

## ALONE IN LONDON

Before starting the letter to his dad, Arthur strolled over to the window and looked out onto the square. Several black London taxis were parked across the way. An elderly couple was feeding pigeons. The lady held the bag while the old guy pitched out the seed. She was frowning. Over to the right under a tree stood the man who, for the past few days, had been following Arthur. As usual he wore the blue sport coat and carried the red notebook. Arthur wasn't sure, but he thought the little man was smiling -- or maybe whistling. Arthur walked back to the table, sat down, pulled his small computer up close and started typing.

Dear Dad,

It's great to be back in London. I went to the old markets today. I started at Petticoat Lane. I bought you a cap and some jewelry for the daughter of a friend. I didn't dare buy you books. It reminded me of the time you and Mom and I walked through here. I really miss her. I can still see her elbowing her way through the peddlers. I still have that picture of her buying buttons from that little old Jewish man. After Petticoat Lane I walked to Brick Lane and checked out the Bengali community and then ate some Tandori Chicken.

I'm staying in London one block from the British Museum. I'm going to sightsee for a few days and then get on with the novel.

Love Arthur

"On with the novel." Arthur liked the sound of that. "On with the novel." It sounded as if this great novel of his was already taking shape, that he had decided just what it would be and he was now working purposely towards its completion. "On with the novel." Well, if you can't lie to your father, whom can you lie to? If that would keep the old man off his back, then so be it. The "Great

Scholar” might just sit there and think for a second before lobbing the letter towards the wastebasket where it would settle next to the other letters from “Difficult Arthur,” the professor’s youngest and least promising son. Anyway, if anyone asked his father why Arthur was in London, now the old boy had the answer.

Arthur went to the tiny kitchen to boil water for tea. This, after all, was England. Once again he found himself admiring the electric teakettle -- a sleek white plastic number with a glass cylinder running up the side. The wire was thick and black and the white plastic plug with its copper prongs looked important. In thirty seconds this high tech wonder could bring water to a spectacular boil. Why didn’t they have something like this in the teachers’ room back at Forrest High School? Instead they had an old piece of shit that had been corroding there ever since Truman was president. Last year the new French teacher got such a bad shock from the thing that she had to be sent home. In fact, Arthur had escorted the badly shaken Madam Pierce to her Plymouth. That was the sort of thing he was really good at -- helping hurt or sick people to their cars. He could be trusted with that kind of task.

Back at his desk Arthur started letter number two. Marge was not his closest friend at Forrest, but she was a buddy, and she knew lots of people so she could spread the word. Plus Marge seemed to be the only one who thought Arthur could write a novel. “You’ve got a good eye for detail, Arthur,” she whispered at the spring faculty party. “And you tell great jokes.” She had been drunk, of course, but still she could keep the myth alive. It had even occurred to

him that as time passed, he might someday be known as that young English teacher who went over to Great Britain to write a novel. "Did he finish it?" "No, but at least he tried." How many would know that he hadn't even started the freakin' thing.

Dear Marge,

You guys must have started today. I can see you now all squeezed into those miserable auditorium seats. You're knitting. Burnsy is studying his class list. Ferguson is doing a crossword puzzle. Our Neanderthal Principal Hammond (El Scumbag) is sharing his vision of the challenges that lie ahead. I kept that list of clichés you copied down from last year's pep talk. With luck, Spalding will fall asleep again. I will never forget how Hammond tried to ignore the snores. He was so pissed at us for not doing anything, but he didn't dare say a thing. What a fine moment. Someone told me that Spalding quit drinking. Let's hope that's not true.

Can you believe this is my first leave of absence since I started teaching there? Have they found a replacement for me or maybe they just canceled sophomore lit for the year "Mr. Moreland is on leave." I have a room in a bed and breakfast near Russell Square. The lady who runs it looks like Jane Marple. Yesterday I walked around Bloomsbury and saw where Virginia Woolf and her crowd hung out. Remember that student of yours (Wilma Spencer?) who plagiarized the paper about To The Lighthouse.

