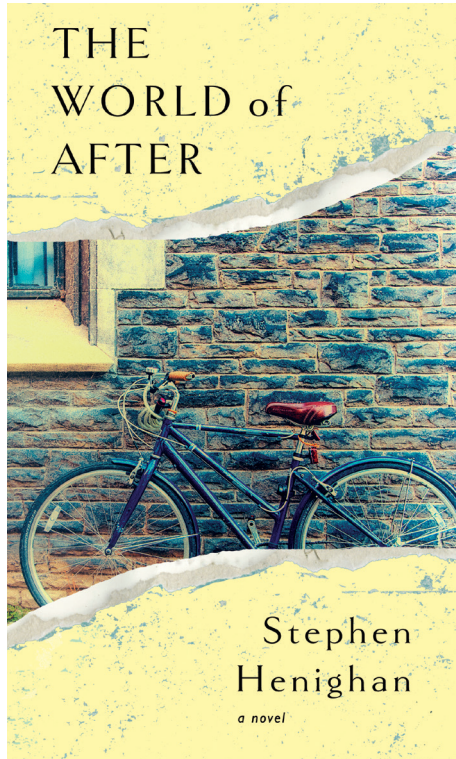


**Excerpt from *The World of After*
by Stephen Henighan**



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PART ONE
MATRICULATION

ONE

Compatriots from different cities, when they meet overseas, are obliged to share a nationality ... I was from Montreal and Alex was from Toronto. In Oxford, we were both blank colonial slates: Yanks who bristled at being called Yanks, and, unlike real Yanks, understood parliamentary government and had listened to BBC news before arriving in England. Having grown up among immigrants, we were fascinated by the suddenly volatile countries in Eastern Europe dominating the news. I must have brushed past Alex half a dozen times before I got to know him. Because, in what became a fateful triangle, we owed our friendship to an Englishman.

Alex wasn't the first Canuck I met in Oxford. That was Decibel Doug from Shediac. A husky, energetic guy with a vivid face and unruly hair, Doug had studied physics at Dalhousie. His room on the upper tier of the graduate student quadrangle of Hamdaw College was dominated by the largest desktop computer I'd seen. He was the first person I knew — this was 1992, when the Berlin Wall had fallen so recently that you could chip off a brick and take it home — to play video games without going to an arcade. He squealed as he blasted carbine-wielding brutes who skulked in tunnels. "How do you find people here respond to you as a Canadian?" he would murmur, turning off his computer and cranking up *Spirit of the West* on his oversized ghetto blaster.

"They don't have a clue," I said. "I figure it's my business to teach them."

As soon as the words were out, I was the arrogant Montrealer, inflated with bilingual presumption, laying down the law to the boy from the fishing village.

"I bet they don't listen to you."

"Then I insist," I said, knowing that the true object of Doug's

hostility wasn't me but Sebastian Castorp, his next door neighbour in the quadrangle at the top of the graduate staircase. Sebastian countered Doug's decibels with chords of classical music. The competitive conversations between the two of them became a spectator sport. Sebastian, the son of a Viennese professor of philology, corrected Doug's assertions with scorn. Their arguments depressed me, not only because the arts versus science formula felt like a high school debating topic, but because their quarrels reminded me of how young my fellow graduate students were. Many Brits started doctoral degrees at twenty-one; most of the English-speaking foreigners were Rhodes Scholars who had arrived in Oxford fresh from being undergraduate class presidents. Coming from Montreal, where graduate programs were thronged with divorced, middle-aged women and men with jobs and families, I hadn't expected to find myself a senior citizen at thirty-two. I avoided the quad at the top of the graduate staircase, ambling through the ancient streets where the serrated spires stood outlined against the cloudy sky and the Tudor beams of the narrow houses squeezed between the castle-like colleges creaked in the damp. I longed for a café life such as I'd known on the Main and rue St-Denis. But only the Burger King and a few luxury restaurants remained open after dark. Beyond that, I was relegated to the chip wagon or the pub. At twenty past eleven every night, young upper-class Englishmen swung out of the pubs, chanting and roaring and vomiting their way home. In their soft-faced, pout-lipped pallor, they looked like revenants from the Oxford of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Their lives, governed by tutorials, drinking, and dinner jackets, were a retrograde affront to my graduate student Oxford of cross-cultural conversations, where almost everyone was a foreigner.

One noon-time, during the blur of those first days, I entered the refectory for lunch. Dinner, which was included in my residence

fees — battels, in Oxford-speak — was served in the college's seventeenth-century dining hall, beneath the hammerbeam ceiling and the implacable surveillance of portraits of wigged Wardens from centuries past. Lunch, paid for on the day, was available in the utilitarian refectory in the college's back quad, which students in the 1970s had dubbed the Ho Chi Minh Quad, a name that student organizations had maintained ever since.

