

THE WHITE VAN MEN

It was all Alan's fault really. I know that sounds like I'm dropping him in it and I am but, to be fair, if it wasn't for him none of this would have happened. I met him last November when we're both working on this job up in Harlow. Well, he does electrics and me, I do a bit of everything – plastering, tiling, artexing – you name it really. I'm a jack of all trades so if there's a few quid in it, yeah, I'll give it a go sort of thing. Anyway, one Friday lunchtime we're at this job sitting around waiting for my mate, Trevor, who's just nipped down to Greggs to get the sarnies and sausage rolls in. Alan's wiring up this fusebox and I'm lolling around reading *The Sun* and we're not saying anything until, quite out of the blue, Alan turns round and goes to me: “What are you reading *that* for?”

Yeah, well, that's what I thought. Cheeky cunt! I mean, why does anyone read a newspaper? For the fucking news, of course. Except actually, I'm more interested in the Sport and whether Spurs have got any hope of getting back into Europe. Same thing though.

“Look,” I says to Alan, pointing at the front page, “They reckon that bloke off the telly's a kiddy-fiddler! I knew he was wrong ‘un.”

Alan doesn't look too impressed at this and he reaches into his toolbag and pulls out this book and slings it right at me.

“You should read this,” he says.

Now I'll admit I'm not really one for books. Not my game. To be fair, we never had a lot of books in the house growing up. My Mum had a copy of *The Carpetbaggers* and I gave that a go once when I had chicken pox as a kid but after twenty pages I thought it was a bit slow so I gave up. Anyway, so I pick up the book and it's got this big red sickle thing on the cover and I look at the title – *The Communist Manifesto* – and says to Alan: “Oh right. Horror type thing, is it?”

Now to be quite honest with you, I'm humouring the bloke. I don't even want to read his fucking book and I wouldn't have if the van hadn't broken down on me later that night. I'm tearing it up some byroad trying to get on the A127 when all this smoke starts billowing out from under the bonnet and just as I'm pulling into a lay-by – wallop! - the head gasket blows and the whole thing goes up in smoke. Just my luck but, given it's got a hundred-thousand miles on the clock, you can't really grumble. I'm straight on to the AA but at that moment, to make things worse, it's started snowing so I'm thinking to myself: “You might be in for a long wait here, sunshine.” I'm bored and some wanker has gone and nicked the radio the week before so in the end I look on the seat and there's Alan's book and I think, “Well, it can't hurt, can it?”

So that was my introduction to Marxist-Leninism. I'd never heard a dickie bird about it before that. Now, at the beginning it's going on about Tsars and Popes and German police-spies so I'm thinking: “Yeah, yeah. Come on, mate. Cut to the chase: when is someone going to get murdered?” But, of course, previous to that night I now realise I lived in a state of pig-like ignorance. My dad had always been Labour but then Mrs Thatcher turned up and after the Falklands and us turning over the Argies he didn't have a bad word to say about the old cow. In that sense, I realise now she deployed a classic imperialist strategy of divide-and-conquer, accomplishing complete submission of the workers by splitting, and, thereby, effectively eradicating what remained of traditional British working-class consciousness. Genius really. I mean, *what a fucking rotter!*

So the morning after I've dealt with the whole pullaver of getting the van towed back home I wake up feeling quite excited. Strangely invigorated by the experience. I mean, I've got a real taste for all this Marxist caper now so rather than sit in the Rose & Crown watching the football I decide to take a trip down to the library. Complete madness, in retrospect.

In the afternoon I rip through the first three volumes of Das Kapital. Now, I'll

admit it's not as punchy as the Manifesto so I skimmed a fair bit of it. And some of it is decidedly iffy to be honest with you. Any mug can see the obvious flaws in dialectical materialism. Still, have a butchers' at the stuff on political economy. I mean you can't argue with the fella there. He's spot on. Right on the money, you could say.

