

—TALES FROM—

*Terra
Fauna*

Mae L. Strom

This is a work of fiction. Names, anthropomorphised animal characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

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Content warning: Contains classism, objectification, smoking and unconventional cigar use, references to alcohol, religion and homophobic language, and the suggestion of relations between consenting male anthropomorphised animals. While no explicit content features, reader discretion is advised.

(16+)

THE
CALLICLES CLUB

BY

MAE L. STROM

FROM THE AUTHOR OF 'LONE SOLE', 'FLOUNDER' AND
'CROSSED SWORDS' COMES A DARING NEW ENTRY IN
THE TALES FROM TERRA FAUNA SERIES, TOLD OVER

FIVE SCINTILLATING ACTS!

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'Nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker.'

—Calicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, circa 380 BC

A C T T H E
F I R S T

E N T R É E

1. In ballet, a prelude to the adagio, in which the two leads make their grand entrance
2. In table service, a small dish, often the first, designed to whet the appetite

It was a curious anomaly, the Callicles Club.

The establishment stood, intransigent, in the bustling heart of Oxton Street, less than a mile from the palace gates. Boutiques rose and fell over the centuries. Taverns and traders gradually gave way to coffeehouses and elegant department stores, but always the Callicles Club remained, its burgundy curtains swaying gently behind a black mahogany façade. The quiet dignity of the club made it easy to overlook, wedged as it was between gaudy glass displays, but all the same, that didn't stop the rumours from swirling.

Pampered pups wielding sticks of candied rhubarb would whisper as they tiptoed past, whilst hoary hares with flower baskets knew to keep a distance. The ebony fascia was blank, which suited the club just fine, because everyone on Oxton Street knew its name by heart. It was feared and revered in equal measure, a font of endless speculation and not inconsiderable jealousy, if the rumours about its illustrious clientele were true. Everyone from chimney sweeps to foreign princes disappeared beyond those curtains, and not all of them returned.

Those were the rumours, anyway...

The club's latest acquisition was one William Tong. The fourth son in a family of chain-smoking, bricklaying badgers, Bill was born with

neither the lung capacity for a twenty-five-a-day habit, nor the requisite shoulder strength to carry a hod. Despite his cheerful disposition, the runt's employment prospects were decidedly more black than white, which was how, at the tender age of eighteen, he found himself outside the club on a sopping Monday morn, clutching the Daily Howlette to his breast.

Nestled in the classified ads was a lucrative opportunity 'like no other!' Bill very much doubted that this interview would distinguish itself from the previous dozen, but the promise of complimentary refreshments was too tantalising to ignore. What else could drag him halfway across town in a flat cap and his brother's Sunday best? A free lunch would grant him the strength to hound the local factories, printing presses and dockyards for another day.

Today was different, though. Bill had never visited an establishment this prestigious before. His prospects seemed to wane with every glimpse of his oversized duffle coat in the window, but beggars couldn't be choosers. (Or bricklayers, as the case may be.) Shivering from the cold, Bill collapsed his patchwork umbrella, shook it thrice to clear the drops, then stole in through the entrance before he could change his mind, tucking his cap under his arm.

He made the right choice. As the door swung shut behind him, warm air suffused his lungs like angel's breath. The taste was clean and heady, fresh-cut leather and patchouli, with sweeter notes he was less familiar with. Inside, the foyer was narrow, but immaculate. Polished wainscotting as far as the eye could see, with seemingly infinite doorways mirrored on a veined marble floor. Brass gas lamps lined the walls. Their flickering lent the hallway a subtle, steady movement that commanded the eye.

Indeed, it was some time before Bill noticed the reception he was standing in. The lacquered desk by the door featured only a pair of bells, while the back wall housed an intriguing rack of numbered silver keys, all minded by a tall timber wolf in a leather apron. It wasn't until the wolf inclined his head in greeting that Bill finally spotted him, at

which point he nearly jumped out of his skin. Up until that moment, the wolf had been as still as a statue.

'Bugger me sideways!' Bill exclaimed, before he realised what he was saying and clamped down firmly on his tongue. He had one chance at a first impression. Was this really how he planned on spending it? 'Sorry mate, I didn't see you there. Long morning. It was a right palaver findin' this place. You'd give needles in haystacks a run for their money. The name's Bill, by the way. Pleasure to make your 'quaintance!'

Wiping his paws dry, Bill offered the handshake with a smile. The wolf's stern, well-sculpted features failed to reciprocate. His toned arms remained at his back, locked behind the leather apron like he was waiting to deliver an elocution lesson. It was an unusual get-up. While the apron was well-fitted, equipped with a variety of pockets from front to back, it could hardly have been called flattering. Underneath, the off-white smock and baggy britches did nothing for his figure. Indeed, they seemed more befitting of an ironmonger's workshop than the front of house, though of course Bill knew better than to mention it.

When it became clear that his offer was falling on deaf ears, Bill withdrew his paw. Hopefully, his nervous laugh would be enough to smooth things over. This introduction wasn't going at all how he planned it. 'I saw your ad in the paper,' he explained, holding his pilfered copy open at the relevant page. 'Brought it with me just in case. Must have circled it half a hundred times on the way over. Violet ink. Now I know that stuff's not cheap, but I thought it might help to show commitment. You don't, uh... happen to know where I should...?'

Staring down at him, the wolf's eyes narrowed. The service bells on the front desk were identical in every regard, save for their hue. The one on the left was golden, the right a tarnished bronze. With no hesitation, and without averting his gaze, the wolf tapped the leftmost bell. Loud and clear, the note rang out. Behind one of the foyer's innumerable doors, there emerged the sound of chairs scraping. Voices laughed, and papers rustled.

Bill watched as the third door on the right crept open. A giddy hare with crooked teeth and no shoes and socks emerged, dancing a jig. He hopped up the foyer with two fluffy thumbs hooked through his paint-splotched overalls. Clearly an apprentice of some description, and of a similar age to Bill, if the hairs on his chin were anything to go by.

'Looks like someone won the pools,' Bill remarked. It was refreshing to share a room with someone shorter for once. The hare's ear tufts scarcely grazed his eyebrows. 'Go well, did it?'

The painter's apprentice responded with an ecstatic twirl. 'You can *thay* that again!' he lisped through his front teeth. Whistling past the reception like the cat that got the cream, the hare flung the entrance door open and vanished into the rain, with nary a coat or cap to his name. The club fell silent. Staring after him, Bill couldn't help but wonder if they were vying for the same position. While he hoped that it wasn't the case, part of him still wanted his competition to get it. The apprentice may have been madder than a March hare, which was unusual for late September, but such *joie de vivre* nonetheless commanded respect. (Even if that respect was best paid from behind the windows of a padded cell.)

A finger click from the foyer brought the proceedings back to the present. Like a gunshot, it was so authoritative that even Bill caught himself standing to attention. He turned around to find a shrew closing and locking that same third door. Impeccably dressed in plum tweed, with matching midnight tie, pocket square and garter socks, he was, if anything, slightly shorter than the hare, though they appeared to share the same disregard for shoes.

