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‘It took me into a world I knew very little about and opened my eyes to its beauty and interest. What I especially admired was the way the characters were both representative of large ideas and yet also fully human ... it’s a huge achievement.’

Alain de Botton

THE KENNEDY MOMENT

THE
KENNEDY
MOMENT
PETER ADAMSON



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To the memory of James P Grant

Author's note

*None of the principal characters in this story
has ever admitted to being involved in the events
described here. All names have therefore
been changed.*

Part One

I | Don't wear a suit

Oxford, April 28th, 1980

Stephen Walsh frowned down at the keyboard of the ZX80 computer. Behind it, along with its packaging, stood a fourteen-inch television displaying a steadily blinking cursor. Holding the manual flat in one hand, he pecked at the rubber keyboard with the other, peering up over half-moon spectacles with each expectant prod.

Dear ...

We've lost touch, the months drifting into years and the years into decades.

He missed the deep travel and satisfying clack of his typewriter keys but stared, captivated, by the letters appearing as if by magic on the screen.

We're all to blame; the immediate subverting the important, as it ever will. But we said we wouldn't let it happen and so ...

He looked in vain for the carriage return as he neared the end of the line.

...I'm inviting you here for a weekend so we can all eat, drink and be miserable, lament how middle-aged we are, and talk about who we were and what we were going to do and what's become of us all.

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The room was dim in the middle of the afternoon. At either end of the couch, parchment-shaded lamps cast a barely perceptible light on old floorboards. Three of the walls were lined with bookshelves interrupted here and there by niches in which hung faded Soviet posters from the 1920s.

I'm suggesting the first weekend in October...

After typing a few more paragraphs he looked up from the screen and let his eyes travel over the volumes of *History Workshop Journal* and *Radical History Review*, most of them ragged with scraps of paper that had been inserted in their pages. The machine was emitting an audible hum he was not sure he could live with.

He stood and crossed to the window seat from which he could look down on the perfect lawn set in its mellow quadrangle of Cotswold stone. Facing him on the other side of the quad were the stone-mullioned windows of the rooms belonging to the Regius Professor of Modern History. That well-known reactionary having recently decamped for Cambridge, the suite was currently unoccupied. The décor was no doubt in need of updating, but the important thing was whether the appointment would be made before the start of Michaelmas Term. In time for their shabby grandeur to host his little reunion.

Among the many rules and observances in Michael Lowell's life, including being in his office before 7.00am on weekdays and 8.00am on Saturdays, was the stricture that, if possible, no piece of paper should be handled more than once. But the letter he now held in his hand, standing on the little wrought-iron balcony of his apartment in the lakeside town of Nyon in the Canton of Vaud, Switzerland, had already been picked up three times as the bells of St Michel struck the half hour.

We can all lament how middle-aged we are...talk about who we were and what we were going to do and what's become of us all.

Don't wear a suit

Away to the west he could see the autoroute, already burdened with traffic glinting in the early-morning sun. Normally he would have been in advance of the rush. But on this particular morning, Friday, May 2nd, 1980, his routine had faltered. Beyond the harbour the mist was beginning to lift, the lake slowly disrobing on what promised to be another fine spring day as he read through the second page again.

Why now? I don't know. The old man died two months ago and I suppose it stirred up the subliminals (as well as embarrassing me with an immodest inheritance). Anyway that's probably what started me thinking of lost youth and time passing, of old ideals and the old friends who once shared them.

Underneath the signature, in a scrawl of green ink, was a handwritten postscript:

'Michael – I already talked to the lovely Seema, who'll definitely be coming. She's divorced now, as I expect you know, so don't wear a suit.'

Below him the roofs of the old town were beginning to glow in the first of the sun. Later in the day, Mont Blanc and the Aiguilles would be visible, but for the moment it was only possible to make out the faint blur of France. He blinked against the astonishing light. Out on the lake a lateen boat, motionless in the calm, had already spread its nets.

Seema Mir. Had there been a day in the last twenty years when he hadn't thought of her?

