



She stood before us, without notes, books or nerves. The lectern was occupied by her handbag. She looked around, smiled, was still, and began.

‘You will have observed that the title of this course is “Culture and Civilisation”. Do not be alarmed. I shall not be pelting you with pie charts. I shall not attempt to stuff you with facts as a goose is stuffed with corn; this would only lead to an engorged liver, which would be unhealthy. Next week I shall supply you with a reading list which is entirely optional; you will neither lose marks for ignoring it, nor gain them by relentless study. I shall teach you as the adults you undoubtedly are. The best form of education, as the Greeks knew, is collaborative. But I am no Socrates and you are not a classroom of Platos, if that is the correct plural form. Nonetheless, we shall engage in dialogue. At the same time – and since you are no longer in primary school – I shall not dispense milksop encouragement and bland approval. For some of you, I may well not be the best teacher, in the sense of the one most suited to your temperament and cast of mind. I mention this in advance to those for whom it will be the case. Naturally, I hope you will find the course interesting, and, indeed, fun. Rigorous fun, that is. The terms are not incompatible. And I shall expect rigour from you in return. Winging it will not suit. My name is Elizabeth Finch. Thank you.’

And she smiled again.

None of us had taken a note. We gazed back at her, some

in awe, a few in puzzlement bordering on irritation, others already half in love.

I can't remember what she taught us in that first lesson. But I knew obscurely that, for once in my life, I had arrived at the right place.

Her clothes. Let's start at ground level. She wore brogues, black in winter, brown suede in autumn and spring. Stockings or tights – you never saw Elizabeth Finch with bare legs (and you certainly couldn't imagine her in beachwear). Skirts just below the knee – she resisted the annual hemline tyranny. Indeed, she appeared to have settled on her look some time ago. It could still be called stylish; another decade, and it might be antique or, perhaps, vintage. In summer, a box-pleated skirt, usually navy; tweed in winter. Sometimes she adopted a tartan or kiltish look with a big silver safety pin (no doubt there's a special Scottish word for it). Obvious money was spent on blouses, in silk or fine cotton, often striped, and in no way translucent. Occasionally a brooch, always small and, as they say, discreet, yet somehow refulgent. She rarely wore earrings (were her lobes even pierced? now there's a question). On her left little finger, a silver ring which we took to be inherited, rather than bought or given. Her hair was a kind of sandy grey, shapely and of unvarying length. I imagined a regular fortnightly appointment. Well, she believed in artifice, as she told us more than once. And artifice, as she also observed, was not incompatible with truth.

Though we – her students – were between our late twenties and early forties, we at first responded to her like kids back at school. We wondered about her background and her private life, about why and whether she had never – as far as we

knew – married. About what she did in the evenings. Did she make herself a perfect *fines herbes* omelette, have a single glass of wine (Elizabeth Finch drunk? only if the world turned upside down) while reading the latest fascicle of *Goethe Studies*? You see how easy it was to stray into fantasy, even satire.

She smoked all the years I knew her. And again, she didn't smoke like anyone else. There are smokers who patently enjoy every burst of nicotine; others who inhale with a sense of self-loathing; some display it as a style habit; others again, annoyingly, claim to have 'only one or two a day', as if they were in charge of their addiction. And – since all smokers lie – 'one or two' always turns out to mean three or four, even half a pack. EF, on the other hand, displayed no attitude to her smoking. It was something she did which required neither explanation nor ornamentation. She decanted her cigarettes into a tortoiseshell case, which left us playing Guess the Brand. She smoked as if she were indifferent to smoking. Does that make sense? And if you had dared to ask her, she wouldn't have fallen back on excuses. Yes, she would have said, of course she was addicted; and yes, she knew it was bad for her, and also antisocial. But no, she wasn't going to stop, or count how many she smoked a day; such matters were very low on her list of concerns. And since – this was my own personal deduction, or rather, guess – since she had no fear of death and nowadays judged life somewhat overrated, the question was really of no interest to her, and therefore shouldn't be to you either.

Naturally, she suffered migraines.

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In my mind's eye – my memory's eye, the only place I can see her – she is standing before us, preternaturally still. She had none of those lecturer's tics and tricks designed to charm, distract, or indicate character. She never waved her arms about or supported her chin in her hand. She might occasionally put a slide up to illustrate a point, but that was mostly unnecessary. She commanded attention by her stillness and her voice. It was a calm, clear voice enriched by decades of smoking. She wasn't one of those teachers who only engaged with their students when they looked up from their notes because, as I said, she didn't lecture from notes. It was all in her head fully thought out, fully processed. This also compelled attention, reducing the gap between her and us.

