

# Degrees of Separation

by Lee Stoddart, 2015

Kyle matriculated in '86, and looking back on his first three months at St. Augustine's College, Cambridge, he did not feel terribly positive about the experience.

Academically, he'd been doing fine, but probably not as well as he would have liked. He was scoring a 2:1, sometimes a 2:2, which was a bit of a blow given he always thought of himself as a "First". Economics was, after all, his subject of choice - and he revelled in his understanding of Monetarist and Keynesian theory at school - where he was considered one of the finest academics they had ever produced. His Economics master had taken great umbrage in the fact that Kyle sided with the left-wing, whereas he was a staunch Conservative - Thatcher's ideology of the neo-right frequently being showcased in lessons. Adam Smith's guiding hand hung over Kyle, but was robustly swotted away at every opportunity - debates in class became more heated as Kyle approached his A Levels and Oxbridge entry examinations, gaining confidence in his arguments and counter-arguments whilst his personal *bête-noir*, Margaret Thatcher, worked (or so he imagined) to destroy the power of the unions and to subjugate the working class.

At the same time his English master fed him left-leaning literature - Kyle was particularly taken with Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* - the story of a group of downtrodden painters and decorators in 1904 - working as little better than slaves whilst their employers schemed to make themselves ever richer at the expense of the poor and downtrodden of the town.

He saw, or at least contrived to see, this process at work in his own family's situation. His father had been made redundant - a skilled engineer no longer required by the business he worked for - automated away, with the craft element sub-contracted to China. Forced

into working for himself, with no stable income, he had to compete on price against an inferior product - bringing in less than when he was employed and could rely on overtime. This was compounded by the fact he'd been persuaded to buy their council house, and the bank was considerably less understanding than the council when times were lean and the money didn't flow.

It was in this way that Kyle slipped into thinking of himself as a socialist, if not a Marxist.

St. Augustine's had not been his first choice – or indeed his choice at all. He really fancied the London School of Economics or even a more provincial university - Kent or East Anglia; but the grammar school felt he had potential and put great store in the number of Oxbridge candidates they got through each year. They positioned it to him, and his parents, that he'd be a fool to turn down such an opportunity; his parents were persuaded, Kyle was flattered. So, he sweated through the exams and interviews, all on top of his A Levels, passed the exams and then promptly collapsed from exhaustion.

Now he was here, his worst fears had been realised. St. Augustine's was one of the oldest colleges in Cambridge - steeped in history - but also one of the most elite in the university. Out of the hundred odd students in his year, he found out he was the only non-public schoolboy...and there were no women allowed. It was VERY traditional like that. It wasn't that he was particularly worried about this kind of extra-curricular activity – he had a long standing girlfriend, Marie-Ann, back at home – but that it offended his sense of egalitarianism – he saw it as a form of misogyny.

Kyle's sense of outrage was stoked further by the ceremony and ostentation of the matriculation dinner and the way his fellow students seemed to look down on him from such a

great height whilst gliding through the pomp and circumstance as though born to it (which, he considered, not ironically, they were).

His peers, if they could be called such, all seemed to have massive allowances from a dotting mummy and daddy at home. He had to survive on a grant. He rarely went down the pub, but would buy a bottle of whisky in the supermarket and drink late into the evening whilst composing his mediocre essays, which his tutors would comment on thus: *starts well but soon descends into inane rubbish*; presumably as he worked his way steadily through the bottle. Kyle put this lackluster performance down to his general mood. He felt low - depressed even, home-sick and love-sick.

He wasn't even sure if he liked drinking that much, it just seemed to be the romantic thing to do, whilst wallowing in self-pity, awaiting the weekend where he would either smuggle his visiting girlfriend into his room, or return home for what he thought of as his "conjugal visits". Not that he was much fun to be with – he spent most of the time bemoaning how utterly miserable he was. He imagined his relationship with Marie-Ann was breaking down due to the distance and separation. The reality was that he was turning into a miserable bastard to be with.

It was some time in mid-November - Kyle was crossing the bitter, snow covered, quad in front of the 500 year old accommodation block. There was a certain gravitas in being allowed to live in those hallowed halls and they attracted a premium price. The solid oak staircases led to fantastically panelled rooms - each with a separate bedroom and...a bedder. A bedder was essentially a cleaner / help that came with the room. No student squalor for the elite - you didn't even need to make your bed or clean your mug. Just like at

home presumably. Kyle looked across at the rooms - *Christ, wonder if they'll ever grow up and live in the real world?* he thought.