In the afternoon I took a walking tour of Islington. George Orwell lived there in the forties. I stood in the garden where George used to dig around. I looked at the room where he finished Animal Farm. I went to the pub where George hoisted a few. I smoked a cigarette in the park where George took his kid to play. If I move back here for good, I might like to live in Islington. Who knows?

Anyway, I miss you guys. I'll let you know how the novel is coming along.

Love you all,

Arthur

The other letters could wait -- the ones to his bowling buddies, his landlady, a few students, his uncle his brother. Jan wouldn't appreciate a letter

from the guy who walked out on her without even leaving his share of the rent. The few other teachers he liked would get theirs. He could keep the lies flowing.

Life had become so easy for him now that he had decided to lie. It just wouldn't have worked to say he wanted to go to London for a year to do nothing - or if not nothing at least something. He had been doing something so badly for so long. He was tired of being a mediocre teacher who could reach a few of his students every few days and that was it. Why not be mediocre somewhere else?

On his way to the mailbox on the other side of the square, Arthur wondered if he should have mentioned the follower, but it seemed silly. His father wouldn't believe him. Marge would worry so much she might forget to talk about the novel. Besides, for some reason -- some inexplicable reason -- he enjoyed being followed. Could this be the first sign that his new approach to life was bearing results? Last year he would have been terrified if someone started to tail him. Now, a few months later in a foreign country totally on his own, he felt an odd exhilaration that a total stranger out there had picked him out to follow.

He headed west to Tottenham Court Road. He thought he would walk south until he came to Foyles and the other bookstores. He wanted to pick up a copy of *Down and Out In Paris and London* and other books by Orwell. He wanted to buy a big cup of expensive coffee and walk through Soho. The coffee would be expensive, but so what? He had money. That was part of the plan. He had saved; he had cashed in a CD, and had borrowed enough so that he would never have to think about money for the rest of the year. That kind of ?? he did not need.

The sun was huge. He had never dreamed of such a sun in all of England. He unbuttoned his jacket and fell in with the crowd. Next to him on the plane had sat a nervous lady from Aurora. She had never been to London and worried that she would feel conspicuous. "They'll take one look at me and see a stupid American." He assured her that she was wrong, that she was no way to look unusual in London. He had been there enough to know.

As he turned south on Tottenham, Court Road, he thought how accurate his words had been. London was one humungous stew of humanity. And even though he had known this for a long time, right now he felt overpowered by all the skin colors, headwear, the coats, and the styles of walking. Into the mix had leapt Arthur Moreland -- thirty-five years old, scruffy beard, bouncing walk, a frayed corduroy sport coat, and aging sandals.

No one would take notice of him -- no one, that is, but the man in the blue coat. He would be back there somewhere. And sure enough, at the corner when Arthur looked behind him, there he was pretending to look in a store window. He reminded Arthur of a cab driver -- short and squat and maybe sixty years old. He wore an old blue sport coat and was carrying a notebook of some kind. Three days ago Arthur had noticed him on the tube to Islington. Arthur had transferred several times, and each time he discovered the man behind him. Later, he saw him standing in the park near George Orwell's apartment.

Two days ago, the man was standing outside the restaurant in Piccadilly looking through the window while Arthur polished off a bowl of soup. He turned when Arthur looked his way and walked away. Same sport coat, same notebook.

Later that day, Arthur spotted him at Speaker's Corner. Arthur had been listening to an animal rightist lambaste a tiny audience. Suddenly he noticed the man with the notebook standing across the way. Arthur looked down at his shoes and then up again, and the man was gone.

Twice yesterday at the markets he had seen the guy. The first time it was at Petticoat Lane when he was buying a hat for his father. ("Try it on, Luv. I gotta a mirror to look at yourself.") He looked into the mirror and in back he could see the man with the notebook looking his way. This time he might have been smiling. Arthur almost waved.

And now here he was again. Once again, no fear, no sense of panic, but now Arthur did wonder, almost academically, what he should do if he did decide to act? What do the books tell you to do about a follower? Lead him to the police station? Confront him? ("What the fuck are you doing, you little limey crud? Don't you know we saved your ass in the war?") Arthur could do it. He had confronted people before. Americans are supposed to be confrontational. But right now in the middle of London with all these people he could not quite imagine creating such a scene. Besides the guy would probably shrug and deny it. And anyway, Arthur felt no need to act.

