

A MOMENT MORE SUBLIME

Stephen Grant

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A NOVEL

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For Mona Grant

CHAPTER ONE

“Consider this. Do all humans aim at happiness? Is happiness broadly similar for all humans? Must you read philosophy to be happy? Must you be morally good to be happy? To answer yes to these questions is to commit yourself to the ethics of Aristotle, and I hope this is what you will come to do.” He looks up at them. “Who would answer yes?”

Inevitably, it is Maya who is the first to respond. “Would that mean that happiness is the same for one of us as it was for a twelfth-century monk?”

“Yes.”

She starts in disbelief. “They were happy reading and praying, but no one here would be happy doing that.”

“The easiest way to understand this would be to consider the terms we are using. ‘Happiness’ is the most common translation of the ancient Greek word ‘eudaimonia’. Many now feel this is better translated as ‘a flourishing life’. Aristotle believed that all humans shared a common nature, and we could describe, at least in outline, the flourishing life for all humans because in each case it would be fulfilling a range of natural capacities that we all have. He would have said that, although the monks may have believed they were leading a flourishing life, they would have been mistaken. Humans naturally appreciate pleasure, and the best life will include many of the pleasures that the monks refused. They therefore could not lead the best life.”

Other hands are now raised, but Maya continues on the assumed right of follow-up questions. "Are you saying that you can't be happy if you don't read philosophy?"

Smiles all around. They sense that this is so improbable it's actually amusing that anyone should have made the claim at all. This in turn creates the opportunity for point-scoring against the philosophers. They have all studied Plato in their first year and find an arrogance in the idea of the ideal state as one ruled by philosophers, which they also detect in their teachers of the subject.

"At some stages Aristotle appears to go as far as suggesting that the best life is not simply one where you study philosophy but one where you focus purely on the most abstract areas such as the fundamentals of logic, mathematics, and physics. Even subjects such as ethics would no longer be a part of what one does. He suggests that the gods are pure conscious thought, and as the gods have the best possible existence and no practical concerns, the best possible existence must be one of pure thought for its own sake. He thinks abstract philosophy is like that."

"Does anyone believe that now?" Joe's first contribution of the year. He is looking down and drawing some sort of machine as he says it, pressing the pen down on the paper with excessive force. Aside from Maya, he is the only student of the five with mental health problems of which Tom is aware. The ever-present symptom is that he sits with his ankles clamped tight and moves his knees apart and together with metronomic regularity over the entire seventy minutes of every lesson. His concentration is so sporadic it is extraordinary that he has made his way this far through school, benefiting from only the short episodes of attention which punctuate the general, swirling storm of his mental energy. Tom takes this to be an indication of what Joe could have

achieved if capable of focusing for more than a fraction of any class. This thought fights for supremacy over the extreme irritation Joe causes by constantly drifting into conversation with others around him, but Tom has never seriously considered having him withdrawn from the class.

In December of last year, there had been an inspection. The aging little Ofsted man with the shirt-splitting belly and the incongruous Paul Smith designer glasses was already sitting in the room when Tom entered two minutes late and saw him tick a box indicating the class had not started on time. Tom began by asking a series of questions based on the material covered in the previous session. Joe's hand shot up at the first question, and he answered using precisely the words Tom had used two days earlier. The same happened with the second question. Other students quickly understood that Joe had studied and memorised that entire lesson in preparation for a possible inspection. They also began to respond with unusual enthusiasm. The inspector commended the "positive learning environment" and awarded the lesson the second highest of the four possible grades. So Tom lets Joe sit there with his knees knocking and his bad drawing and his constant talking.

"No one who counts himself an Aristotelian today would accept this. There are differences of opinion over whether or not Aristotle himself really held this to be the case. Most believe that he was committed to the view that the best life for all of us would involve philosophy as a means of fulfilling the intellectual potential that all of us have. But he also stresses the value of developing the moral virtues, such as being charitable, and talks of the importance of friendship. It is better to think of the best life as one which involves developing a range of capacities, including our philosophical ones."