Kyle, of course, didn't live in Elizabethan splendour. Well, he did of a sort - his accommodation was on the third floor of a utilitarian mini-tower block, overlooking the quad, built in the '60s to service the needs of an expanding student population; and that suited him just fine. It was relatively cheap but not particularly cheerful. Like most student accommodation he'd seen, it was more akin to a prison cell than a flat and he often cogitated on the benefits of wealth, whilst taking a perverse pleasure in (forcibly) abstaining. For some strange reason, the college had chosen to build it in the middle of the ancient quad (perhaps to counterpoint the designs, but more likely because it was the only land the small college had available), and as such from his floor he could look down into the ground and first floors of the sixteenth century rooms opposite.

For all that, he felt himself privileged to even be at university - the first of his family to do so and benefiting from a full grant that meant his education wasn't too much of a burden on his parents who had supported him in thought and deed, if not in monetary terms. Indeed, his parents had barely benefited from a secondary education at all – his father had started full time work at fifteen, despite an enquiring and razor sharp mind.

'Hey, you! Yes, you! Damn pleb!'

Kyle looked up. The cry had come from a first floor window at the base of the old building. He'd like to say this kind of abuse was original or even unusual, but it was rather a constant stream, coming from a number of his fellow students.

'What the hell do you want? Didn't Mater or Pater teach you any manners you narrow minded, fascist, prick?' Kyle bluntly retorted, pulling his green Italian army jacket closer to him, as though it were armour against the expected assault as well as the biting cold.

The man at the window looked inside, as though conferring with someone out of sight behind the leaded windows before sticking his head back out into the cold again, 'Yah. Très bien repost my good man - one of the classics. We only wondered if you wanted to ride to hounds with us at the weekend. We thought you might enjoy getting blooded - make a real man of you! Daddy is sending down his driver to pick us up. No need to bring that common little tart you knock around with – I'm sure we can find something better for you.'

'Oh yeah, very funny. Read the jacket!' Kyle gave him the finger, swivelled on his trainer shod feet and pointedly gave them a view of the back of his jacket with the hand painted legend: *Say NO to fox hunting!*

'Oh my, I do believe I've upset him!' came the response from behind him in a loud stage whisper - clearly intended for all to hear, but directed mainly at the others in the room.

'Up yours, you fucking queer!', Kyle shouted as he strode off.

Jeremy, Kyle's protagonist, disappeared into the room, guffawing heartily, closing the window behind him. *Such a common little man - really shouldn't sully the university by being here*, he thought.

Jeremy's family had been alumni of St Augustine's for the last seven generations. They made significant contributions to the coffers and consequently always found a place avail-

able without too much effort. Grades were similarly not found wanting - irrespective of the academic ability or work put in and there was always a place for them in some city institution or another post-graduation, until they inherited the estates. *Still, not a bad body on him...a bit of rough wouldn't go amiss*, Jeremy reflected.

The all male college was a perfect home for Jeremy. He was at liberty to do as he pleased for 3 or 4 years before he needed to settle down and ensure the family line continued. He wouldn't have too much choice then from the preferred list his parents would micro-manage to be his intended. Right now, he was happy in his libertarian stance. Kyle was wrong in that he wasn't a homosexual - nothing as straightforward as that. His stance was at least partially informed by the Marquis de Sade and particularly his fiction *The 120 Days of Sodom*. He intended to indulge in every perversion he could whilst he had the chance, knowing that at some point he would have to 'settle down and be a bit more circumspect' in his dalliances; although to be honest the torture, mutilations, murder, necrophilia, coprophagia and paedophilia in the novel (in fact most of it) turned his stomach - so he couldn't really claim to be the rampant libertarian de Sade would have admired anyway, but Jeremy liked to play up to the image.

Despite Kyle's perspective, Jeremy was not an evil man - at least he didn't think of himself as such. He felt a little guilty having taunted him from the window, but it was all part of the game he was playing with his current love interest as they enacted one of their favourites - the right of *prima noctua*. Jeremy was, of course the noble in this particular scenario, his willing partner a second year gentleman from across the hall - eager to please someone who would one day be as rich and powerful as the character they were portraying.

Over Christmas Kyle returned home to Southampton. He felt depressed – his academic performance wasn't up to his expectations and he fretted about failing, but he also felt out of place at home and seemed to be constantly arguing with his parents and girlfriend – who he accused of being unfaithful, if not in deed then in thought. He taunted her with all the supposed “opportunity” he had, but didn't take-up, revelling in his over developed sense of his own faithfulness. She ended up crying, whilst he disappeared into a bottle.

Despite his self-enforced seclusion at university, he realised he was growing beyond his family's experiences – giving him a bigger perspective and a wider worldview. Their conversations were limited as they no longer had so much common ground – the last four months had indeed put a distance between them. By the time he had to return to St. Augustine's in mid-January he didn't know where he belonged, or how to handle his relationship with Marie-Ann; and didn't have the maturity to work out an answer. He desperately wanted to leave the university, whilst the sense of pride shown by his family at his success in achieving such a place was an emotional loadstone that he simply couldn't shed – why couldn't he have been selected for a “normal” university? He would just try to carry on and push through. It would, he insisted to himself, be OK in the end.