'I want you to make a note,' the shrew told the timber wolf. His socks were whisper quiet as he padded up to the front desk, stopping only when the tips of his coiffed, greying hair were peeking over it. Contrary to his size, his voice was powerful, and surprisingly resonant. 'Despite his potential, the exuberant Mr Baxter has taken temporary leave of his senses. Even so, his participation in the process merits the swift return of his shoes and coat. Assuming he doesn't return within the hour, his

address will be appended to you once this morning's round of interviews has concluded. Remember to leave a mint sucker in the outbreast pocket. He may not thank you for it, but his family will. That is all.'

Staring dead ahead, the wolf nodded, slightly flushed. It was the most emotion Bill had seen in him since he arrived.

'And who might you be?' Finally spotting the badger in the room, the shrew was simply delighted with what he'd found. Lifting his spectacles, he rubbed his eyes like he could scarcely believe his luck.

'W-William, sir,' Bill said, extending his free paw. 'I'm here for the interview.' The other arm was still occupied with his cap, umbrella and the paper, though strangely, he didn't recall passing a rack when he walked in. The shrew took his paw immediately, delivering the warm, sturdy handshake of a true gentleman. His cologne wafted over, pink peppercorns and lavender. This was more like it. 'The name's William Tong, but don't trouble your fine self with all them extra syllables. Where I come from, we don't sweat the small stuff. My mates just call me Bill.'

'I'm sure they do, Bill. Allow me to introduce myself. Master Damson Pitch-Claret Piper, though for our purposes, Master Damson will do nicely. As the head disciplinarian of the oldest and most prestigious gentlemen's club, I have rather less room for impropriety. What my friends call me is entirely my business, though perhaps over time we'll find ourselves better acquainted, eh?'

Studying Bill from top to bottom, the master's wax moustache was positively bouncing, even if it curled slightly at the spectre of his still-dripping umbrella. 'Ursa Major! Has no one offered to take your things?'

Bill sniffed. 'No, sir,' he said, shaking his head. 'Not that I mind it, but I couldn't find a hook for hide nor hair. I thought you might've been gettin' your brass thingamajigs all polished up for the bank holiday.'

Master Damson sighed. 'No, no, this won't do at all.' He snapped his claws twice. To Bill's surprise, the timber wolf sprang into action, stepping from behind the desk to reveal two bare, well-manicured

paws on the cold marble floor. Turning around, the wolf knelt before the disciplinarian and his prospective interviewee. Multiple articles of clothing were hidden on his person. Three umbrellas already hung from pockets at his waist, while a shrew-sized coat and a pair of pristine loafers lounged on hooks at the back of his neck. ‘There you are, lad. Any hook of your choice!’

Bill was less enthusiastic about the arrangement. ‘Are you sure, sir?’ he asked Master Damson, tucking the newspaper into his coat pocket. ‘How do you mean?’

‘It’s just... I’ve never had someone take my coat before. Is this really how it works?’

Pride blazed, red-hot, behind the master’s eyes. ‘It is in the Callicles Club,’ he said. ‘Now hop to it, there’s no time like the present. The sooner you’re decent, the sooner we can discuss the magnificent opportunity laid out before you.’

Bill bit his lip. He’d been warned by his brothers about the queer customs of blue-blooded folk. If the wolf had shown distress, or offered the slightest hint of resistance, his distaste of the act may have overwhelmed him, but the rumbling of his stomach made the dilemma surprisingly simple. The badger hadn’t eaten in two days. A free lunch was a free lunch. Even as he divested himself of his coat, cap and umbrella, positioning his personal effects to better balance the wolf’s burden, inside his head was swimming, replete with conjurations of clean tablecloths, crusty loaves, blood-red wine and trout on the bone.

Last to go were his brother’s dress shoes. About three sizes too large, and thirty times too scuffed for an establishment with its own gas line, Bill apologised under his breath as he hung them up. Karma answered in the icy bolts that shot through his moth-gnawed socks, biting his pads through the holes. Not for the first time, the extravagant tastes of the gentry did the impoverished few favours.

‘Hold the phone, that can’t be right.’ The master frowned. ‘Aren’t we forgetting something? Where’s your scarf, dear boy? Where are your

gloves?’

‘I don’t have any scarfs or gloves.’ Bill knew that it wasn’t a good look, but it seemed too early on in the day for truth twisting. Even so, he was unprepared for the sheer delight that his answer precipitated. One would have thought the holidays had come early.

‘Music to my ears!’ the master announced. ‘I do believe this interview is going to go swimmingly.’ Another click from his sharp, well-honed claws compelled the wolf to rise and turn, still with his arms at his back.

‘Cheers, mate,’ Bill said reflexively. The wolf may not have replied, or even acknowledged Bill’s existence, but his tail certainly did, straining against the service loop that bound it to the apron. Were it not for the loop, it would have been wagging up a storm.

The master rolled his eyes. ‘Please refrain from thanking the furniture,’ he told Bill. His patient manner suggested that he was used to repeating himself. ‘We don’t want it getting ideas above its station.’ The moment he turned to the wolf, the wagging stopped. ‘I see they didn’t teach this clothing rack to count. I make that eleven unique articles, gloves notwithstanding. Do you know what that means?’

The wolf moved to answer, but thought better of it, and made a gesture with his paws instead. ‘That’s right,’ Master Damson continued. ‘You’re overencumbered. Decant in the cloakroom at once, and set your best shoeblick to work on those derbies. If they don’t look ready to return to the retailer by the interview’s end, you can satisfy your itching tongue on the next pair. Have I made myself clear?’

Red as a beet, the timber wolf nodded.

‘Good. Mr Baxter’s interview room will need to be rendered suitable for the afternoon. In the meantime, Bill and I will take Master Corrigan’s executive. If the young master has any objections, he can file them in writing. He’s your handler after all, is he not?’ Passing the wolf a silver key, the master received one in turn. The key for the third room went back on the board.

Before his dismissal, the wolf offered the master a bow. The motion

was well-practised; despite its depth, his adornments remained fixed to their hooks. Bill received only a withering glance, but being used to worse, he was hardly of a mind to complain. Besides, bearing witness to these bizarre rituals was giving the badger plenty to think about. It seemed almost quaint, exercising authority without the explicit threat of violence. Where he came from, discipline was a five-letter word engraved on the knuckles of a swift back hand.

The wolf took off down the foyer with surprising speed. 'Hang on a tick!' Bill called out, but his words went unheeded. The wolf disappeared around the first corner. 'Drat. I didn't catch the bloke's name.'

Smiling, the master ushered Bill after him. The interview room awaited. 'Oh, I wouldn't worry about that,' Master Damson said.

'Why not?'

'Isn't it obvious? The coat rack's on the clock. It doesn't have one.'

A C T T H E
S E C O N D

R E L E V É

1. In ballet, raising the body onto the very tips of one's feet, requiring careful balance
2. In table service, a substantial meat dish, often beef, consumed before the main course

The interior of the club would have been the envy of the Minotaur himself. Master Damson led Bill down the first marble hallway. At the end, they turned left, then right, then took three lefts in quick succession without retracing their steps. It was at this moment that Bill abandoned all hope of memorising the layout. Every hallway looked the same, and if there was any numbering convention to the endless parade of doors, the logic evaded him. The twelfth and eighty-sixth rooms shared the same narrow stretch.