One of the advantages of being the creative director of an advertising agency is that you can stare out of the window for hours on end and people will not only believe you are working but will quite probably assume you are doing something brilliant. Toby Jenks, who frequently took advantage of the scope thus offered, was in fact standing by his window because he was ever so slightly inebriated at four o'clock in the

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afternoon and had felt himself to be at some risk of nodding off at his desk.

It was the first week of May and the window in question admitted a dull London light into the modern third-floor office on the west side of Berkeley Square. Below, the trees were swaying slightly, much like Toby himself as he locked his hands on top of his balding head and pushed out a fat bottom lip. It had been a bad week. Really, a bad week. Monday had seen his fortieth birthday come and go. Tuesday had brought more hate-mail, including one particularly vituperative letter from a woman in Queensland. Wednesday he had discovered that Sarah had been back to the house and taken away the rest of her clothes and all of her shoes. Worst of all, the day's second post had come and gone, forcing him to face up to the fact that, for the first time in a decade or more, he had not been nominated for a BTA Award.

Over the rooftops a weak sun was attempting to push through the clouds that had covered the Home Counties all week. In the square itself the trees were just coming into bud and a group of young people who might have been students were stretching out on the lawns. That was the thing in this business; you were put out to grass when you stopped being young. As soon as you were no longer a rising star you were a black hole. And probably that's where he was right now, poised at the dread point just past the top of a mixed metaphor. He blinked his eyes into focus. Under his window, a few of the regular dog walkers had gathered by one of the gates to the park.

He thought about pouring himself another Scotch. Ten minutes earlier the bottle had been resolutely put away in the low rosewood cabinet that housed a bank of television screens. Rubbing both ears hard to wake himself up, he returned to his desk and began looking through his in-tray: product briefs, draft pitches, story-boards, corporate prospectuses, all of which promised nothing but terminal tedium. Coming

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across a couple of typed letters dictated earlier in the week, he signed them with his initials and transferred them with a flourish to the out-tray. He had cultivated being known by his initials ('friends call me TJ'). And for many years he had also affected silk ties in a different pastel shade for each day of the week. It was an idiosyncrasy that had quickly become famous in the advertising world, as he had known it would, and whenever it elicited comment he would explain that it was the only way most of his colleagues would know what day it was. In retaliation, the thirty or so creative types in the department had taken to referring to the days of the week by their colours ('Thank God its Pinkday'). He might also have been disappointed to know that he was commonly referred not as 'TJ' but as 'Old Tobe', or sometimes 'The Toby Jug', and just occasionally 'High Jenks'.

And, to top it all, the morning post had brought not an invitation to the BTA Awards dinner but a letter from, of all people, Stephen bloody Walsh. *The first weekend in October. Eat, drink and be miserable. Old friends and old ideals.*

He gave up on the in-tray and returned to the window, looking out on a city that was already getting ready for evening. From the far side of the square the row of plate-glass windows that was Jack Barclay's Rolls Royce showroom blazed with the reflected glow of an unexpected sunset. Across the city, lights were going out in shops and offices as hundreds of executives, middle-managers, accountants, designers, copy-writers, film editors, space-buyers, secretaries, shop assistants, hurried through the streets, escaping to evenings of boredom, bliss or argument.

And in front of it all his own reflection confronted him, refusing to go away.

Stephen bloody Walsh.

And underneath the signature, the sly, handwritten post-script with its pretentious Greek 'e's and green ink: *'Tobe, I*

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already heard from Hélène who's definitely coming. So bring a good supply of mints. Ab imo pectore, Stephen.'

Michael engaged cruise control as the autoroute began to clear. Ahead lay the city of Geneva and a day of meetings, personnel decisions, data-checking, periodic performance reviews, mid-term strategic plans.

...talk about who we were and what we were going to do and what's become of us all.

He took the exit for Pregny and began working his way down to the lake. In twenty years he had never been able even to hear the name 'Stephen' without also hearing the words he had spoken that evening in the small back bar of the Eagle and Child at the end of Trinity Term, 1960: *'You know I believe in speaking truth to power, Michael. But I'm afraid I also believe in speaking truth to friends. And the fact is, of course, she's turned you down because she finds you just a little bit too dull.'*

Stephen had clinked beer glasses with him to show that this had been said in the spirit of honest, straightforward male comradeship. It had been a struggle to receive the words in the same spirit. And it had been a struggle ever since.