The first night back, Kyle was close to tears with homesickness and the near-terminal state of his relationship with Marie-Ann. He had a few glasses of scotch, pacing his room and gazing aimlessly out of the window – the pile of boxes he'd brought back still unpacked. He couldn't go on with this – he needed to change his outlook and get to a position where he could be content so he could at least perform academically for the next three years. *Easier said than done*, he thought. Perhaps if he just tried to engage in a debate rather than moving to confrontation straight away - take out the emotion? Maybe try to under-

stand their position a bit more? Cut his ties with Marie-Ann? In the miasma of despair induced by the whisky, this felt like it could be a solution.

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Kyle was, unusually for him, in the college refectory (*why couldn't they just call it a canteen?* he thought belligerently) eating a lunchtime sandwich before heading off to a lecture on the “multiplier effect” on the other side of the city. It was part of his plan to be a little more accessible that he hadn't simply bought one from the Co-Op on the way to the lecture theatre and eaten it on the fly but rather chose to spend some time in the college common rooms. So far, the plan hadn't worked very well. It was early February and still no one talked to him. Inevitably, no one was sat at the same table as Kyle in the bustling room, who had gained a reputation for being somewhat difficult.

Across the room he caught sight of Jeremy, paying at the till. Unusually, he was on his own rather than surrounded by what Kyle derisively thought of as his “harem”.

Of all people, Kyle despised Jeremy more than any other. He was everything that Kyle hated – unashamedly rich, arrogant and self-centred. He had a really over-developed sense of his own self-importance and entitlement. Not to mention his blatant homosexuality – which Kyle had been indoctrinated to despise throughout his working class upbringing. But how could he be any different? Jeremy was a product of his upbringing – as much trapped by his social context and conditioning as anyone. Perhaps it was time to make an effort – Jeremy was on his own, so there was no danger of drawing others in. Kyle looked up from his sandwich, caught Jeremy's glance, and gave a slight nod of recognition.

Jeremy caught the gesture and gave a similarly slight nod back. Seeing that Kyle was at the only free table, he sauntered over. To Kyle's growing horror, and without asking if he minded, Jeremy sat opposite Kyle, put his tray down and took a bite from his torpedo roll.

'It's Kyle isn't it? I'm Jeremy.' The words came unexpectedly across the table - heavily accented in rich, plummy, self-confident tones.

'Yeah? So what?' Kyle retorted; instantly regretting his regression to such a defensive stance when he had decided to be more positive in his engagement.

'Look, I just wanted to say I felt we'd really got off on the wrong foot. I'm sorry to have ragged you so much. I don't suppose we'll ever be friends, but I've come to realise it was wrong of me.' This was at least partially true. Jeremy had also spent a lot of time thinking over Christmas. Much of it had centred on Kyle. His earlier thoughts about him as a bit of rough had matured. He now lusted after him with a passion, coated with a veneer of admiration for his principled stance on issues that they would probably never agree on. Over Christmas break, Jeremy had spent time cogitating on his position in relation to Kyle and how the chance of them ever being together was negated by their politics, class and that Kyle was so utterly homophobic and clearly repressed. Jeremy had resolved to win him over as a friend at least. 'Can you accept my apology? It would be good to start again.'

Kyle was gobsmacked. He couldn't believe his nemesis had come to him offering him an olive branch. It must be a joke – some kind of game. Who was watching? Kyle looked around – no one was taking any notice of them. It must be more elaborate with a longer term payoff, Kyle's paranoid side demanded. Yet, here was a man that seemed to be giving him a chance to enact his survival plan – how could he not take it up?

‘Look, I’m sorry I jumped down your throat.’ Kyle said. ‘If you mean it, let’s call a truce. See where that takes us? Maybe you need to understand a bit more about me and why *your type* winds me up so much?’

‘And maybe you need to understand that *my type* are also human beings and aren’t all evil aristocrats – the stereotyping goes both ways,’ replied Jeremy – stressing “my type” to emphasise the hypocrisy in Kyle’s words.

‘OK. Fair play.’ Kyle stood and stuck out his hand – it took a second for Jeremy to realise that Kyle expected him to shake it.

‘Should I spit on my palm first?’ Jeremy joked.

Kyle smiled, ‘No. that’s absolutely fine.’ They shook hands and Kyle left for his lecture.