It was a huge relief when the master finally stopped outside a door with a golden plaque. The previous plaques had been silver. 'Room E-IV,' Bill discerned under the gas lamps' dim flicker. If the IV were numbers, like the ones in the Shepherd's Bible or on the face of Big Bill, the capital's clock tower, that would have made it the fourth executive room. Bill felt a small swell of pride at the deduction. Not every hod carrier's son would have been able to put two and two together. (Literally, in some cases. Growing up with three brothers, Bill had learned from a young age not to argue with men that could throw punches faster than words.)

As the master unlocked the door, a mechanical noise emerged from across the hallway. The head of a vacuum device poked into view, soon accompanied by a tiger garbed only in a loose-fitting toga. It was difficult

not to stare. There was something familiar about his blotchy nose and high cheekbones. Seemingly oblivious to the master and his guest, the tiger was occupied with the bellows, at least until the door to Room E-IV swung open, blowing his toga up. The resultant shaft of light exposed a rump that could have been carved from marble.

Frozen in place, the tiger locked eyes with Bill. The heat generated from the exchange stirred uneasy feelings in the pit of Bill's stomach. No girl had ever looked at him like that.

'Well, son? Are you coming?' Master Damson was his saving grace. Bill ducked inside before the libidinous feline could take matters further. The door was closed and locked behind him, and that was the end of that.

Bill found himself in a bright, well-furnished study. It was warmer than the rest of the club, both in temperature and sensibility. Twin floral chaise lounges framed a crackling fireplace, while the textured throws on a hardwood floor provided welcome relief for his thawing pads. At the far end of the room sat a walnut desk with two oddly proportioned chairs. Their legs were short, squat even, but the red leather cushions looked plump and inviting. Master Damson was already seated at the head.

Bill was in no great hurry to join him, however. Eager to drink it all in, the badger found his strides falling in time with the pendulum of the grandfather clock. Carved in the shape of a swan, its broad wings formed the central focus of the room. Each tock was resonant enough to draw a demure rattle from the chandelier overhead. The ornament was massive. It could have been made of glass, or crystal, or pure-cut diamond for all Bill knew. Even then, he would have blanched at the revelation that he could have lived for a year on the cost of one of those beads.

Bill was delighted to find that the bookcases lining the walls were packed with books, instead of the ashtrays and odds and ends that littered all but his bedside shelves at home. The reading was heavier too. Encyclopedias, medical journals and almanacs, along with tomes so old that the cracked leather had rendered their spines illegible. Bill knew just the tanner to call for a restoration. He wondered if it would

be impertinent to recommend them. Well-to-do folk were notoriously thin-skinned, and he didn't want to risk his own hide ending up on a shelf one day. For the time being, he kept it in his back pocket.

'Won't you join me?'

It wasn't until Bill was standing at the desk that he realised why the chairs appeared so unconventional. They weren't chairs at all. Rather, two members of staff had prostrated themselves on all fours. Besuited, but missing shoes, a saddle of sorts held the back cushions in place. The master's seat of choice, a mature bear of significant bulk, seemed utterly unperturbed by the obligation. His eyes were obscured behind blinders. The steady breathing of Bill's own chair, a striped wildcat, was almost too much for him to bear. Firelight danced off the studs of his crimson cushions.

'If it's all the same to you,' Bill said, speaking carefully, 'I reckon I'd be better off on my own two feet, thank you very much.'

'Are you quite sure? All necessary provisions for comfort and safety have been made. An empty chair serves no one, least of all the chair.'

Bill nodded. 'As sure as eggs is eggs. In fact, if you could show me to the door, I'm happy to stop takin' up any more of your valuable time. I don't want no trouble. I'm sure whoever's running the joint is doing a bang-up job. Nothing but respectability from top to bottom, but whatever you're selling here, I ain't buyin' it. Never had much appetite for the flesh of my fellow animal, and I'm not all that keen on signin' my soul away with a flaming feather neither. If you asked me to dance with the devil in the pale moonlight, I'd disappoint every time, and not just because I've got two left paws. I'm a simple soul, me, common as muck and happy to be so, and my place is out there with the rest of 'em. Not in here, with fancy candle holders swingin' over me head like the ruddy sword of Dumockles. Please... let me go.'

To Bill's relief, the master's reaction was one of confusion, not anger. 'Nobody in this establishment would dream of holding you against your will,' Master Damson clarified. 'My deepest apologies if it seemed

otherwise. Permission is our sacred mother, and we guard her virtue jealously. We have no designs on your soul, or the sanctity of the mind and body of any creature, though I won't pretend your response is the first of its kind. I may have misjudged your character. A rare mistake, and not one to be repeated.'

The master produced the room key from his pocket. 'Standard interview procedure confines me to the desk,' he explained. 'If you must leave, we ask only that you keep our business to yourself. Reject our customs, reclaim the cost of your travels if you will, but forgo discretion, and your safety can no longer be guaranteed. A small price to pay for enlightenment, as I'm sure you'd agree.'

Bill half-expected one of the chairs to rise up and smother him, but his approach was uninterrupted. He retrieved the key without complaint. The only surprise was the genuine disappointment behind the shrew's brown eyes. Try as he might, Bill could detect no malice in him. 'Before we part ways,' the master said, 'is there anything I can offer you to change your mind? Anything I can say?'

Bill shook his head. 'Unlikely, sir, but thanks for trying.' With the key in hand, he was feeling more confident already. 'It's a funny old world, ain't it? Bigger 'n' stranger than anything that old king of Ithaca could imagine. Chances are, I'm just jumpin' at shadows on the wall, but that's the kinda creature I am. Cut me, and you're as like to find cotton wool as the real thing, if you catch my meaning. The gentleman you're lookin' for is out there, I'm sure of it. Someone with cleaner claws and bigger boots to fill than a brick-dirt runt from Hodsfield Common. Knowin' my luck, this was another case of right place at the right time. Only thing wrong was the badger. Unless you've got other gigs goin', something that sits better in the old gut, I think I'm happy to call it a day. Master Damson.'

Nodding respectfully, Bill made for the door, at which moment his stomach seized upon the opportunity to voice its displeasure. Far from genteel, but undeniably impressive in its own right, the growl was fierce

enough to wrack the chandelier. Master Damson called after him. A single word, but it was enough to freeze him in his tracks. ‘Faggot!’

Bill turned around slowly. ‘Excuse me?’ he said.

‘Faggot,’ the master repeated. ‘Braised with marrowfat peas and beef gravy? Suckling boar with garlic and wild thyme mash? Trio of lobster thermidor, basted with Larenese butter and served in a century brandy sauce? Nobody can prevent you from throwing the interview to the wolves, but indulge me please, I beg you, and stay at least for lunch. Never let it be said that the Callicles Club permitted a guest to leave with an empty stomach. The finest chefs in the land sharpen their steel in our kitchens. There must be something your heart desires.’

Once again, the latent twinge in Bill’s gut proved no match for his aching stomach. The badger’s imagination was set to racing. Every dish he’d gazed at longingly from the wrong side of a restaurant window cycled through his mind, growing in resplendence. Teetering towers of jellied earthworm pies gesticulated behind dripping cuts of bloody steak. Golden chips, thicker than his forearm, snaked through the juice, their glassy skins glistening with salt and fat. Bushels of fresh, plump fruit cascaded down a three-tiered ice cream slope, scattering sprinkles and flecks of caramel drizzle to the wind.