He indicated right again and made his way up through the leafy suburbs behind the European headquarters of the United Nations, unable to prevent himself being drawn back to Stephen's words of that evening long ago.

'Pair of them in tears. Couldn't help hearing the odd word. Said if she was looking at the next fifty years she wanted a little bit more. Something about you being incapable of ever doing anything that would surprise her.'

The blue-and-white flag of the World Health Organization flew at the barrier as he turned in. Was it an exaggeration? Had there been days in the last twenty years when he hadn't thought of her? Last thing at night. Or first thing on waking. Or at odd

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moments during the day. In a meeting. In the lab. On a plane. It had never needed much – just a passing thought that strayed too near the buried magnet of her and was deflected inwards, making contact with a little metallic click in the mind – and there she was again, as vivid as ever: the calm amusement in eyes that seemed always to be expressing mild surprise; the incipient smile ever at the edges of the mouth; the maddeningly imperturbable composure; the sheer excitement of her; the power to slip effortlessly past any guard he might from time to time have put in place.

Waved through without showing ID, he began patrolling up and down between the strips of lawn, crossing wet patches of blacktop where the early-morning sprinklers had over-reached themselves. But the parking lot was full at this hour and he was forced to take the ramp down into the *southern*, pulling off his sunglasses and braking to avoid the scarred curve of the wall.

... old ideals and the old friends who once shared them.

He turned off the engine. The dimness soothed and he let his head fall back, listening to the engine ticking in a crypt of silence. Above him were eight floors of offices, corridors, conference rooms in which three thousand people spent their days, most of them knowing that youthful hopes had long ago run into the sands of bureaucracy. He reached across to the passenger seat for the old Gladstone doctor's bag. Those years in the field had not been like this. Working from dawn 'til dusk on Bhole Island. And later, in Africa, when they were finally closing in on the virus. Had he thought of her even then, in those last days in Merikka and Bardere as they had trudged through the endless rains, driven on by the thought that the greatest of all killer diseases had been narrowed down to just those two villages?

In the gloom the ticking had almost stopped. From somewhere an elevator whined. No, not even then had she been lost to him. Like a paraphrase of Blake – *'there is a moment*

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in each day that Satan cannot find – there had always been a moment in his day that Seema Mir could find.

By six o'clock, Toby was perched on a revolving stool in the cellar bar of The Warsaw, just off Soho's Poland Street and wondering if any other member-in-good-standing of London's Australian diaspora might be dropping in. He swivelled round to face the early-evening crowd. Everything too dark or too light. Too much bloody contrast. Too much bloody drama. Is that Gilbert? Grinning all over the place. Sliding round the bar like a fucking oil slick. Grin. Grin. Fucking Gilbert. Fucking Ogilvy's. Taken to greeting his staff with a mock-opera rendition of 'Just one Cornetto' and introducing himself as 'The Man who put a Tiger in your Tank'. Might as well be waving his fucking BTA invitation in my face.

He looked away to avoid a greeting from some agency types descending the stairs. It hadn't always been like this; it was here that he'd had some of his own best ideas. The sensational 'cool girl' ad, with the lovely Silky Mathilde. And the loneliness of the long distance commuter with the Dirk Bogarde lookalike, a man's life set to the rhythm of the train. And the BTA-winning *Mens Sana* campaign for the chain of fitness centres; the only time, he reflected, when his Classics degree had been of the slightest use.

Stephen bloody Walsh.

He spun back to the bar and picked up his drink. Not even half six. Could just pop back to the office, see if it's come in the late bag. Fuck no. Face facts. See that face wobbling in that shallow little circle of Scotch, big and pink and pathetic? That's you, mate, and you're off the screen, wobble, wobble, bye-bye, over the hill and far away. A fresh crowd was descending from the street. Theatre or film types. Or glorious pioneers of the age of videotape. Best of all, yes, best of all, this was the place

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where he had thought up the first wordless commercial. He saw it now through the gloom of the bar: the tanned, thirty-something Australian descending into the cellar, all laid-back masculinity, listening warily to the voices of effete, upper-class Brits ordering martinis 'with a twist' and peach schnapps with Chambord, followed by a slow, nervous retreat, making his way backwards up the cellar steps and emerging with relief into the last of the evening sunlight which merged into a glowing, overflowing pint of Australian lager.