After lunch I'm on to the notebooks of this Italian geezer, Antonio Gramsci, that he wrote when he was doing a spot of porridge back in the twenties. Fancy that, I'm thinking; most of the people I know who've done a bit of bird spent their whole time trying to scrounge a couple of snouts or jacking a load of smack up their arm. And Gramsci's alright – especially if you're into the more poncey cultural-type stuff – but not half as good as Mao. For me, Mao's the absolute dog's bollocks. I'd even go as far as to say that his Little Red Book is probably the best book I've read. Not that I've actually read that many, of course, but I liked it because it's short and he gets right to the point and there's none of all that fanning about you get with Engels.

The Monday after I'm telling Alan about all this. He seems quite chuffed and starts calling me “comrade”. Turns out he did a politics degree at the Open University so I end up asking him loads of questions because he knows a lot about this stuff just like I know a lot about Glenn Hoddle and cavity wall insulation. The thing is, I'd decided even then I didn't want to be some sort of armchair Marxist, some noncey theorist. You know the type: *Yeah, I would join the revolution, mate, but I've got a mortgage to pay.* That lot can fuck right off. What I said to Alan was we needed to do something. You know, direct action.

A couple of weeks later there's me, Alan and Trevor convening the first meeting of what turns out to be our Revolutionary Council over a couple of pints down at Wetherspoon's. Looking back, maybe Trevor wasn't the perfect fit – not the right man for job so to speak – but, then again, I'd done a fair chunk my last wage packet down at Ladbroke's and I didn't have enough to get the van fixed so I had to rely on him for getting about.

“It's all good just talking about it, Alan,” I'm saying as Trevor goes off to gets a round in, “But what are we actually gonna *do* about it?”

“Look, in the long-term capitalism will destroy itself,” Alan replies, “The point is, as Marx states, the evolution of the socialist state is an economic inevitability.”

Now we haven't even had our first meeting and I can already see the cracks appearing; a perennial problem for us on the left, I'll admit. I'm an unapologetic Revolutionary Communist of the old school, you see, but I'm beginning to think Alan might have some suspect, social democratic leanings and that maybe he even thinks of himself as one of the 'intelligensia'. You know what I'm on about: a member of the cappuccino-swilling, metropolitan, liberal elite. Wankers, for want of a better word.

“Bollocks to that!” I say, “It won't happen unless we make it happen. Do you reckon the capitalist class are just going to give up? *Well, lads, it was good racket while it lasted but we realise now the game's up.* That's very lazy thinking for you, Alan!”

I can see he gets a bit offended at that. As for Trevor, I think he's gone off to have a piss in the bogs.

“But you're not appreciating the inherent risks in violent revolution,” Alan says, “The obvious means of working-class emancipation is civil disobedience and non-violence.”

Give me strength, I'm thinking. Non-violence?! What fucking good is that? I mean, Ghandi – what did he ever achieve? Alright, the liberation of an entire subcontinent from an imperialist oppressor perhaps. Fair enough. But, quite frankly, I was gob-smacked that Alan couldn't see the obvious distinction between the coloniser and the colonized. I mean the difference is night and day, your Pale Ale versus your IPA. Anyway, he must have seen the expression on my face and at this point, I think, Trevor comes back from the bogs.

“So what you are *proposing* exactly?” Alan asks.

Now I had thought about this. Thought about it quite a lot actually. To begin with I reckoned we should have stormed Buckingham Palace but I'd dismissed that

early on. Too ambitious and a bit juvenile really. Being a revolutionary, it's a bit like being a tradesman: you smart small and work your way up.

“What I'm proposing is forming a vanguard – i.e. us – to seize the means of production *vis-a-vis* the assets of our capitalist oppressor.”

Alan looked confused.

“I fink ee's talkin 'bout doing a robbery.”

See, say what you like about Trevor, but he's not as thick as he might look.

“Robbery?” says Alan, looking dismayed, “Common theft, you mean? Isn't that a bit vulgar?”

“I thought you said all property is theft, Alan,” I countered, feeling quite chuffed with myself for remembering my Proudhon, “And isn't the whole notion of *taste* just another form of bourgeois tyranny?”

I knew I'd skewered him on that one. And I'm right, of course. You can drone on all you like about renouncing material forms of human exploitation but where does that get you? You have to seize what's rightfully yours – they're not just going to hand it to you on a plate – and, besides, I owed Kwik-Fit a few hundred quid and I reckoned if we going to start a proper revolution I'd need to get the van back on the road.