Tom now gives each of them an extract from Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics* accompanied by several questions, answers to which they must extract from Roger Crisp's new translation. This is not the one that the exam board specifies, but it is more readable than the Penguin version. This in turn makes it easier for Tom to sit down and daydream as the students try to decipher sentences which are longer than most paragraphs. It is many years since his expanding laziness overcame the professional obligation to circulate among the students, checking their progress and helping them. He now sits quietly as they get on with it and reflects on other matters. He calculates that, as he will provide the right answers at the end, it makes no sense to dilute their enthusiasm by correcting them as they go. Once he has gone through the text with them, he writes some notes on the whiteboard summarising key points. The board is still annoyingly stained down the right-hand side from where rainwater used to leak through the roof. The leak was fixed as part of a mass of decorating and repairs which preceded Ofsted's visit. Prior to that, on rainy days, he could use only the left side of the board because the constant drip of water would wash away anything written in its path.

After the lesson, Maya follows him to his office to pick up a list of secondary texts she has asked for, some of which he has read himself. Although she is in a second-year course, she is in her third year at the college. She arrived with eleven GCSEs, ten of them at A*, pretty much the best any British sixteen-year-old can do before progressing to two years of sixth form study, followed by university.* She then took five AS courses in her first year instead of the usual four, picking up an A for each of them, as well as re-taking the eleventh

* Note to American readers: 'sixth form college', in the British educational system, is more or less equivalent to 'senior high school'.

GCSE to ensure the full set of perfect grades. In January of her second year, she re-sat an English lit paper in which she had scored only a B, despite getting an A overall. When the result came back as another B, she dropped out of the college and returned the following year. The email from Learning Support said she now had a better counsellor and better meds, but to monitor her carefully. Going on past experience, Tom judges it unlikely that she will suffer another breakdown if she fails to get the place at Cambridge which has been held over from the last year. He has taught many more fragile than her who have survived the grades they didn't want. He is theoretically required to consider whether she might be at risk of suicide, but he believes the likelihood of that to be vanishingly small. Then again, you never really know.

When she leaves, he sits in uncomfortable anticipation of what awaits him. He will have to wait fourteen minutes between switching on his computer and being able to use it. It will take another four minutes if he wishes to open his work emails, though he will have just about enough time to check his Hotmail before his mule of a machine fully revives for the day ahead. This is the unavoidable consequence of the college lacking the money to buy new equipment while having to upgrade the software without which attachments sent by anyone from first-year students to funding bodies cannot be read. In practice, this means that, if he wishes to prepare some work at home to print off for his first lesson, he needs to take an earlier train in order to have time to both print and copy it.

The irritation of waiting for the computer to finally kick into life each morning always needs to be balanced against reprieve from opening the emails he knows Barry has sent him. These are from either late the previous evening or at eight in the morning when Barry has arrived at his desk in the English department with a series of new ideas on which

urgent action might be required. In a moment of breathtaking misjudgement, Tom had agreed to stand for the position of branch secretary for the Union of College Lecturers two years earlier. The thought of representing the staff's interests had figured somewhat less prominently in his reasons than the attraction of having four teaching sessions removed from his timetable to carry out his revolutionary responsibilities. He had anticipated meeting with management once a fortnight, helping to chair branch meetings twice a term, and plenty of general discussion about the uselessness of the college's senior managers.

What Tom had not understood was the Castro-like enthusiasm of Barry Egham, branch chair of fifteen years. Barry had approached him on the back of two questions raised in a branch meeting, asking him if he would be interested in "getting a bit more involved." It emerged that the then secretary would be leaving the college, and Barry decided that it would be good to enlist someone from outside the English department. The position of secretary carried little importance in itself but came with a much higher status because whoever took up this post also became a lead negotiator. This in turn meant engaging in hand-to-hand combat with management, which elevated the holder to the rank of local hero. Barry persuaded the only other person interested in standing for secretary to think instead of the great work to be done as health and safety officer, thereby neatly matching the available candidates to the range of posts and avoiding the need for elections.