His reflection confronted him again from between the liquor bottles on theatre-lit glass shelves. He had seen Stephen once or twice over the years: the odd lunch in the West End, and at the college gaudy he had regretted attending. Even back in the day they had had nothing in common. And now they had considerably less than nothing: the adman and the pinko academic, Pauncho and Lefty. No way would he be going. He swung around again to face the mounting din of the cellar. Fucking Stephen. *'Talk about who we were going to be'*. Who am I? Where am I? Same fucking bar. Same fucking sawdust on the floor. Sawdust! It's the West End for Christ's sake! Place stuffed full of Gilberts. Gilberts to the right of him, Gilberts to the left of him, Gilberts to the front of him, trolleyed and plastered. Into the BTA dinner they rode, when can their glory fade, when can that speech be made? But not, not, Toby Jenks. He frowned into the bottom of the glass. Couldn't stand it all again anyway. All the sham bonhomie. All the cod conviviality. All that pathetic pretence at surprise, all that gushing over people who'd had diddly-squat to do with anything, air-kissing some bimlette from Channel 4 who wouldn't know a decent commercial if it ramraided her fucking sweet shop. Ten years of it all, and then suddenly wham-bam-thank-you-Toby and you're not even at one of the round tables with the candlelit place-name, not even one of the also-rans clapping too hard and pretending they don't have a modest little speech tucked

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away in the inside pocket of the tux, eating their little hearts out with smiles like fucking rigor mortis. No. No way would he go. He had no desire to see Stephen bloody Walsh again. Creep. Marx in Doc Martens. With his aristocratic background and his ludicrous estuary accent. Of course he won't have changed his fucking ideals, he'd never left fucking Oxford, except for a few years on the wild side over at Cambridge.

The bar seemed more crowded now, undifferentiated waves of sound crashing over him, seas of words building and breaking over faces and bodies and the too-bright lights that hurt the backs of his eyes. Jesus, blind as a welder's dog and it's not even seven o'clock. A slim young woman descended the stairs, looking around for her date. It would be good to see H el ene again though. God knows what she'd think of him these days. Didn't think too highly of him back then, as he remembered it. And Seema of course, he'd always loved to gaze on Seema and admire. And Michael. Michael was his friend.

Seema Mir had developed a mild aversion to working in the faculty library with its hushed, cough-inducing atmosphere. Instead, non-teaching days would usually find her in one of the Greenwich Village caf es or, if she needed the exercise, the reading room of the Harvard Club on 68th Street. It was true that some of her favourite haunts were public places and not especially quiet, but she preferred their buzz and vague background sense of connectedness to the self-consciously scholarly ambience of the Bobst or the Cooper Union.

On this particular morning, Tuesday, May 6th, 1980, she had walked the forty blocks uptown to the public reading room of the New York Public Library. There, on one of the vast polished oak tables, she spread the various books and papers from which she was attempting to put together a genealogy for the Hemings family. But by eleven o'clock she was forced

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to admit that mapping the relationships of plantation slaves in nineteenth-century Virginia could not compete with the prospect of coming face to face again with Michael Lowell.

There had been no correspondence. At first, it would have been too painful. And later, perhaps, too awkward. She knew he was living in Geneva, that he was still unmarried, that he had risen rapidly in his chosen career, as they had all known he would. But beyond that, nothing. She leaned back in her chair to look up at the rather absurd *trompe l'œil* ceiling of clouds and cherubs. Probably he would not have changed much; he was not the type to put on weight or let himself get out of condition. Stephen had once said that Michael had contrived to look middle-aged in his early twenties. For a few more minutes she was able to focus on her work, but her thoughts soon drifted back to the question that had frayed her concentration all morning: would it be asking for trouble to accept Stephen's invitation and meet Michael? She stared again at the ceiling. The cherubs offered no help.

Talk about what's become of us all...of old ideals and old friends...