So Arthur walked briskly down Tottenham Court Road. At Oxford Street. Instead of going to the bookstores, he trotted down the steps to the Underground. A few minutes later, he was sitting on the tube heading west towards Marple Arch. Next to him a wrinkled old lady with a red hat read that the

Home Secretary's son had just been arrested for selling pot to an undercover cop. Back up on the street, Arthur headed for Hyde Park.

Two hours later he was lazily rowing a boat in the lake in the middle of the park. He looked east and could see the arch of Hyde Park Corner. When he looked west he could barely see Marble Arch near where he had listened to the animal rightist speak. The park was filled with strollers -- probably visitors like himself. A Sikh in a large turban was doing yoga on the lush grass; two black nuns were stretched out asleep. On the bench two men were talking but looking straight ahead. Spies?

He hadn't been this relaxed in a long time. Even though he didn't worry much about teaching, it was always there to hunt him down and steal his time and his attention. By the end of the school year, the kids would always have worn him down. But not this year. This year he would reach June relaxed and fit. He would not have to stare at the wretched grade book and feel responsible for 120 kids who didn't really give a shit about English.

By the landing dock, Arthur spotted the little man with the notebook. He was looking up at the sky as if to catch some sun. Sun, Arthur thought, is something this old corpse could use. Next to him was an old black fat-wheeled bicycle. Once again, Arthur did not feel the least bit undone by the follower.

Arthur intended to ignore the man and head for Russell Square, but when he walked away from the boat landing, he practically bumped into him as he was starting to climb onto his bicycle. And, in spite of himself, Arthur spoke out: "Why are you following me?" His voice sounded distant and metallic -- very American.

“I beg your pardon.” The man leaned his bike against his leg, took off his gray hat and scratched his balding head. He looked even older than Arthur had imagined.

“I’ve been in London for three days -- only three days -- and I’ve seen you a dozen times. Every time I look up, there you are.” Arthur kept his voice low and distant. He didn’t want to be too conspicuous.

“Are you sure? Maybe all Englishmen look alike to you Yanks.”

“It’s you. I recognize you. Why do you find me so interesting? What do you think you’re doing?” Arthur felt his stomach tightening.

“What I ‘think’ I’m doing?” Now the little man was smiling. What few teeth he had were golden yellow.

“What you think you are doing.” Arthur tried to make his voice low and steady.

The man leaned his bike against a tree and sat down on a nearby bench. Arthur sat next to him as far away as possible. “I’m not sure what I think I’m doing, but I know what I am doing.”

“Following me. But why?”

“I saw you get out of the cab at Mrs. Floyd’s bed and breakfast. That’s one of the places where I find people to study.” He tapped his notebook on his wrinkled chin.

“So you admit it.” In spite of himself, Arthur half shouted. A couple walking by with a dachshund looked over towards him and hurried on.

“Of course. It’s not against the law as far as I know. I figure people out by their clothes and possessions. I guess what kind of people they are. Then I test my theory by following them around for a bit. In a few days, it’s all over and I find someone else to follow.”

“And the notebook?” Arthur forced a crooked smile.

“That’s where I wrote it all down.” He patted the notebook and smiled benignly up at Arthur. “I’m all through with you now.”

“I didn’t take long did I? What did you decide?”

The man looked down at the notebook, but did not open it. “I decided you are approximately thirty-five years old. You could be a teacher or a writer. You have visited the usual places plus a few special ones like Islington. You walk deliberately, and eat fast. You like our pubs. You shrug and smile at strangers and look at your reflection in the windows. Do you agree?”

“Basically. Is that all you have on me?”

“Just about.” He patted his notebook once again and stood up. “Just about. Time to head home.”

“So that was all you were doing?” Arthur called after him.

The little man turned around. “I collect my observations. It just keeps me busy. Like stamps or coins you know.” He put his notebook into the basket and pedaled away unsteadily towards Marple Arch. For several minutes Arthur stared after him. Then he walked slowly towards the Kensington Underground.