Tom's relief at avoiding the possible humiliation of defeat dissipated when it became clear exactly what working with Barry was to be like. There would be meetings at eight-fifteen every Tuesday morning in which they would discuss all on-going union-related issues with the other seven members of

the branch executive committee. Tom's role included preparing the agenda for any meeting and recording all action points. In order to maintain branch unity and strength, the two of them would visit two of the college's programme areas each week to meet with their members for an hour. This allowed them to detect all rumblings in all areas of the college. Barry insisted that a newsletter must go out twice a term, and Tom was expected to draft at least two or three articles for each one. On top of this were the individual cases which periodically came his way, in which he might have to spend hours with a member who was accused of incompetence, or who was taking out a grievance against his manager for bullying. But Barry had further ways of extending the work beyond the official hours. He was also a member of the union's national and regional executives and thought it essential that Tom should find out where they stood in the context of the wider issues facing the sector. He would check his voicemail to hear, "Tom, it's Barry – there's a regional meeting on Saturday from ten till one, I'll see you in front of Boots at Kings Cross at nine-thirty"; or "Tom, it's Barry – there's a conference on strategy for defending pensions in a couple of weeks, I think we both need to be there, and I've sent our names to the national officer who's running it." Only once did Tom ever dare to refuse, claiming that he had a longstanding commitment to take his mother out for her birthday on the weekend of a demonstration to save a college in Essex from partial closure. This felt more justifiable than the real reason of having organised a key tennis match which he needed to win to avoid sinking into league three for the first time. Barry didn't like tennis.

The problem Tom found in dealing with Barry was not that he was fearsome or intimidating so much as that he was so enthusiastically committed that any refusal resulted in the

sense of guilt one might have at disappointing a child. Barry wasn't naïve, but he had the belief normally associated with youthful idealism, and it was uncomfortable to know you were letting him down. It also generated an unpleasant self-awareness in Tom, a sense of the distance between his philosophical critique of policies which damage education and his readiness to oppose. He never quite knew which motive was the stronger, but every time he got up on Saturday morning to travel up the Northern Line for some excruciating trawl through the woes of London's secondary education system, he knew it wasn't virtue which lay behind it.

The eighteen minutes pass, and the second of his six new emails is from Barry.

Tom,
Dickie wants to meete. Droop inot my office
and lets hav a word.
Cheers,
Bary

Tom is relieved that his weekend remains intact, but he rolls his eyes at the thought of meeting with the principal in the first week of the academic year. Whenever Dickie asks to see them it is a bad sign. He has an unconcealed loathing for the union, which he must overcome for the regular fortnightly meetings. He never meets them more often unless he has to. Given all the jobs being cut elsewhere across London, Tom fears this may be the only reason he would summon them. Better to find out Barry's thoughts on this sooner rather than later, and he walks down the two flights of stairs to the English department.

Barry habitually sat in only two positions. The first was when he had his face four inches from his monitor as he belted out

some message to the union members or a press notice so replete with misspellings that only a former journalist could have written it. The second was when the chair was in the reclining position as he marked the essays of his communications students or provided searing Marxist analysis of contemporary events. At sixty-two, he still retained hints of the physique of a former near-athlete who had failed a rugby league trial for his local professional team when he was seventeen. Now he never even mounted his exercise bike, but there was a smooth efficiency to his movements and no sagging excess visible on his face.

When Tom enters, he is playing with his reading glasses and smiling at the report he is reading on the BBC website about a Conservative donor caught by an undercover journalist advising her not only on how to set up an account in Cyprus but also offering to take her out for dinner to explain the details.

"Hi, right, let's go," says Barry in a Yorkshire accent uncorrupted by thirty years of life in west London.

Tom follows him out of the room, but instead of heading towards the union's office, they turn towards the management offices, and Tom stops him.

"We're going to see him now?"

"Why not? He said to come along for a quick chat just to sort out a couple of issues before term starts. Let's see what he wants."

"Since when is he this informal?"

"Never. That's why we need to see what's up."