When anything truly meant anything, where did one begin? The answer would surely define not only one’s character, but one’s eternal, immutable soul. Was decorum welcome in the well-stocked larder of the gods? Was it even possible? Such quandaries united princes and paupers alike, a great leveller unlike any other.

Bill licked his lips. ‘I’d kill for a sandwich,’ he said at long last.

A smile spread across Master Damson’s face. ‘Wouldn’t we all?’ came the shrew’s reply. ‘May I ask what kind?’

‘Chicken,’ Bill said, pocketing the key. ‘No, bacon.’ Then, after a pause: ‘No... *both?*’

Master Damson nodded in approval. ‘Anything else?’

‘Lamb’s lettuce, radish, and hot, hot mustard.’

‘What of the bread?’

‘The what?’

‘The bread. Thirty-four varieties are hand-stretched in our artisanal bakery every morning. Only thirty-two are available before noon, though if you’re willing to wait, the sour olive and Volkovian black spelt and honey can be sourced from our partners tout de suite. The choice is yours, dear boy. Classic bloomer, or crusty baguette? Perhaps you’re feeling a little rye?’

Bill shook his head. ‘Not during an interview I ain’t,’ he said. ‘It’s bad manners to talk back, sir. Mrs Mudskipple taught us that. Even so, I can’t say in all honesty I’m that fussed about the bread, so long as it goes down easy. Is it okay to let the house decide? Dealer’s choice?’

‘Dealer’s choice,’ the master agreed. ‘And to drink?’

Here, Bill found himself at a standstill. He could ask for water, or wine, or the slowly fermented tears of Larenese swimmers collected during a full moon. But if he stripped back the finery of the centuries-old rugs he was treading, what did he really want? Ultimately, there was only one correct answer.

‘Hodder’s tea,’ Bill said with a grin. ‘Loose, if you’ve got it. Well-steeped, and strong enough to chew.’ He made sure to add a hasty, ‘Please and thank you!’ before his excitement got the better of him.

‘Your wish is our command,’ came the reply, ever obeisant. ‘There’s only one thing we expect in return, a small toll exacted from all guests. Worry not, your coin purse is safe,’ the master added, watching Bill’s paw leap to his suit pocket. ‘Consider it a gesture of good will for your time in the club.’

‘What are we talkin’?’ Bill asked. But part of him already knew.

Master Damson motioned to the wildcat waiting patiently on his hands and knees. During their conversation, he had scarcely twitched, but the prospect of being sat on had his back cushions quivering with what Bill could only assume was anticipation. ‘In the Callicles Club,’ Master Damson explained, ‘articles of furniture are afforded the same

respect given to their handlers. We don't usually permit them to speak during hours, but I'm prepared to make an exception here. Would it please you to know that your use of the facilities wouldn't constitute a burden?'

Bill's stomach answered by way of an impatient gurgle. He nodded. The badger still wasn't happy, but if this was the path that the good Shepherd had laid out for him, he'd be damned if he was going to stray.

Master Damson snapped his claws at the wildcat: once, twice, then a third time. The wildcat stretched. Rolling his shoulders, he yawned, showing off an impeccable set of pearly whites before he turned to Bill with a smirk. The observations that poured forth were cutting and clipped, enunciated broadly as though the silver spoon were still poking out of his mouth.

'Him? Mrow. The young master looks like a wriggler, but etiquette aside, there's nothing to him, I shouldn't imagine. Provided he doesn't get crumbs beneath my cushions, he shan't be a problem. We trained with bulls at the academy, you know. Master Brillig oversaw the seating arrangements. A jolly fellow he was too, the length and breadth of multiple jolly fellows. His manner was such that it never felt like work, even at full capacity. You wouldn't believe the scrapes we used to get into, fighting over the honour of seating him. During the changing of the gowns, mortar boards were flying like grapeshot—'

'Yes, yes,' Master Damson said drily. His left ear twitched, as though the momentary break from politeness were causing him discomfort. 'You all had a rip-roaring time at the academy.'

A further two clicks saw the wildcat lower himself back down, but not before offering Bill another smirk, this time accompanied by a devious glint in his eyes. Bill was starting to realise why the bear was wearing blinders. Despite assuming positions of extreme humility, the 'furniture' in the club still exercised an uncanny level of control. It was difficult to shake the feeling that they were the ones in charge, somehow.

Master Damson turned his attention to Bill. 'Better?' he asked.

‘Better,’ Bill replied, more truthful than not.

At the master’s prompting, Bill inched up to the desk, returning the key before it had a chance to burn a hole in his pocket. It felt like there was more riding on the moment than comfort. The room had grown quite still. Pacing past the wildcat’s shoulders, he gingerly lowered himself into place. It was impossible to describe what it felt like to take his seat for the first time. The subtle warmth of a fellow animal bleeding through the cushion. The gentle sway of the world as his hind paws left the floor, lessening as Bill grew accustomed to the chair’s breathing, its steady heartbeat, and the intermittent flexing of its powerful back muscles. In turn, the chair responded to Bill, elevating him the moment he fell short of resting his elbows flat on the desk.

The synergy between wildcat and badger, furniture and handler, was a force unto itself. Entirely unspoken, it was curiously intimate, and more comfortable than Bill cared to admit, even to himself. Apparently, it was impossible to hide from Master Damson, whose approval was plain to see.

‘Get yourself nice and comfortable, lad,’ the master told him. ‘It’s unlikely you’ll experience the privilege again.’

‘You sure about that?’ Leaning back in his chair, Bill grinned. Of all the animals to goad, a badger, even a pint-sized specimen such as himself, wasn’t one of them. He had half a mind to take the blasted interview, just to prove he could ace it before refusing the position.

‘Unfortunately, in this case, I am. You forget where we’re sittin’, son. This is the executive suite. Your chair is currently sixteenth in line to the throne, so take care not to defile it with crumbs or unseemly behaviour. Your country wouldn’t thank you, let alone your king.’

Bill gulped. His head had never felt so precarious atop his shoulders. The seat bobbed underneath him, a succession of silent chuckles from a studded desk chair only a few steps removed from divinity itself.

A C T T H E
T H I R D

S A U T É

1. In ballet, a jump, from the smallest hop to the largest leap of faith
2. In table service, an entremet, prepared by tossing ingredients in a blistering heat with oil

Months later, Bill would learn that the fancy hatch his food arrived in was called a dumbwaiter. It would seem an odd denigration of a role he'd be lucky to aspire to, but for now, it was just a hole in the wall, like the ones his tin-mining cousins used in the country. His sandwich came wrapped in brown paper, adorned with a wax seal on a porcelain plate. It certainly looked a picture, but the proof of the pudding was in the eating. The doorstep slices were pillowy, buttered to high heaven and slightly steamed from the wrapping, and the thick-cut bacon was crisp, glazed with just enough sweetness to round out the sharpness of the mustard. Washed down with a healthy swig of tea, liberally dosed with enough milk and sugar to fell an ox, it was just about the best thing he'd ever tasted. Taking care to keep his crumbs to himself, Bill gazed around the study while he chewed, wondering what he ever did to deserve this.