“Yes,” says Alan, “But how would society *distinguish* us from common criminals?”

He thought he'd got me there, of course, but I'd sussed that one out too.

“Well, obviously we'd have a name,” I said, pausing for a moment to have a little think, “Like... the Soviet Council for the Revolutionary Bolshevik Tradesmen of Essex?”

“It's a bit of a mouthful.”

I wasn't going to disagree with him on that.

“I know!” he says, coming over all sparky, “What about The White Van Men?”

I didn't get it at first but Alan explained it had something to with the white van being a uniform symbol of proletarian solidarity, emphasizing both the socio-

linguistic use of *auto* as in KwikFit compared to *autonimism*, an offshoot of the sixties' Situationist movement encouraging autonomous anarchistic action as a mechanism for overthrowing the state. (Of course, critics have later pointed out the inherent racism and chauvinism implied by our choice of name but at the time, I'll admit, I quite liked it. Fucking clever really, I thought.)

“So item one on the agenda agreed, comrades,” I said, “Therefore, on to item two. Now, you've got to decide. Are you fucking up for it, Alan? Trevor's brother just got of the nick. He can lend us a hand. Workmen of the world unite! Power to the people, right?”

I could see from Alan's face he had some reservations about it all and at that point I began to wonder how committed he really was to the armed struggle. This is a problem because being a revolutionary Marxist is a bit like being Magnus Maganusson on Mastermind. *I've started so I'll finish*-type of thing. You can't really decide to bottle it half way through. I mean, you can't be some sort of gap-year Che Guevara.

“Yeah, I don't know really,” said Alan peering down at the carpet.

“Come on, mate. Where's your bollocks?”

“Don't be queer,” chipped in Trev.

(I should point out, that I had a word with Trevor about that later, explaining to him that the whole notion of a so-called 'deviant' sexuality was merely another form of cultural hegemony imposed on the people by an oppressive ruling elite.)

So with the plan finalised, the next day I go down the Army & Navy Surplus Supplies in Romford to get us all balaclavas. I'm even toying with the idea of getting myself a beret but then I'm thinking: *Is that taking it a bit far?* Maybe I should have done because it would have looked better than the photo that appeared in the Evening Echo but then again I can see how these things are easily misinterpreted.

My point is: I realise now it just all got a bit out of hand. In the days leading up to it we'd all got a bit over-excited so when we all leapt out of Trevor's van to do the

wages snatch we hadn't really thought it all through. Like, what would happen if the Old Bill turned up? Of course, I suspect someone tipped them off, some agent of the state who had infiltrated our ranks and grassed us up to the fascist bully boys. Maybe it was Alan and he'd been working for the other side all along or maybe Trevor had got cold feet given that his brother had just come out for a ten-year stretch for pulling a similar stunt. I felt betrayed really, stabbed in the back, just like Leon Trotsky when he sensed a sharp stabbing pain in his head and knew it wasn't a migraine.

When I finally get down here and that detective constable starts asking me all these questions, I'm trying to explain it to him. It's not about the money, I keep telling him, it's about redistribution of wealth, egalitarianism and common ownership. He's looking at me a bit funny and that's when he asks me if I'm on any medication or whether I'm seeing a psychiatrist.

“Look, mate, I might my militant tendencies,” I say, “But that hardly makes me doolally, does it now?”

Of course, I knew then it didn't look good. My solicitor reckons I could be looking at a ten stretch easily. But then, as I always say, a revolutionary change is as good a rest and so I don't mind having a bit of a breather from the old painting and decorating lark. In fact, I'll be able to get stuck into some more reading and who knows? Maybe I'll even do a politics degree. And as for the trial, well, I'm not too bothered really. I mean, when the revolution does happen then who'll look the mug, eh? I'll probably be revered as a revolutionary hero by then. Maybe I'll have my own statue in Romford High Street just like that one of Bobby Moore down by Upton Park only a bit bigger. You see, whatever sentence the judge hands me, it's he's the one who should be worried because as my old mate, Karl, points out: “History is the judge — its executioner, the proletariat.”