They enter the outer office where four secretaries coordinate the meetings of the principal and the vice principal. This room is trying so desperately hard to look like a sophisticated office that it never does anything more than advertise its own cheapness. The unpleasant, hard-wearing carpets and the

oak-effect furniture are home to four women whose dress sense is far more influenced by the casual indifference of the teachers than they realise. None of them ever achieves the business-like sharpness they seek.

Bella, Dickie's secretary, greets them and opens the door into the principal's office to tell him they have arrived. Tom can't hear the response, but she comes back out and has them sit down on the Ikea sofa for ten minutes before Dickie opens the door himself and asks them in. Tom isn't sure if this is a strategy to emphasise his power or if he just wants to give the impression of being busy. It never even occurs to Tom that there may be a genuine reason for the wait.

Dickie's expensive, tailored suit hangs remarkably well from the sloping shoulders of his five-foot-five-inch frame. Jacket and trousers taper neatly around the various bulges, almost hiding the improbably round potbelly. He asks them about their summer breaks and welcomes them back with all the conviction of someone who doesn't mean a word of what he says.

In two years of meetings with Dickie, Tom has only ever had one exchange which came close to relaxed. During a delay when Bella was hunting for a file, it came up that Tom was working through a box set of *The Sopranos*. Dickie had watched it all first time around on his new fifty-inch plasma set with his full Sky package, and they had swapped views on why it was so compelling. The goodwill lasted until Bella returned with the file and it emerged that Tom had correctly remembered an offer made at a governing body meeting in which Dickie had promised to include all the unions in the development of the college's new strategic plan. They realised this would mean allowing the people Dickie most hated to enter discussions over the future of an institution which he felt he possessed with the same degree of ownership as those

expensive suits and his two homes. At the end of the meeting, in an apparently casual return to the subject of *The Sopranos*, Dickie talked about the subtlety and cleverness of the finale, providing a helpful interpretation to guide Tom through it.

The office door opens again and Sally Field walks in, pausing in the doorway. "Bella, please stop what you're doing for a moment and bring us some water."

She is rarely present at these meetings, but Tom loves it when she is. She had started twelve years earlier as Dickie's secretary, a Sarah Ferguson lookalike. Rumours began circulating after a couple of years, but final confirmation only came late one Friday night at The Garden, when Dan Corporal, the vice principal, was buying rounds of Jack Daniels for three heads of department. He had come to the outer office after receiving an email from Dickie saying that his budget for ESOL was to be cut, and one of the other secretaries told him to go straight in. He entered to find the office empty and was about to turn around and go out again when he heard a grunt of pain from the neat little ensuite, and he realised Dickie might be having a heart attack. He moved towards the bathroom but stopped on seeing events through a crack in the door. Sally was leaning over the sink, gripping each of the taps for dear life, as Dickie bounced back and forth behind her just as fast as his little legs would carry him. Dan's shock was soon succeeded by the panicky dilemma over whether he should quickly exit the office, even though the other secretaries had seen him, or stay and pretend he was unaware of events in the bathroom. This second option was compromised when he looked back in the direction of the bathroom, inadvertently glancing at the mirror just above the basin, and found himself staring straight into Sally's eyes as she gazed into the same mirror. For reasons he could not explain, he then sat down and waited. There was the sound of two people trying to

dress quietly, some whispering, and the flush of the toilet. Dickie then emerged, greeted Dan, and offered him the only increase in ESOL funding for any college in greater London in that academic year. In a letter to the *Education Guardian*, a senior union leader singled this out as an act of great humanity and foresight.

Sally moved from being secretary to head of personnel without ever wasting time on either relevant experience or appropriate qualifications. The full extent of the advertising for this new post was a card placed on the notice board in the personnel Portakabin. She was the only applicant, and Dickie chaired the interview panel.

Opinions vary over whether this promotion was a reward or a sign that Dickie was displeased when she started putting on weight. But whenever Tom has to sit through meetings filled with the tension of dealing with a man who despises him, he is always able to take refuge in imagining what must have been going through her mind when she looked into that mirror and saw Dan looking back. His amusement at this will soon be overwhelmed to a degree he would have believed impossible.