Master Damson refrained from sharing lunch, citing several important duties, but he did agree to take tea, preferring it as black as a moonless sky. By the time he poured his cup, it was sufficiently steeped so as to ooze from the teapot, something the master clearly relished while he worked at his letters, and Bill worked at his sandwich. The first sip melted years from his grey-tipped whiskers, restoring the shrew to a reverie

which, before he regained his composure, felt almost too intimate for company. ‘Now that’s what the doctor ordered...’

The letters were finished shortly thereafter, generously dusted with pounce. Each envelope in turn was lowered beneath the desk. ‘Tongue,’ the master commanded, to which his chair unquestioningly obeyed, working blindly to soften the adhesive gum to the master’s satisfaction.

Once his obligations had been met, Master Damson was finally able to relax. He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a leather cigar case. ‘You don’t mind if I indulge, do you?’ he asked Bill.

‘Course not.’ Bill shook his head, no stranger to the thick, cloying must of a fresh cigar. His father celebrated every birthday with a royal roll, though he didn’t recall them burning quite this cleanly. Nor indeed had their bands been constructed from solid gold, hammered thinner and finer than broadsheet leaves, with the royal warrant stamped on the underside. It appeared that the Tong family tradition was royal in name only.

‘So, Bill...’ Puffing away, the master reclined in his padded ursine throne. ‘Pray tell, what brings you to the Callicles Club?’

Swallowing a bite, Bill wiped his mouth with a napkin. The question was more delicate than he initially perceived. Any attempt at flattery would ring hollow for a club that prided itself on secrecy, and it was obvious from Bill’s standing that none of its cohorts would place him even among their outermost circle, making a good reference or recommendation impossible. What, then, was he expected to do? Come clean? Honesty was a dangerous currency to barter before anyone, let alone an employer wearing your life’s worth on his chain. Bill knew better than most the price one paid for truth.

The runt’s early years had been plagued with distemper, a plight not uncommon for pups born prematurely. Damp rags, feverfew tea and lashings of scorn were administered on the hour, such that the inconvenience of his existence was never lost on him. During a particularly agonising bout, it seemed doubtful that he’d make it through the night.

Bill remembered asking his mother if there was anything he could do to make her love him. He knew love was possible from the affection she lavished over his father and brothers. Her reply, which concluded the conversation then and there, constituted more words between them than had been spoken before or since. These words he now echoed to Master Damson, though they smarted still. Time had done little to dull the pain. 'Do you want the airs 'n' graces, or the cold light of day?'

Master Damson's answer came swiftly. 'Oh, the latter, every time! There are only so many matters of import that one's airs and graces can postpone. While I can't speak for the other disciplinarians, you can rest assured that you have nothing to fear from me.'

Bill scarfed down another hunk of sandwich. Breathing through his nose, he shrank into his seat like some covetous frog, in no great hurry to leave the warmth and safety of his book-laden lily pad. A quick calculation confirmed that, if push came to shove, the rest of his lunch would fit snugly in his cheeks. The books were less of a surefire bet. While his brother's suit was loose, with interior pockets broad enough to smuggle a spatchcock, the lining was poorly maintained, and he feared the colonies too much to chance it. Bill may have been a petty thief by necessity, but nothing about his thievery was petty. (A stroke of luck for the master's silver cigar cutter.) The badger knew when he was beaten. That handsome volume by the door was going nowhere.

'I came for your money, truth be told,' he admitted. 'Opportunity sounded too good to be true, but I showed up anyway, hopin' for a sixpence advance if the good Shepherd's smilin' down, and a stale heel or cup o' rice milk elsewise. No clue what the hours were like, much less the pay. The writin' in the paper was clever like that. I didn't know what to expect when I jumped off the platform, and frankly, beggin' all of your pardons, I've got less idea now.'

If Master Damson was insulted by Bill's candour, he certainly hid it well. He seemed more amused than anything, swirling his cigar like a brandy glass. Perhaps he intended for the bouquet of smoke to give form

to his thoughts. ‘The advertisement was vague by design,’ the master informed his guest. ‘Not vague enough, however, to dissuade you from presenting yourself, entirely alone, at a heretofore unfamiliar location, to unknown parties, for an undisclosed but assuredly lucrative business arrangement, the prospects of which you found reason to doubt. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this naïveté seems most unbecoming of a Hodsfield Common native. The scoundrels and screevers one imagines rubbing elbows with just to make ends meet, and yet the worst you feared from today’s encounter was a less-than-stellar selection of victuals. Enlighten me please, I implore you. How is this possible?’

Bill shrugged. ‘It ain’t much to write home about. Small ads charge by the word, don’t they?’ Master Damson nodded. ‘The way the Daily Howlette’s sellin’, they can charge by the letter, so anyone hoggin’ half a page must have notes coming out of their ears. No scam could ever claw back more than it cost to print. That’s how you know the money’s real, and you’re not settin’ yourself up to get played, or conked on the bonce by crafty resurrectionists. As to why you can trust it, well it’s written real fancy, with plenty o’ big words from the proprietor himself, but...’

At this late juncture, Bill found himself hesitating. He looked to the master for guidance. ‘Go on,’ Master Damson told him. Watching closely, he drew from his cigar, his stony countenance betraying nothing of his inner thoughts. ‘It’s all right. You can say it.’

Bill fortified himself with a draught of tea and another bite of sandwich. ‘It gives the game away, sir,’ he said. ‘One or two slips of the pen. A trifle, really, but the kind that earns a badger of limited learnin’ like myself countless canings in ragged school, such that he never forgets it, and grows up compelled—against his better judgement—to report it. Take the word “middle” for example. Far from a tricky customer, though there’s no shame in havin’ trouble with it. It’s the end that sometimes catches me, and yet the proprietor jammed three d’s in it, which ain’t regional, and makes little sense as a flourish. Only conclusion? It’s an honest-to-Shepherd mistake, one of several, and yet all the big, whoppin’

showstopper words are squeaky clean. That's what you get from someone thumbin' through a thesaurus, keepin' only the stickiest words to hand. Could've hired a proofie, but didn't, even though by all accounts they had the funds. Now what sorta person is that?

'Splashes out on a spread, but handles it themselves, and doesn't pay extra for a once-over. Clever with words, but ill at ease with the pen, someone more concerned with makin' a good impression than seeing it through, almost like their standin' no longer depends on it. Everything points to new money, which ain't a bad sort, mind. Just... a business owner of modest means who recently came into wealth, and might find it weighin' down their pockets something terrible.'

Here, Bill grinned despite himself. 'The kinda pinch that an honest, hard-working labourer from Hodsfield Common would be only too happy to help out with. Am I still makin' sense here?'

'Sense?' Master Damson repeated quietly. Bill held his breath. Smoke streamed from the master's nostrils, trailing his moustache until the latter half of the room was swimming in his phantom whiskers. The crackling from the fireside abated, leaving the grandfather clock to chime alone like some hellish, ever-growing knell. They were all of them, even the desk chairs, prisoners in the quiescence, until at last it shattered.