Her diction was formal, her sentence structure entirely grammatical – indeed, you could almost hear the commas, semicolons and full stops. She never started a sentence without knowing how and when it would end. Yet she never sounded like a talking book. Her vocabulary was drawn from the same word-box she used for both writing and general conversation. And yet the effect wasn't archaic in any way, it was intensely alive. And she enjoyed – perhaps to amuse herself, or to surprise us – throwing in the occasional phrase of a different tonality.

For instance, one week she was talking to us about *The Golden Legend*, that medieval assemblage of miracles and martyrdoms. Gaudy miracles and instructive martyrdoms. Her subject was St Ursula.

'Cast your minds back, if you will, to AD 400, a time before Christian hegemony had been established on our shores. Ursula was a British princess, daughter of the Christian King Nothus. She was wise, dutiful, devout and virtuous – all the usual moral

accoutrements of such princesses. Also beautiful, that more problematic accoutrement. Prince Etherius, son of the King of Anglia, fell in love with her and asked for her hand in marriage. This placed Ursula's father in a dilemma, since the Angles were not only very powerful, but also worshippers of idols.

'Ursula was a bride to be bartered, like many before and since; and being wise, virtuous, et cetera, she was also ingenious. Accept the offer from the son of Power, she told her father; yet attach conditions which will impose delay. Ask to be granted three years of grace, so that Ursula could make a pilgrimage to Rome, during which time young Etherius was to be instructed in the true faith and then baptised. Some might judge this a deal-breaker, but not the love-struck Etherius. The views of the King of Anglia are not recorded.

'When news of Ursula's planned spiritual escapade got out, other like-minded virgins flocked to her side. And here we hit upon a textual nub. As many of you will know, Ursula was accompanied by eleven thousand virgins; those of you familiar with Venice might recall Carpaccio's sequential representation of the story. Such a package tour to organise, and Mr Thomas Cook had yet to be born. The textual nub I mentioned concerns the letter M, and what the original scribe meant by it. Was it M for *Mille*, thousand, or M for *Martyr*? Some of us might find the latter reading more plausible. Ursula plus eleven virgin martyrs makes twelve, also the number of Christ's Apostles.

'Still, let us allow the story to proceed in Technicolor and CinemaScope, techniques which Carpaccio did much to popularise. Eleven thousand virgins set off from Britain. When they reached Cologne, an angel of the Lord appeared to Ursula, with the message that after leaving Rome she and her cortège were to return via Cologne, where they

were to acquire the holy crown of martyrdom. News of this endgame spread through the eleven thousand, to be greeted with staunch rapture. Meanwhile, in Britain, another of the Lord's ubiquitous angels appeared to Etherius, instructing him to meet his intended bride in Cologne, where he would also acquire the palm of martyrdom.

'Everywhere she went, Ursula attracted more and more followers, though the total is not recorded. In Rome, the very Pope joined this female host, and in doing so brought upon himself calumny and excommunication. Meanwhile again, two villainous Roman commanders, fearing that the hysterical success of the expedition would further the spread of Christianity, arranged for a Hunnish army to massacre the returning pilgrims. Conveniently, a Hunnish army happened to be besieging Cologne at that very time. We must allow for such narrative coincidences and angelic interventions: this is not, after all, a nineteenth-century novel. Although, as I say that, nineteenth-century novels are full of coincidence.

'And so Ursula and her vast entourage reached Cologne, whereupon the Hunnish army turned away from their siege machinery and began slaughtering the Eleven Thousand Plus with – and the phrase was a banality even in AD 400 – “the savagery of wolves falling upon a flock of sheep”.'

Elizabeth Finch paused, surveyed the room and asked, 'What are we to make of all this?' And into the silence she gave her reply: 'I propose: Suicide by Cop.'

Elizabeth Finch was not in any way a public figure. You will google her with little result. If asked to characterise her professionally, I would say that she was an independent scholar. That may sound like a euphemism, even a truism. But before

knowledge became officially housed in academe, there used to be men and women of the highest intelligence who privately pursued their own interests. Mostly, of course, they had money; some were eccentric, a few certifiably mad. But money allowed them to travel and research what and where they needed, with no pressure to publish, colleagues to out-perform or heads of department to satisfy.

I never knew Elizabeth Finch's financial position. I imagined she had family money, or an inheritance. She had a West London flat in which I never set foot; she appeared to live frugally; I assume she arranged her teaching to allow her time for private, independent scholarship. She had published two books: *Explosive Women*, about female anarchists in London between 1890 and 1910; and *Our Necessary Myths*, about nationalism, religion and family. Both were short, and both out of print. To some an independent scholar whose books are unavailable might seem a laughable figure. As opposed to the scores of tenured dolts and bores who would have done better to keep silent.

Several of her students subsequently made their names. She is acknowledged in some books of medieval history and female thought. But she was not known to those who did not know her. Which may sound self-evident. Except that nowadays, in the digital landscape, friends and followers have come to mean different, watered-down things. Many people know one another without knowing them at all. And are happy with that superficiality.