"I'd like to start with news which I think will be welcomed by all and which will be a relief to many. Psychology is no longer NTI. Nor are biology, engineering, and media studies. Indeed, there remains not a single subject at this college which we shall be obliged to formally describe as under 'notice to improve'. This is a tribute to the fine work of so many staff, and it vindicates the great faith senior managers have always shown in the middle managers and lecturers who deliver these crucial subjects."

Whenever Dickie speaks, he always gives the impression of trying to deliver some Churchillian address to the millions who hang on every word of the only man who can save them

from peril. Yet the estuary accent and the pompous tone inevitably make him sound like the modest little man that he is, always slightly overreaching as he tries to find the words to give himself the credit he thinks he deserves. NTI is the latest means of trying to measure the quality of the college's performance in a neat, numerical return. If the pass rate in a subject falls too low, the college must write to the funding body to declare this. If performance does not rise above the minimum standard within two years, funding for the course will be reduced. This is intended to motivate staff to do a better job. In reality, everything carries on as before, but the college presents information differently in order to avoid any problems. Thus, if Dickie is smiling, it is partly because he has found some means of achieving this, but mostly because he wants everyone to know. It is tempting to deny him the pleasure, but they need to know, so Tom asks him how it has been done.

"Quite simply, we were being punitively harsh on ourselves. We were treating our AS exam results as the results of one-year courses, whereas this grossly distorts the true picture of our academic world."

"AS courses are one-year courses," Barry remarks.

"On the contrary, Barry. They last only from September to May, which Sally tells me is a mere nine months. Only when students move from AS into the second year of their course have they entered what will become a course which lasts over twelve months. Instead of counting our AS results, we have therefore entered the more appropriate results from our A2 courses, and these reveal that not one subject at Sandford is NTI."

At the end of the AS courses, all those who fail are told they cannot go into the second year, and all those who don't like the subject drop it anyway. The upshot is that virtually

no one ever fails at the end of the second year. Using the second-year results will show results leaping from pass rates of around sixty percent to well over ninety. Psychology is in the same department as philosophy, and Tom shares a room with one of the teachers. He knows that their results have actually declined again, yet the Department of Education will see them as a model of improvement.

Barry mulls this as Dickie beams. They have a lot of members teaching all of the affected subjects, and funding cuts would raise the possibility of job losses. Getting out from under this threat by any means is welcome.

“Is this way of looking at it within the guidelines?”

“Barry, we have followed the guidelines religiously. We are clear. But there are also some other issues I wish to raise. Specifically, I wish to ensure we avoid any repeat of our photocopying shenanigans of last term.”

One aspect of Dickie’s commitment to the free market in education was to introduce an internal market into the college. This hasn’t really affected the teaching side, as his policy has been simply to cram as many students as possible into every classroom, and they can in turn study anything they want for all he cares. No point in getting the departments to compete against each other if they can all have as many as they can fit in. But he felt there would be more scope on the administrative side of the college, so he broke up various parts of the college into autonomous business centres with their own budgets.

One of the centres was Procurement – the only part of the organisation permitted to purchase and distribute outside supplies of basic materials – and one of its cost-saving measures was to reduce the amount spent on paper by cutting supplies to the different academic departments. This was intended to make the latter use paper more sparsely. Instead, they

started running out by Thursday afternoon of each week, and no one could produce any worksheets for Friday classes. The departments could buy more paper from Procurement out of their own budgets, but at three times the price you would pay in a shop.

Under pressure from teachers, the only solution which the heads of department could come up with was what Dickie is now raising. It was cheaper to get paper from Reprographics, but they couldn't buy it, as this would be procurement. So they had to take a blank piece of paper and have someone run off a thousand copies of it. Procurement tried to put an instant stop to this, but as Reprographics was a separate business centre enjoying an unexpected boost to its income, the process carried on for the final month of the academic year. Dickie refused to intervene as he wished the market to assert its authority, but when the Art department cancelled its entire order from Procurement in order to go exclusively with Reprographics' second-hand alternative, the college was heading towards the point at which it would soon be photocopying its entire supply of blank paper before sending it out to the teaching staff to be photocopied again. All of this was taking place without reducing the amount of paper being used, while massively increasing costs for additional ink for photocopying.