'You're makin' more sense than you realise, dear boy!' Both parties were relieved, but only Master Damson's smile stretched from ear to ear, his stern affectation well and truly discarded. If Bill didn't know better, he'd have sworn on something more valuable than his young life that the shrew was proud of him, though he couldn't fathom why. No animal had ever been proud of him before.

'Over the years, the club's recruitment process has been carefully curated to deter incompatibles,' the master went on to explain. 'The affluent, the indolent, and most everyone in between. What the advertisement fails to consider, the interview seeks to correct, and you, my friend, are living proof of its efficacy. My decision to expedite you may not have been in vain after all. I have a proposal that I'd like you to

consider, but first, a question. What do you know of Callicles, the figure from whom this humble institution derives its name?’

‘Lovely fella,’ Bill bluffed. ‘Haven’t heard a bad word about him!’

‘Have you heard many words about him?’

‘I have a feelin’ I’m about to hear some more.’

Master Damson grinned. ‘I wouldn’t want to make a mockery of your hodder’s intuition. Callicles lived two thousand years ago. The marbled polecat was an ancient thinker and contemporary of Socrates himself, though not one of the more agreeable ones. He maintained that dominion of the strong over the weak was the natural, just order of the world.’

‘Blimey,’ Bill said. ‘I’ll bet my stripes he wasn’t a beggar. Mudlark would be a surprise.’

‘Do you agree?’

‘That mudlark would be a surprise?’

‘No. Do you agree with his position?’

Bill scratched his chin. He bought himself some time by resuming the assault on his sandwich, though he insisted on a minimum of two chews per mouthful, to demonstrate restraint. ‘I mean, it happens,’ he said eventually, head bent over the desk. ‘Can’t argue with that. The bloke with the biggest fleet sacks the city. Lion with the smartest mane gets the dame. You’d have to be a mole to miss it. Whether it’s right, now I don’t think I’m in any place to say. They’re called our betters for a reason, aren’t they?’

‘Are they?’ Master Damson took a puff from his cigar, tinting the lenses of his spectacles red. The glowing clump at the end was growing steadily longer. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ he said, inspecting it with an uncharacteristic detach. ‘Like it or not, there is an order to this world. Old money: less divinely ordained than the sum total influence of exorbitant wealth and the inclination to wield it. Birds of a feather, and so on. Certain animal-made laws are immutable, and this one is carved in stone. Like bedrock, their strata may drift or compact, but only over

THE CALLICLES CLUB

millennia, to aid in the illusion of movement. Against the scale of our fleeting, flannel-shaking lives, they're not going anywhere. They owned your grandparents, they own you, and they'll most assuredly own the grandchildren of your grandchildren's grandchildren.'

A C T T H E
F O U R T H

P I È C E D E
R É S I S T A N C E

1. In ballet, the grand pas de deux, a duet demanding unparalleled grace and athleticism
2. In table service, the choicest dish of the main course, for which guests must reserve space

An indeterminate period of reflection followed. Bill resigned himself to his teacup, though it was anybody's guess what he hoped to find in the leafy dregs. Perhaps he was scrying for his future, a commodity whose admittedly dismal value had never been up for consideration before. The sandwich was long gone, reduced to specks once the crumbs had been mopped up. He'd been contemplating sneaking his chair a morsel, but that was before the mood had soured. 'Does it shock you to hear it?' he recalled the master asking in gentle tones. It may not have been the first time.

'Nah,' Bill said, relinquishing his cup to the saucer with an almighty clatter. The miscreant in him prayed for the perfect porcelain to chip, to wear, to mar in any way, but evidently it was made of sterner stuff. He sniffed. 'Nice to know where you stand, if anything. I reckon we're all thinkin' it, deep down. Just don't all have the courage to say it. If blisters on toes and splinters on thumbs bring you closer to the good Shepherd Himself, then why aren't the workhouses filled with lords 'n' ladies? 'Specially when it's their doubloons and finery that'll bar 'em from the gate when they meet their maker. Don't like to put myself in the habit of questionin' His grand design, but it never sat right with me.'

'It isn't right,' Master Damson said. 'Nor is it the work of invisible

guiding hands. That's why we're here. The club provides an indispensable service for the rich and poor alike, a fundamental redressing of the balance that enables both parties to thrive. Without us, the fabric of polite society would tear asunder, as you're no doubt aware if you're even passingly familiar with Larennese history.'

'The revolution?' Bill asked.

Master Damson nodded approvingly. 'The revolution,' he repeated. 'Weigh the odds too heavily against the masses, and they will take their pound of flesh to restore the plates to an even keel. This is why I was so intent that you stay for the interview, Mr William Edmund Tong from Hodsfield Common. You have been granted an audience with powers beyond the comprehension of your peers, upon whose crests the fates of empires rest. Witness their rise and fall from beyond the confines of the hourglass. This is your chance to seize your fate, and leave an indelible mark upon the world. If it's a far cry from paradise, remake it in His image. I extend to you no plans or proclamations. Only a formal invitation to tip the balance.'

'I thought you said nothin's ever gonna change. How can the scales budge when the same old cluckers rule the roost, come rain or shine?'

'How do you suppose?' Master Damson asked, tending to his cigar. The ash had grown so unwieldy that it teetered like a rope bridge, threatening to topple at any moment. Bill shrugged. The question sounded rhetorical, and he had a feeling he was about to receive his answer.

There was one last smoky draw for luck. Then, clearing his throat, the master repeated his command from earlier. This time, however, when the blind bear's long, pink tongue unfurled, it wasn't adhesive gum that greeted it. The stack of ash broke neatly on top, sizzling in a perverse facsimile of eggs in the fireplace until, at the behest of a claw click, the whole lot disappeared inside. Bill stared at the brazen display in disbelief. Master Damson just smiled. 'But who in their right mind would agree to this? What's in it for them?'

‘Everything,’ the master replied. Below the desk, formidable jaws worked, and a grateful crunching ensued. ‘Take my chair, for example. You won’t be familiar with its aunt, fearsome she-bear though she is, but the output from her black reservoirs will soon be impossible to ignore. The world is entering a new era of industry, the excesses of which even a century of rapid acceleration couldn’t deny. In the event of the she-bear’s demise, my posterior warmer stands to inherit a tidy sum of eighty million saman. That’s just under eight million Britannian pounds, and she’s far from the club’s wealthiest patron.

‘There is nothing in this world that money cannot buy. No interest too dull to sustain, nor curiosity too twisted to deny. For someone in your shoes, such a life must seem like paradise, instead of an occupation under manias beyond the means of modern medicine. One’s pockets never overflow, you see. The fabric stretches under the strain, requiring yet more to fill them until the wearer has become the worn, yet still the coppers climb. Temperance, diligence, charity. Such virtues are fever dreams to our clients, which is why they come to us. It’s a curriculum only the Callicles Club can provide, supplemented by our legendary discretion. Only kings could dream of being peasants.’

‘And they’re never sore about it?’ Bill asked, glancing down. From where he was sitting, it was an issue that required immediate clarification. ‘Being forced to hold coats, or lick letters... or worse? They’re not whistlin’ for the headsman as soon as the shoes are on, and they’re back in the golden cab?’