Having paid for my lunch, I navigated the aisles, holding a plastic tray. The only graduate students I saw were Sebastian Castorp, his Australian buddy Stan, and an older-looking fellow with a wave of dark hair riding his forehead. I slid into the vacant seat opposite the guy I didn't know.

I'd barely sat down when an eager undergraduate hurried towards our table. He brandished a fan of red brochures. "Oxford Labour Party. Join up and help put an end to Tory rule!"

Sebastian leaned back in his seat as though avoiding a foul odour.

"I'll take one of those," the man I didn't know said in an East London drawl, "when the Labour Party stands up properly for the working class."

Unfazed by two rejections, the undergraduate directed an expectant gaze through his glasses at Stan and me. "I belong to the Australian Liberal Party," Stan said, in a high-pitched voice at odds with the thicket of chest hair padding his tight white dress shirt.

Feeling sorry for the young man, I said, "I'll take one."

"Americans can't vote," he said, withdrawing the brochures.

"I'm not American, I'm Canadian. As a Commonwealth citizen, I can vote in local elections. Or do you not care about the make-up of Oxford City Council?"

"I didn't think there was any difference," the young man mumbled, ceding me a brochure and hurrying away in search of a more

predictable audience.

“You certainly put him in his place,” the man opposite me said.

His name was Leon Zamenhof. He lived in the ugly quad at the top of the graduate staircase, but was rarely there because he had a girlfriend in London. For the first time since my arrival, I felt at ease. Here — in contrast to the dutiful Christians, confirmed bachelors, closeted gays, devoted asexual scholars, tortured virgins, and prescriptive born-again whom I’d encountered until now — was a person with an acknowledged sex life. At twenty-eight, Leon was closer to me in age than the other graduates.

“The Labour Party!” Sebastian said, interrupting our introductions. “This is Oxford! Are we not all Conservative?”

“Not in this college, mate.” Leon waved towards the window. “That’s the Ho Chi Minh Quad out there. Hamdaw College has produced one leader of the Labour Party and a slew of cabinet ministers. People on the left, if they’re coming to Oxford, study here.”

Stan, running his hand over his close-cropped skull, said, “Nobody tells you these things when you’re back in Sydney. All they say is, ‘You’ve got a place at Oxford.’ That was good enough for me. ‘You’ve got a place at Oxford.’”

“We’ve all got places at Oxford,” I said. Stan and I had grated on each other at first sight. Like every Australian I’d met here, he had come to Oxford in ardent pursuit of all I found objectionable about the place.

“We don’t even wear gowns to dinner! At Sydney Uni they didn’t let you into dinner without a gown. If you came in late you had to bow to the Master to be admitted.” He illustrated the gesture, his thick, crescent-shaped nose descending towards a crust of Yorkshire pudding. Mediterranean extravagance burst out of Stan’s big, hairy body in defiance of his voice’s high-pitched an-

tipodean squeak.

“You have cut your hair, Stan,” Sebastian said.

“I keep it short. If it gets curly, I look like a wop. The day I arrived, the porter at the Lodge asked me my name. ‘Konstantine Papadopolous,’ I says. And he says, ‘I didn’t expect that name with that accent.’ ‘I’ve got a place here at Hamdaw,’ I says to him.”

“What the fuck do you care what a porter thinks about your name?” Leon flashed a mirthless grin. “What fucking business is it of his? If some wanker gives me a nasty look because my name’s Zamenhof, I say, ‘Yes, it’s a Jewish name. My father’s a Jew. Do you have a fucking problem with that?’”

Sebastian looked startled. “I did not think I would meet people like this at Oxford.”

Leon stood up. “You wouldn’t, would you? You don’t have to deal with people like me in Vienna, do you? You took care of that problem a few decades ago.”

Grasping the intent Leon had heard in Stan’s words, I said, “I don’t think he meant —”

“He knows what he meant,” Leon said. He picked up his tray and left.

I looked at Sebastian and Stan, waiting for them to make amends. When they said nothing, I got to my feet and followed Leon out of the refectory. Outside, feeble sunlight drained through the grey Thames Valley clouds. I caught up with Leon. “What a relief to get out of there.”

He stopped, observing me. His build was shorter and squarer than mine; his broad features and long, thick hair gave him an air of being indomitable and, at the same time, bold and dashing. “Fucking wankers. He’s the sort of tosser who tells you the Jews burned down the Reichstag. Where do they find such utter *arses*?”

We crossed the perpetually damp, impeccably-mown grass of

the Ho Chi Minh Quad and sat down on broad concrete steps overlooking the modern, glassed-in college bar. The bar was closed, the lights extinguished. In the dull day, our blob-like reflections clung to the muted pane like oversized raindrops. “I wouldn’t mind a pint right now,” Leon said.