Impatient with herself, she began checking the dates for John Wayles, born Lancaster, England, who had been the first of his line to arrive in Virginia, and for his son, also John, who had fathered six children with an 'Unknown African Woman'. Weren't they all? She bit lightly on the metal ferrule of the pencil. She had, she realized, thought of Michael with increasing wistfulness over the years; drawn to his undemonstrative maturity. But hadn't that been the problem? That he had been *too* mature, *too* steady? Wasn't that the very reason she had said 'no', as gently as she knew how, when he had proposed to her so very formally in the Botanical Gardens at the end of that long Oxford summer?

For a few minutes more she focused on the web of solid and dotted pencil lines that linked the names, across and down,

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ending with the twenty or so Fossetts and Hughes who were the direct descendants of her Unknown African Woman. Had she been a housemaid, or a cook, summoned from the kitchen to her master's bed? Had she been Ibo, Yoruba, Ashanti? And what sort of relationship had it been that had created all of the lives spread out before her in the New York Public Library two hundred years later? It had been in a library, far smaller than this and smelling of age and mildew, that she had first met Michael Lowell. She put down the pencil and rested her elbows on the desk. What else had she been seeking when she rejected him? And look where opting for more excitement had got her. The previous week she had run into Howard in Bryant Park. It was only the second time they had met since the divorce and 'unkempt' had been the rather British word that had come to mind. They had chatted amicably enough, but she had refused his rather forlorn invitation to lunch.

For the next half hour she copied on to one page all the notes she had on the Unknown African Woman: the daughter a mulatto, the granddaughter three-quarters white, the great granddaughter seven-eighths white, the descendants merging imperceptibly into the white world, probably without ever knowing that their forebears included both the Unknown African Woman and the six-foot-two-inch 'straight as a gun barrel' Virginia lawyer Thomas Jefferson.

It would be fun to see Toby again as well, though they usually got together on his annual visit to Madison Avenue. Tom, too, though he was apparently in the process of relocating to New York anyway. She would take the weekend to think about it. Inching her chair back, sneakers squeaking on the polished floor, she began gathering up her papers, knowing that at the level of the mind where decisions are really made the question was already settled: she would be in Oxford as the leaves on the trees in St Giles were turning yellow and the streetlamps were haloed with the first tinge of frost.

Don't wear a suit

Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 14th, 1980

Five thousand miles from the New York Public Library, in a sweltering outpatients' clinic amid the corrugated zinc roofs of Abidjan's slums, Hélène Hevré helped the boy to perch on the edge of the treatment table. He was a Mossi child of perhaps eight or nine years old, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and a thick swaddling of dusty rags around his right arm. The mother, hardly any bigger than her son, hovered in the doorway, speaking too quickly for Hélène to catch every word.

Fighting against the tiredness washing through her system like some debilitating internal tide, she began unwrapping the layers of progressively less dusty rags. Bared, the boy's elbow was swollen, the skin wrinkled, inelastic. The bones had healed well, but whoever had treated him had splinted the break straight out. Tearfully, the mother began reciting in undulating Mooré rhythms all the things that the boy could no longer do with his useless stick of an arm. Nodding her head in sympathy, Hélène laid a gentle hand on the child's shoulder. The only X-ray machine had been out of commission for over a month.

Two or three more relatives had ventured in, murmuring support: the boy was useless; could not wield a *daba*, could not tie a knot, could not pour water or light a lamp, could not hook a cocoa pod. Once the screen had been tugged into place, Hélène eased the boy into a lying position and asked the assistant to fill the sink with water. Speaking in a calm whisper, she explained what she was about to do. It would hurt. But the pain would not last long. And soon he would have his arm back. The boy set his face in a fierce expression and stared upwards at the ceiling fan. More relatives had now appeared in the consulting room. The tallest of them, peering over the top of the screen, was starting up a running commentary. Unwrapping a roll of dry casting, Hélène handed it to the trainee and nodded

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again towards the sink. The boy was still staring determinedly at the slowly turning blades.

Steadying herself, she pinned the boy's upper arm to the table while her right hand slipped underneath the forearm. On the other side of the screen the commentary grew more excited, provoking a rhythmic whispering which might have been prayer. Holding her breath, she began to lift the forearm away from the table, steadily applying the pressure until there was a sharp 'crack' and a stifled moan from the boy's compressed lips. Hélène glanced down. The boy's eyes were squeezed tight, the jaws locked, the muscles of legs, stomach, buttocks held rigid so that the thin body had lifted slightly from the table. As the forearm reached the upright position the boy let out a long hiss of breath. Behind the screen, the mother had begun a low moaning.