Master Damson shook his head. ‘Even if they loathe their treatment, which is rare enough to discount as a possibility, the code of the club is sacred. These walls are impermeable; nothing that transpires within is permitted to leave without. You understand why such secrecy is necessary, and why, should word of this be breathed to anyone, not only will your body never be found, but the bodies of everyone sharing your name and bearing a recollection of your likeness will follow shortly thereafter?’

Bill twitched a nod. ‘I’m sorry, lad.’ Master Damson sighed. ‘It brings

me no pleasure to belabour the point. Understand that this is not a threat. The road to Pastures Evergreen must necessarily be a narrow one. The irony isn't lost on us that in the process of breaking chains, others must be forged, but we believe their weight to be well worth enduring. Our charges were born to inherit the planet. We, the chosen few, are the only animals that will ever tell them no. They will crave the time they spend here for the rest of their days. If you decide to stay, it will be your pleasure, as well as solemn duty, to teach gentlemen years your senior the meaning of servitude. Master of the masterless, we call it.'

'Master of the masterless...' Bill felt himself reaching for his armrests. The cool leather provided a grounding effect in the face of notions so outlandish, they ought to have been laughable, were it not for the treason implicit within. 'Let's get this straight,' he said. 'They let us, the great unwashed, just... use 'em?'

'In more ways than you can imagine. Just as they learn to crave being under heel, so too will you learn to embrace the trappings of true gentlemanhood. Indulgence, yes, but also etiquette, decorum, social responsibility. *Literacy*.' Bill's eyes lit up at the word.

Master Damson pretended not to notice. 'They will serve, and you will know what it means to be served, lavished and slaved upon. To have your whims obeyed as grand dictates: your candles lit, ink poured, paws kissed, tail brushed, and back kneaded. The lessons we teach are purely philosophical, though we won't pretend there isn't gratification in the process. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. Full training is provided, of course.'

'Of course,' Bill repeated, as though it were self-evident. He'd never had his tail brushed before. The morning was suddenly pregnant with possibilities. 'That all sounds swell. I guess the only question I keep circlin' back to is how it is I got so lucky. No qualifications to my name, 'less calluses count, and you'd be hard-pressed to say I was hard done by in life. Not with a roof over me head and a fortnightly tub soak. If you're pairin', as I gather it, the highest of the high with the lowest o' the low,

you need to stop by Mr Miller's Grist Yard, just south of Threshton. Only thing those bruisers ever turned down is a bar o' soap.'

Master Damson shook his head. 'If poverty was the only requirement, we'd raid the local prisons and be done with it. The process selects for a very particular breed of candidate. They must be patient and understanding, with a deep-rooted intelligence and natural curiosity.'

Bill resisted the urge to scoff. 'And I thought you had the wrong badger before. What on the good Shepherd's glowin' green orb makes you think I'm the guy for you?'

'The sword of Damocles,' Master Damson replied. His smile arrived a moment later, and Bill's frown later still. 'How many brick-dirt runts do you know that can cite anecdotes from ancient history? Given your pronunciation, I'm inclined to believe you read it over hearing it, which falls in line with the gaps in your vocabulary. Self-taught and seldom travelled, if I'm not much mistaken. Something tells me reading is a great adventure for you. Scraping by on whatever texts you can ferret away—the acquisition of which I will spare your blushes—your tastes skew older, do they not? Closer to tales of monsters and jealous gods than the dry memoirs and social novels that blot the modern day?'

Bill nodded. There wasn't much to be gained by denying it. 'That explains the confidence. You're a special case, you know. The world doesn't take kindly to our lot. Difference is snuffed out as soon as sniffed, but you'll find that the traits you've worked so hard to hide will turn to your advantage in the club. The bonds you forge will hold for life, affections kindled of the like you never imagined expressible in waking hours, which only gentlemen who share the company of gentlemen can understand.'

Master Damson paused here to scratch his chair under the chin, still holding his smoking nub aloft. The chair issued a rumble like tender purring, prompting the encounter with the tiger to flash, unbidden, through Bill's mind; he remembered only then that the prime minister shared those same nose markings. 'What makes you think I throw in

for that sorta filth?’ Bill asked, sitting a little straighter in his seat. The insinuation was no laughing matter. Criminals had been hanged for less.

The queerest combination of sympathy and amusement greeted Bill from across the desk. The distance between the two suddenly seemed vaster than oceans. ‘Just a hunch,’ Master Damson said, biting back a smile. ‘The same hunch that prompted the stag with the crooked antlers to leave their newspaper behind on the Central Line. They hope your interview is going well, by the way. There will come a time when the contents of one’s garments is immaterial. When our love, which is every bit as natural, healthy and necessary as theirs, is recognised, not only by the state, but by the grand old Shepherd Himself, from whom no formal prohibition was ever made, much to the protestations of His flock. Until that day, our brotherhood of bachelors, spares and wayward sons remains open to you. Remember, no stitch of shame is sewn so deeply that it can’t be unpicked, nor acorn sown so carelessly that roots can’t yet find purchase. The decision is yours, Bill.’

The badger thought long and hard about the road that lay ahead. A lifetime of furtive glances and would-be dalliances, culminating in an eternal pledge of marriage to some unfortunate soul with whom he’d share his bed, his seed, and not a single honest word. Did she not deserve better than to serve as the shell under which Bill’s selfish crab sought to hide? Did he, likewise, not deserve better?

Bill rose from his seat with the clarity of mind usually reserved for the enlightened or the delusional. Remembering his earlier faux pas, he patted the wildcat on the head in lieu of thanks, which didn’t go unappreciated. ‘Would I be right in thinkin’ you came from pretty humble beginnin’s yourself, Master Damson?’

Intrigued, the master rose with him, discarding his cigar stub to the otherwise unused ashtray. ‘Just as I was beginning to believe that my past had finally been outpaced,’ he said. His left ear gave an almost imperceptible twitch. ‘What gave it away, if I may be so bold as to ask?’

Bill considered the master’s nostalgia for cheap tea. The iron grip he

reserved for his possessions, as though they were in need of protection, and the unconscious manner in which his pockets were repeatedly patted down. His informality, occasional dropped letters, and failure to stand and greet his guest once they were alone. Even the deep-set grooves on his palms, which no piano-playing princeling was ever going to develop. 'Nothin' much,' Bill assured him. 'It's just a hunch.'

They shared a smile together, like a private joke. 'Did it make you happy?'

'Immeasurably so. Not only happier, but more intelligent, generous and well-rounded than could be expected of a lowborn shrew with sight not past his nose. One's willingness to extend sympathy to oneself is directly proportional to one's attunement to the ebb and flow of history. We are each of us, under this roof and all, flesh and blood, but we needn't treat our fearful congregation like an abattoir. Does that answer your question?'

'More than you know. Any regrets?'

'Only that I hadn't joined sooner. I rejected the call twice, you see, thinking myself too proud or too cowardly to abandon my father's name and trade in favour of setting up shop with the enemy, as I saw it. It was to my own detriment. My life only started the day I pledged to live for myself.'

'Right then,' Bill said, extending his paw. 'I guess I only got one more question for you...'

A C T T H E
F I F T H

C A F É

1. In ballet, a sultry number in the world-renowned Nutcracker, no sooner tasted than imbibed
2. In table service, a dark, bitter beverage, traditionally served hot, that concludes the meal

It was a curious anomaly, the Callicles Club.