Dickie spreads his arms on the table. "I think we need common sense to win a victory for Sandford. I am going to increase the supply of paper for each department, but each lecturer will have his own code for photocopying, and each programme manager will be responsible for monitoring the use of each lecturer in their area. Serial offenders need to be spoken to, whilst the sensible majority will be able to continue on their responsible path."

"Very sensible," says Barry. In practice, this means nothing

will happen.

The academic side of the college is divided into four departments, each of which has ten programme areas with a programme manager at the head of it. The four heads of department answer to the two vice principals, and these are all Dickie's people. They don't like him, but they rarely try any resistance. Those who do are summoned to his office to see him either on his own or with some more obedient soul such as Sally, and there is perhaps an hour of sneering cross-examination to identify the causes of their failure. But below head of department is union territory. Thirty-eight of the forty programme managers are members, and to devolve anything to them is to ensure that no one will face any undue sanctions. This is the closest Dickie has ever come to acknowledging defeat.

"One more issue must come before you. The governing body will meet tomorrow to discuss the building strategy." Up until a few years earlier, there had been the prospect of a steel-and-glass cube rising out of the car park and football pitch. This was now an expensive memory, with two million pounds in architects' and consultants' fees wasted before the government decided it needed new college buildings less than the country's financial institutions and ended all school building projects in favour of bank bailouts. So they were stuck in their leaky seventies block until the next boom came around to finance something they could all fit into. "I and the governors wondered if you might like to attend in order to discuss how we hope to repair and maintain Sandford's walls for the next generation."

If Dickie is inviting them, it means he is absolutely sure there is nothing of interest to be discussed, and he can benefit from the illusion of including the union in a key meeting without any danger that it might challenge the path he wants

to take.

Barry draws a deep breath. "Will there be any discussions concerning the terms and conditions of employment at the college?"

"Barry, the discussion will be about maintenance."

"In which case, please thank the governors for their invitation, and tell them we would welcome attending future meetings when the issues are more directly related to the concerns of ordinary working people at this college."

"Barry, you're not being invited to join the governing body, but I will pass on the message." He usually manages to restrain himself because he can't bully the union in the way he is accustomed to dealing with his managers, but the combination of Barry refusing him with the suggestion of greater participation on the only body which has any real authority over him causes the tone to sharpen. "At any rate, I hope we can look forward to a year of cooperation and progress." He smiles broadly at them.

Meeting over. Sally's minutes will contain a pale imitation of what has been said, but as long as the substance of what affects the members is preserved, who cares? They go down to the union office, a coffee-stained cupboard between the staff toilets and the canteen. The radiator operates at sauna-like temperatures, or not at all, and the window looks directly onto one of the main arteries linking the humanities to the sciences.

"Fuckin' twerp," says Barry. "So pleased with himself at being clever enough to jiggle the figures you'd think he'd won the Nobel Prize for maths. Right, I think we should call a branch meeting to update people on the national initiative on pay and the local struggle for better London salaries. See if you can book the music centre for next Thursday."

Tom says nothing.

“What?”

“Why did he meet with us? All of this could have been done by email.”

“Showing off. He likes to think he’s clever, and the best people to prove it to are your worst enemies. Book the music centre for Thursday and set up a meeting of the branch executive committee for Wednesday so we can vote on strategy.” He sees Tom is still uncomfortable. “Look, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. I’ve a meeting with the national negotiators on Saturday, and I’ll ask them if they know if anything’s up. Now set up the branch meeting.”

Maybe Barry is right, and it is only later in the day that it comes to Tom why he is suspicious. Dickie never smiles at them. He rarely smiles at anyone.