I laughed. I hadn’t adapted to British pub culture, preferring a glass of wine in a club with jazz music, yet I felt that in Leon I’d met someone human. The year before, accepting at long last that a larger world was not to be found in the confines of English Montreal, where my family had lived for as long as anyone could remember, I had applied on a whim to Oxford. Even as I was filling in forms and applying for scholarships, I recognized the archaic nature of my plan. In an atavistic colonial impulse, I saw Oxford as the solution to Anglo-Montreal stagnation. I knew, though I could barely acknowledge it, that what I really wanted wasn’t Oxford — about which I knew nothing — it was Berlin. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, I had become fascinated by Eastern Europe. I longed to go to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, to touch the Berlin Wall. I saw moving to Oxford as the first large hop on my road east.

To my surprise, my scheme worked. I was accepted by the university and received scholarships that gave me enough money for four years at Oxford. Now I woke up every morning in a narrow bed flush against the radiator below the window of my room halfway up the graduate staircase of Hamdaw College. Situated in a 1960s building at the back of the college grounds, the graduate staircase led up to a double-tiered fishbowl of a quad where first-year graduate students lived in glass-fronted rooms that looked out at each other across the concrete. I went up there to hear Decibel Doug and Sebastian argue, but I was glad that my room was on the staircase below the quad, at the front of the building. My window looked out across a balcony at the back of the ancient din-

ing hall, the kitchens and the Fellows' dining room. Waking each morning, I thought, *I'm in Oxford. How did this happen? What's going to happen next? Will I get to Berlin?*

I explained some of this to Leon, in a jocular way, as our rain-drop-reflections performed bobbing movements in the glass of the closed-up bar.

"We're all adrift," he said. "Me da' had this tremendous sense of purpose. When he was a young blade he went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. When I graduated from uni, I went out to Greece to teach English."

I said nothing, puzzled to learn that Leon, who must have been born in the mid-1960s, was the son of a man who had been old enough to fight in a war in the late 1930s. "There was a Montreal doctor who fought in Spain," I said. "Norman Bethune. He was a friend of my grandmother's. He became a hero in China. The Chinese put up statues to him."

"The left is wonderful for odd characters — and factional disputes."

I felt him testing the water, gauging my enthusiasm for conversations about the left. I decided to view any confidence Leon displayed in me as a sign of his having overcome British stereotypes about people whose accents they couldn't distinguish from those of Americans. "At some point," I said, risking an assumption of future complicity, "I'll tell you about the woman I worked for in Montreal."

"Women!" He didn't pick up on the part of the sentence I'd expected. "Emily, my girlfriend, was terrified of my coming to live at Hamdaw. Oxford insisted you have to live here for at least a year for the doctorate. She imagined me surrounded by young nubile..."

"Her mind should be at ease."

Our eyes met. I remembered the sunny morning a few days earlier when the newly matriculated graduate students of Hamdaw College, having been instructed on appropriate sub-fusc — the white shirt, collar, and bow-tie to be worn beneath a dark jacket and gown — were summoned to one of the college's ancient doorways to have our group photograph taken. There were about thirty-five of us, some of whom I had not seen before. Having not so much broken up with, as veered apart from Camille, I'd observed the women with a certain discreet, or perhaps not so discreet, hunger. The first disappointment was that, in a reversal of graduate student populations in Canada, there were more men than women. I was surprised by the youth, not only in years, but also in callowness, of my fellow graduates. Nearly all, regardless of their countries of origin, had been drawn to Oxford from relative provincial backwaters. The only exceptions were two American women who didn't count since, being Rhodes Scholars, they socialized mainly with American Rhodes Scholars in other Oxford colleges, preparing the ground for the political careers they would pursue when they returned home. I imagined Camille surveying the men, and decided that she would feel a frustration similar to that which I experienced with the women. It was not simply that none of these women looked like potential lovers, but rather that, lacking experience of love and loss, they were tense, naïve, and puritanical. A certain companionship between men and women, born of an awareness of the games the sexes play, was absent. By leaving Montreal, I'd torn up my life in more ways than I'd imagined. I longed for familiarity and found it nowhere in these portentous turrets and impregnable pale-brown walls. I leaned towards Leon, grateful that we shared a culture of the political left, a sense of humour and an interest in women. As I tried to inveigle him into further conversation, he got to his feet.

“Cheers, Kevin. It’s a relief to learn there’s someone halfway human on the staircase. Let’s have a natter later on. This conversation won’t be complete until I introduce you to another bloke I know.”

Before I could ask for an explanation, he walked away.