Nodding to the trainee to hold the boy's arm in place, Hélène formed wet rolls of plaster into a casting around the now-bent elbow. Finishing off with a clean gauze, she placed the arm across his chest while she fitted the sling. '*Courageux, courageux,*' she said, handing him a tissue while the trainee pulled the screen aside. The relatives surged forward, all talking at once as Hélène took a bottle of Fanta from the fridge.

Ten minutes later, she was sipping iced water on the veranda of her quarters, tucked away along with five or six other bungalows in a corner of the compound. It was the hour of relaxation, the outpatients gone and the worst of the day's heat over. On the table beside her, an envelope postmarked Oxford had been slit open with a bamboo paper knife. She removed the straw and raised the glass to her lips, draining the last of the iced water. Even before she had begun to read, the green ink had stirred a faint memory.

We've lost touch, the months drifting into years and the years into decades.

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The exhaustion seemed to be washing over her in slow, irresistible waves. Surely this was something more than ordinary fatigue? Or could it be just the accumulated tiredness of years of overwork? Stephen Walsh, by contrast, obviously had leisure to muse over old friends and time passing. And to add a sly, handwritten postscript. *I heard back from the others before I'd even located your whereabouts. They'll all be here, though I have a suspicion Toby's only coming in the hope that you'll be there.*

She sank back into the chair. Perhaps she would feel less tired after the rains had freshened the air. All day the skies had been promising a downpour, and now the first warm drops were beginning to spill over on to the dust of the compound. In Haute-Volta, where she had been all the previous week, the real rains had already begun and had quickly turned the loose, laterite roads into swirling red rivers that had slowed their progress to a crawl. The little girl had died just a few minutes before they pulled in to the village, the tiny body wasted, the legs widest at the knee, the skin grey and stretched across stark ribs. Her name had apparently meant 'Bright Hope'.

... talk about who we were and what we were going to do.

Later, back at the clinic, she had begun filling out the forms: *Cause of death – measles*. Forms that would be used to tick boxes in municipal offices generating more forms in the Ministry of Health and eventually be forwarded to the regional office of the World Health Organization in Brazzaville and thence, in the fullness of time, to WHO headquarters in Geneva where they would one day no doubt appear on the desk of Dr Michael Lowell. It would be good to see Michael again, and he might need to be reminded about the thousands of Bright Hopes.

Her eyelids drooped. On her next home leave, she would get herself checked out at McGill. She might even be able to take in Stephen's little reunion on the way. Why had she ever lost touch? With Seema, who had been her closest friend and had now become an American citizen. And with Toby, her

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long-lost love, her Australian Lord Byron, her chain-smoking Ginsberg who had howled at every convention and who was now apparently an advertising executive.

She sat up, wanting more water and staring again at the letter: surely she was strong enough to face Toby again with a lighter heart; to push into the attic of childish memories those weeks that had seemed so deeply scarring at the time; to smile at the memory of his wounding loss of interest when she had refused to sleep with him in that long, hot summer at the dawn of the 1960s.

Thanks to an out-of-date address, Tom Keeley received his invitation a week or two later than the others. When it finally arrived on the morning of Saturday, May 17th, 1980, via his office at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, he passed it wordlessly across the breakfast table to his wife.

Caroline scanned it. 'We're on vacation that week.'

'I know. Good excuse.'

'Shouldn't you liked to have gone?'

'Not madly, no.'

She looked at him suspiciously over the top of her reading glasses. 'So-oo, no ex-girlfriends you'd like to spend the weekend with?'

He gave her a saintly smile. 'I spent all my time studying.'

On the Sunday he wrote a brief, handwritten reply, thanking Stephen for the invitation but telling him that, on the dates in question, they would be taking the children on a two-week tour of their own home state of Virginia. He sent his best wishes for the weekend and asked to be remembered to the others.

Tom Keeley never expected to hear anything more about the reunion. He was wrong.