

PAUL MAVROUDIS

THE CHATTERING CLASSES

ZERO

I JUST WATCHED it happen slowly. And I didn't even see all of it. And to be honest, I'm not sure if half this stuff is even true. All I can vouch for is what I was told by the reliable people. I don't think anyone can vouch for the unreliable people though.

ONE

The same thing every year, only worse. If you wanted to learn you could. But *they* made it harder with their prattling chitchat. Quiet enough to be unintelligible; loud enough to draw attention to itself and its lack of decorum. A reasonable person might have expected it to be otherwise; after all, no one was forcing them to be there. This wasn't high school. They weren't being compelled to attend, and it wasn't Melbourne or Monash either, where there was some veneer of respectability in merely having a presence. It was Victoria University's St Albans campus where you came to learn how to be a nurse, social worker or web designer for accountants who didn't really need one but had 'delusions of grandeur' that needed to be satisfied. Besides, if you weren't doing it, someone else would, and where would that leave you and your 2.1 kids and the cookie-cutter house in the McMansion belt, the mortgage an albatross you'd carry for twenty-five or thirty years?

TWO

Paul took a left off McKechnie Street, heading towards Trev's place to finish off a film project. Instead of weaving his way through the back streets, he decided to take a stroll along the wetland ponds next to Jones Creek. The loose gravel crunched under his footsteps, and the hum of the overhead powerlines merged with rare frogs warbling. Blue-necked ducks ambled along the reedy edge, and apart from a green earthmover gathering dust across the other side of the water, there was nothing else to be seen. It seemed like a good spot to dump a body or two, if the situation required it. Even though the lakes were right underneath the flight path, it was unlikely they'd notice someone disappearing into the secluded depths.

THREE

Clarke Thomas was fifteen minutes into his lecture, going on about the ethics of public relations. One student's disbelief in the concept was lost amongst those exhibiting a sort of learned attentiveness and those just marking time. Clarke stopped mid-sentence, standing at the lectern with the best effort of patience he could muster. Eventually the whisperers cottoned on that there was some sort of silence. 'Look, I've told you two before, but you do it every week, and it's incredibly disrespectful to me and to your fellow classmates'.

FOUR

The first one was reported missing a week after she'd last been seen. She'd moved down from Bundaberg; studying in Melbourne just an excuse to get out of her home town, and have some fun along the way. And now that no one could find her, she was out of the way, too.

FIVE

Jenny was a sessional, working five days and two nights across two uni's, and at the adult education place when she could, just to make ends meet. She had a good heart and slightly dodgy hearing—that winning combination meaning that the chattering classes could get away with a fair bit more in her tutorials. Paul sat there, trying to focus on some random chick from Bayswater quietly stumbling through *Speed, A Pastoral*, wondering whether Jenny would ever repeat her one-off call for there to be silence.

SIX

Crocker was at her desk when the call came through—two more missing. Now that the list had gone up to three, maybe four, they could start figuring out patterns. The fax with the class lists of the missing came through halfway through the lunch delivery. Going through them, they narrowed it down to one person who was in every tutorial and lecture of the missing. They had nothing on record relating to Paul Mandaris; even a quick internet search came up with not much more than a couple of guestbook entries on the *Media Watch* website; accurate but naïve comments on Monsanto and the War on Terror. Still they would have to follow up.

SEVEN

Paul had a dream, that just once he would have the courage to take matters into his own hands, and tell them to shut the fuck up. But each time he held back, and his head filled with garbled nonsense about nightclubs, fashion and online comics, and he would exit the class after a couple of hours full of hatred not just for them, but himself too.

EIGHT

He lived in a one bedroom flat above a butcher's shop. They'd waited for him to leave; it was easier that way. Rather than break down the door, they'd got the key from the landlord. The landlord, the old Greek Taxiarihi, Tex to the locals, liked the kid because he kept to himself, paid his rent on time and kept the place meticulously clean. But there was something that had always worried him about Paul's manner; he was too polite, too composed and lacked the zest of life that the young should have. And besides, Tex had been an informer in the old country, ratting out Communist sympathisers to the Junta's village lackeys, and was happy to help the police. Crocker led the way in, followed by Moffat and Tran. They searched the drawers and cupboards, logged onto Paul's computer, but they knew from first impressions they wouldn't find anything. It was the kind of situation that meant that either he hadn't done anything or had done everything. Back to square one.

NINE

Numbers two and three were like sisters. They went everywhere together, took the same subjects, and barely passed, but they didn't care. Paul wondered why they didn't just drop out, but then again, he thought that about a lot of people. People in literature classes who didn't read. People in public relations classes who didn't read. People who didn't read full stop. But they could talk. Just not about what the class was about, unless they took advantage of someone like Phillip, a tutor who let his class discussions slip into the personal and ephemeral. His outward reasoning was that it made learning relevant to his students, but he knew it was really about making the day go by just that little bit faster. The good students would get the same marks regardless.

TEN

They eventually decided to bring him in for questioning. He didn't look the least bit surprised. Crocker couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing. She'd been in this job for so long, she'd gotten the knack for reading them. But there was something in his straightforwardness that was alien to her, and she read into it a depth that simply wasn't there. They didn't teach Seneca and Epicurus at the academy. Paul declined tea and coffee, but accepted a glass of water. He exercised his right to remain silent. The cops had nothing, and ploughed on for fifteen minutes, before realising that he knew that they had nothing.

ELEVEN

Sunshine was a hole. Birthplace of the hooded jumper if you believed it. The place where androgynous figures clad in blacks and greys laid hands on each other, real estate agents walked around like minor celebrities. Flash cars were parked outside drab box homes, and the dregs of the first, second and third worlds combined to make it the kind of place where you were more likely to be asked which way to the Magistrates' Court than anything else. You could bottle up your hatred or you could let it out, but it wouldn't make much of a difference. You either had to get out or stay and make a game of it; an alternate reality not depicted anywhere on television.

TWELVE

The press had finally latched onto the story and were keeping a watch outside Paul's place. On the train and on the streets, people stopped and stared, and their conversations came to sudden ends. The only things that could be heard were rattling rails and airconditioning; traffic and birdsong. At first Paul found it an odd experience, this much attention after not having done anything. But an investment into an mp3 player sorted that problem. His classes were quieter now, until they became streamlined places of learning.