You might think me old-fashioned (but my case is not relevant). You might think Elizabeth Finch equally, if not more, old-fashioned. But if she was, it was not in the normal way, that of embodying a previous generation whose truths had now proved wan and withered. How can I put it? She



dealt in truths not from previous generations but from previous eras, truths she kept alive but which others had abandoned. And I don't mean anything like 'she was an old-fashioned Tory/liberal/socialist'. She was outside of her age in many ways. 'Do not be taken in by time,' she once said, 'and imagine that history – and especially intellectual history – is linear.' She was high-minded, self-sufficient, European. And as I write those words, I stop, because I hear in my head something she once taught us in class: 'And remember, whenever you see a character in a novel, let alone a biography or history book, reduced and neatened into three adjectives, always distrust that description.' It is a rule of thumb I have tried to obey.

The class soon shook down into groups and cliques, by the usual method of hazard and intent. Some of it was based on the choice of drink after class: beer, wine, beer and/or wine and/or anything else in a bottle, fruit juice, nothing at all. My group, which shifted easily between beer and wine, consisted of Neil (i.e. me), Anna (Dutch, so occasionally outraged by English frivolity), Geoff (provocateur), Linda (emotionally labile, whether it came to study or life itself) and Stevie (town planner looking for more). One of our bonds was, paradoxically, that we rarely agreed about anything, except that whatever government was in power was useless, God almost certainly did not exist, life was for the living, and you could never have too many bar snacks in noisy packets. This was a time before laptops in class and social media out of it; when news came from newspapers and knowledge came from books. Was it a simpler time, or a duller one? Both or neither?

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‘Monotheism,’ said Elizabeth Finch. ‘Monomania. Monogamy. Monotony. Nothing good begins this way.’ She paused. ‘Monogram – a sign of vanity. Monocle ditto. Monoculture – a precursor to the death of rural Europe. I am prepared to acknowledge the usefulness of a monorail. There are many neutral scientific terms which I am also prepared to admit. But where the prefix applies to human business . . . Monoglot, the sign of an enclosed and self-deluding country. The monokini, as facetious an etymology as it is a garment. Monopoly – and I do not refer to the board game – always a disaster if you give it time. Monorchid: a condition to be pitied but not aspired to. Any questions?’

Linda, who often seemed to be suffering from what she quaintly called ‘heart trouble’, asked anxiously, ‘What have you got against monogamy? Isn’t it how most people want to live? Isn’t it what most people dream of?’

‘Beware of dreams,’ Elizabeth Finch replied. ‘Also, as a general rule, beware of what most people aspire to.’ She paused, half-smiled at Linda and addressed the class through her. ‘Enforced monogamy is as much to say enforced happiness, which we know is not possible. Unenforced monogamy might seem possible. Romantic monogamy might seem to be desirable. But the first normally collapses back into a version of enforced monogamy, while the second is liable to become obsessive and hysterical. And thereby lies close to monomania. We should always distinguish between mutual passion and shared monomania.’

We were all silenced, taking this in. Most of us had had the average sexual and amatory experience of our generation: that’s to say, far too much in the opinion of the preceding generation, and pathetically little in the view of the next, pressing generation. We were also wondering how

much of what she said was based on personal experience, but none of us dared ask.

Linda, to her credit, pursued the matter. ‘So are you saying it’s all hopeless?’

‘How does the witty Mr Sondheim put it?’ And Elizabeth Finch actually half-sang: ‘“One’s impossible, two is dreary, / Three is company, safe and cheery.” Which is one way of looking at the matter, to be sure.’

‘But do you agree with that, or are you just avoiding the question?’

‘No, I am merely offering you the alternatives.’

‘So are you saying that Etherius was wrong to go to Cologne?’ Linda, as we were learning, took classes very personally, even those on medieval religion.

‘No, not wrong. We all pursue what we think is best for us, even if it means our extinction. Sometimes, especially if it means that. By the time we attain it, or don’t, it is usually too late anyway.’

‘*That’s* not much help,’ said Linda, with a kind of whiney fierceness.

‘I am not employed to help you,’ replied Elizabeth Finch, firmly and yet not rebukingly. ‘I am here to assist you to think and argue and develop minds of your own.’ She paused. ‘But since you ask about Etherius, let us consider his case. As Ursula’s betrothed, he accepted her conditions: that while she undertook her pilgrimage to Rome, he would study the Christian texts, be convinced of their truths, and be baptised into her religion. How much this must have enraged his father, the King of Anglia and a most notorious pagan, we are not told. But in any case, an angel of the Lord appeared to Etherius, instructing him to meet Ursula in Cologne, where they would suffer glorious martyrdom together.’