Arthur spent the next morning at the National Portrait Gallery and had lunch hat Covent Garden -- a potato and a beer. In the afternoon he went tot he

Imperial War Museum. The ground floor was one giant room full of tanks. Upstairs was a special exhibit about codes in World War II. Once he thought he saw the little man with the notebook, but he was mistaken. That night he went to a play about a man who buys an all-white painting. Arthur found it stupid. The following day he went off to the wax museum. Next to him in line was a family from Accra, Ghana. Inside the man posed next to every black leader he could find -- Nelson Mandella, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali. Arthur snapped the pictures with the man's camera. Afterwards, Arthur waited for the family outside the museum and took them to dinner at an Italian restaurant.

"Mrs. Floyd," Arthur stood in front of the landlady's door.

"Hello, Arthur. We're so glad you're going to stay in London for the fall. It's such a nice time." Arthur had knocked on her door on his way in. They were now standing in the hall. Mrs. Bernice Floyd was wearing a blue housecoat and clutching a tabloid.

"I wanted to ask you about a little man that I saw around here the first day. He was -- this is hard to explain -- following me." Mrs. Floyd nodded all the way through his question.

"Oh yes. You're talking about Mr. Fletcher. Nigel Fletcher. He used to work at the University of London."

"So he was a teacher too." Arthur liked the idea.

“Oh dear, no! Nigel was a maintenance man. Plumbing I think. When he retired he stayed around Russell Square -- just hanging around as you Americans say.” She was frowning down at Arthur’s ravaged sandals.

“I talked to him a few days ago. He says he tries to guess what people are like. Then he follows them to test his theory.”

“Yes. That’s how Nigel operates. Should we call the police?” She looked ready to return to her apartment.

“No, of course not.”

“Will you work on your novel?”

“That’s why I’m here.” There was no reason not to lie to her too.

“Will you have enough money?”

“Actually I’d saved enough to live her for eight months. Teachers in the states make enough to put some away.”

“You’ll be busy then.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mrs. Floyd; I won’t be bored. I’ve met some other people at the pubs. And I know some other teachers who will be up here from time to time. But I’m really looking forward to being by myself.”

He walked slowly down the hall to his room. Behind one of the closed doors he could hear a couple arguing in a foreign language. Back in his room, he made a cup of tea. Once again he admired the teapot. He especially liked the red numbers on the cylinder. In the living room, he discovered that Mrs. Floyd had given him a bookshelf and she had replaced the small writing table with something sturdier.

Arthur sat down at the table and opened up his engagement book. He could see that there were enough museums and galleries to take care of him for the rest of September and most of October. Near Halloween, three college drinking buddies were due to hit town. By that time, he would know enough about the pubs to entertain them in style. Nights of ale and days of hangovers. Why not? At Thanksgiving he would drive to Devon to visit a family friend. He expected to spend Christmas there too. In between he would walk and look and look and walk. No papers to grade. No meetings to attend. No angry parents to mollify. What had old Doc Johnson said: "When you tire of London, you tire of life." He would not be bored. He couldn't analyze a culture the way his father did, but he knew how to use all of this good stuff to get through the day. And, he could always chat with people in the pubs. Small talk was Arthur's specialty.

The next day, instead of taking a tour of the East End as planned; he sat in Russell Square and tried to read. This was OK. His plan included lots of hanging around. There was no real reason not to. If he felt like sitting in the park, he would sit in the park. He might even run into Nigel.

The following day Arthur sat in the park again, still reading the first chapter of Orwell. He had lunch at a pub near the British Museum and then returned to the park. Then in the late afternoon he spotted Nigel. The little man was sitting down against a tree. His hands covered the red notebook. Arthur stood up and walked towards him. The temperature had started to drop. The sky, for the first time since he had been there, had turned gray -- the gray sky people expect in London.

Once he got close, Arthur could see that the little man was sound asleep. His shoulders were moving up and down, and his mouth held a small smile. Arthur looked around. The few people still there were asleep or reading. No one was watching him. Quickly he leaned down and reached for the notebook. Even though one of Nigel's hands held the book, Arthur didn't expect a fight from the sleeping old man. But when Arthur grabbed it, Nigel awoke and held on fiercely, and it was all Arthur could do to yank it free and run off through the park.