The establishment stood, stalwart, in an ever-changing stretch of prime real estate in the centre of Oxton Street, only a few doors down from where the guided tour of the palace began. Businesses boomed and busted over the century. Coffeehouses and department stores hung up their hats to cafés and shiny supermarkets, but always the Callicles Club persisted, its burgundy curtains beckoning from behind the black mahogany façade. The unassuming reserve of the club made it easy to miss, wedged as it was behind West End billboards and posters advertising huge savings, but all the same, that didn't stop the rumours from spreading.

School-rush pups wielding cap guns and hobby horses would halt their campaigns until they were safely past, whilst greying martens with grocery bags silently exchanged knowing glances. The ebony fascia was blank, which suited the club to a tee, because everyone on Oxton Street knew its name by heart. It was feared and revered in equal measure, the epicentre of much scuttlebutt and not inconsiderable skulduggery, if the rumours about its controversial clientele were true. Everyone from conscientious objectors to war heroes disappeared within those walls, and not all of them returned.

Those were the rumours, anyway...

The club's latest visitor was Dr William Edmund Tong. It was fifty years to the day since he first set foot on the premises. Though his black-and-white stripes had faded to an even grey, he considered himself no less the wide-eyed rapsallion that he had always been at heart, even if his suits now fitted him. The badger had weathered depressions, plagues, and schisms that split the world in twain, and yet it was on this warm, unsuspecting September morning that he would breathe his last.

He had just delivered his final lecture, using the same tattered anthology that he once traded a jar of lampblack for in the winter markets. While in subsequent decades the translation had proven to be spotty, it would always hold a special place in his heart. What were stories, after all, if not collections of fondly regarded mistakes? It was a lesson that his students were going to spend the rest of their lives learning, but he appreciated their feigned understanding all the same. He was going to miss them terribly.

Some animals were born retired. Others achieved retirement, and others still had retirement thrust upon them. If not for his hips, he never would have given up the ghost. Bill's mind remained, for good or ill, as sharp as it ever had been, but at least the club was in capable hands. He would have sooner nailed his tail to the lectern than abandon the next generation of dreamers and tender hearts to their own devices in the rubble. Their tutors, lovers and fighters all, had taken bullets for him, among other things. Better company the badger could not have conceived, save for an old shrew whose memories he harboured most fondly, and whose lessons he still recited daily.

Peeking out from under his favourite straw boater, Bill left the club with applause still ringing in his ears. With one paw, he navigated the pavement using his trusty walking stick, and with the other, he nursed his freshly brewed coffee. The sun was bright and the coffee was warm, and he intended on enjoying both while they lasted. A late defector to the bean, the radical infusion of chocolate had proven too delectable

to resist. Of all the familial sensibilities that Bill had challenged over the years, it amused him to no end that his betrayal of tea remained the most egregious.

A herd of wild kids parted around him, alternating between giggles, genial headbutts, and vain appraisals of their candy floss sticks; sugar had only recently been removed from rationing. Nothing soothed the after-images of war quite like the laughter of children. Children hadn't yet been trained to laugh in the face of adversity, or bitter irony, or the sheer seeming pointlessness of it all. The only thing that garnered a child's laughter was something that warranted their mirth. Despite never having had pups himself, there was a purity in the observation that even a bachelor like Bill could appreciate.

Everything was going to be all right. The foundations had been laid, the soil tilled, and the seeds planted. There was no greater privilege than no longer being needed. It was a bitter pill that Bill would have swallowed a hundredfold, if it meant bringing the world one iota closer to the paradise he once dreamed of.

Squinting in the light, Bill raised his cup to his lips, and halted. Something about his internal sheet music was erring: a rest, where there ought to have been a beat. It had never done so before, but as he fell, somewhat cleanly, onto a light dusting of autumn's first leaves, his coffee drained, starting from the lip of the cup, until the resulting spillage broadened into a puddle like the very image of his own escaping soul.

The brick-dirt runt, who had beaten the odds by living a long and storied life, had no regrets, and even as the picture show of his greatest moments played out before his eyes, he found a smile gracing his muzzle. He didn't know if he still believed in Pastures Evergreen, but if there was something out there, waiting for him, he prayed that the venue would allow for a change of shoes. After the reunion, he was going dancing.

A W O R D F R O M
T H E A U T H O R

It was a curious anomaly, the Callicles Club.

The premise had been around for years, but work only began in earnest in 2025, shortly before *Lone Sole* was published. While the story took shape, world events worked around the clock to challenge the very notion that a story set in a secret society, with connections to royalty no less, could ever be considered in good taste. Revelations of the most disturbing nature continued to develop, with the accountability of the perpetrators remaining the only notable omission. How could escapist fiction hope to outrun this ever-looming shadow? Failure to address the growing parallels would be remiss, but failure to consider them at all would be condemnable.

The project was shelved and dusted off, and shelved and dusted off many times. Serious issues were raised regarding the nature of fiction itself. How the unimaginable pain wrought upon the minds and bodies of others was routinely co-opted for the titillation of the audience. I'd been guilty of the same crime. While I always aim to write from my own experiences, there are traumas depicted in my work that I never lived through, and hope to be lucky enough to avoid.

One must never fall for that old line about fiction being a safe place for exploration, within whose impalpable walls all crimes are

permitted. Once published, it belongs to the fabric of its public, and is inexplicably woven throughout. Observe the ways in which media compels despondent people to life, irreligious people to devotion, and otherwise sound people to violent massacres. Recognising the impact that a certain shark-themed thriller had on the global population of the species is not the same thing as calling the director a murderer. But it's not letting them off the hook, either.

The moment something exists in the world, it is real. It remains the responsibility of all creators to recognise that, much like food, once something is placed within you, it becomes a part of you. A student film about a serial killer suffering from dissociative identity disorder is unlikely to get the pitchforks sharpened, but one would be deluded to believe that a century of similar depictions wouldn't influence the kinds of real-world treatments admitted, medications administered, and job opportunities denied. Fiction is a collective lie that we agree to buy into. It is, therefore, as helpful or as harmful as any other lie.

Eventually, the decision was made to finish and publish the story. Only you can decide how convincing my reasoning is. Fiction is often used as a corrective tool. On this occasion, I chose to engage in a fantasy in which, behind closed doors, polite society was deeply concerned with safe, sane and consensual relationships. In which the psychopathy inherent in winning the great game of capital was recognised and addressed, and in which cooperation between the classes was not only possible, but mutually beneficial. I need not tell you how absurd this fantasy sounds at the time of writing, but perhaps that was why I considered it so necessary to plough on through. There was no possibility that the story would ever be confused with reality.

This is my response to the hypocrisy of criminals whose unspeakable acts will never be punished, even as they seek to legislate against the creative and sexual freedoms of others.

As always, thank you for reading my short story. I hope you enjoyed it.

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and there will never be any pay walls or barriers to entry. As a result, if you enjoyed it, please consider throwing a [Ko-fi](#) or [PayPal](#) tip my way! It keeps me drinking tea and eating sandwiches, helps to maintain the website, and I'd greatly appreciate any donations that you feel like sending!

Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, especially during these difficult times, remember to stay hydrated!