you get all the money? Or just the sense of control?”

Philippe smiled. He came downstairs and gently laid a hand on Ferguson’s shoulder. “You should join us. I have a group starting up over in Highgate, and we’re one short. The work would do you good.”

“Yes, but what exactly is the work.”

“The *work*?”

“Screw you, Philippe.”

Philippe moved as if about to punch, but stopped at the sound of the front door opening. Karin looked to Ferguson, then at Philippe. “May I speak with you?” she asked Phillippe.

Ferguson had just turned up the thermostat and settled into bed with his clothes on when there was a knock on the door: Philippe, Tom, Melanie, and Jane. The committee had met downstairs with Karin. Following brief presentations, they had come to the conclusion that, as Philippe put things, it would be best if Ferguson left now.

Best.

“Fine with me,” Ferguson said. He put his bottle of aspirin in his suitcase. Tom followed him downstairs, and while Ferguson was still organizing himself on the porch, he heard the door close and lock. He took the tube out to Heathrow.

FERGUSON DIDN'T hear anything from Tom for a long while after that. He sent him a letter. No answer. A year went by. Then, the following spring, Ferguson began receiving the occasional postcard again.

Ferguson decided to call. Philippe answered. Tom was in Belgium for a few days. Business was booming. And everyone was wondering what had become of Ferguson. Everyone was so worried.

About the Author

ROBERT LINDSEY lives in Vancouver. His work has appeared in *Quarry*, *Ariel*, and the *Bloomsbury Review*.