Kyle’s life continued – the breakthrough with Jeremy didn’t immediately relieve his crippling home sickness and he continued to oppose the many injustices he perceived at the university – the privilege and the over-indulgencies of his better-off colleagues in particular. However, he did this with a less confrontational style and often found that Jeremy would support him – not perhaps in the detail of the discussion but in the spirit of giving him a voice and air space when Kyle felt most over-whelmed by his protagonists – who had weight of numbers. Over time Kyle found he was (slightly) more accepted and could stomach being with some of the less-extreme examples of the upper class. In particular he found himself spending more time with Jeremy down the pub, often now wrapped in friendly dispute. Jeremy seemed to Kyle to bend more to his arguments; whilst Jeremy, strangely, perceived that Kyle often gave more ground.

Kyle's academic standing began to pick up as the home sickness abated somewhat. He spent less time drunk, pining over Marie-Ann, and more time composing essays with thoughtful arguments, gaining praise from his academic supervisors. With Spring in full swing, Kyle often worked late into the lengthening evenings, with windows open, working on his latest submission. Marie-Ann made fewer visits, and he returned home less often because he "had to work".

As he typed at his word processor (a gift from a proud parents to boost his presentation and hence, his grades) he heard what could only be the sounds of human sex, drifting in through the open windows. The paced moaning and grunting was getting louder and faster – surely about to reach its inevitable conclusion. Intrigued and not a little turned on, he left his dry academic papers and peered out the curtains. There could be no doubt. The pornographic noises were coming from his friend's first floor window - which was open and un-curtained. He'd have to have a word about being a bit more discrete – perhaps it hadn't occurred to Jeremy that anyone in the second or third floor of the new block would have a first class view.

Kyle didn't intend to be a voyeur, but it was so hard to resist. He could see right into the room. Jeremy had his back to the window, with someone in a blue ball gown bent over a chair in front of him facing away from the window, skirts lifted above the waist, stockings and suspenders on display. Jeremy was giving it his all, and with a bellow finally completed the act. With a slap on his lover's arse he withdrew and turned around. Kyle cringed behind the curtains – unable to look away from his friend's now deflating manhood and finding his own hand creeping into his underpants.

Jeremy dropped to his knees. The blue ball gowned debutante turned, lifted the skirts further, and stuck a tumescent dick in Jeremy's mouth which he set to with a will. Kyle gasped with shock...he knew his friend was equally at home with either sex, but this was the first time he'd been forced to grasp the fact quite so emphatically. Over time, he'd become comfortable with Jeremy's bi-sexuality, but now this was less like an intellectual hypothesis and more like hard evidence – the “debutante's” beard was strangely more disconcerting than the penis; and yet, he was unable to look away or remove his hand from around his own growing member which he was now pounding furiously.

Both debutant and Kyle progressed to their natural conclusions. Kyle dropped the curtain and fell back on his desk chair, breathing heavily taking a huge gulp from the glass of whisky. *My God*, he thought. *That was weird!*

Over the week, Kyle schemed to avoid Jeremy at every opportunity. He wrestled with the reality of what he'd observed and his own reaction to it. He admitted to himself that he felt an intellectual curiosity but also a confusion and shame at his reaction. He still felt somewhat turned on by the scene which he had always railed against. Jeremy had always argued with him against his views on homosexuality – saying that it was more natural than he imagined – not something to be belittled or minimised as something *less than the real thing*. Love, he said, or at least lust, might be directed at or received from anyone. Even so, Kyle felt an overwhelming sense of guilt as he remembered how turned on he had been.

That weekend, Kyle wrote to Marie-Ann and took the coward's way out – ending the fragmenting affair by post and blaming it on the stresses of a long-distance relationship. He didn't hear back from her.

It was late one Sunday evening, towards the end of the summer term, when Kyle heard the knock on his door and Jeremy's plummy tones calling to him. 'Kyle! Get your arse out here. Time we went to the pub!' It was the moment Kyle had been dreading – he'd been avoiding Jeremy for days. No escape – he would have to face his friend. He'd decided that he wouldn't mention a thing – carry on as if nothing had happened. Jeremy was his own man – he could do what he liked. Kyle didn't have to be part of it (he'd carefully expunged his own reaction to the scene) but now he saw Jeremy in the flesh he felt the strange stirrings of emotions he had tried to repress.

'Hi. Yeah. Pub. Let's go,' Kyle replied, answering the door and sweeping out the room, pushing past Jeremy without quite making eye contact with him.

In the pub, they sat in an alcove on bar stools around a high table, drinking pints of Green King. Jeremy seemed in a confrontational mood, sensing that his friend had been avoiding him and unsure why. Slowly as the pints sank in, and the alcohol loosened inhibitions, the subject moved to an old favourite – the right (or not) to behave in a libertine manner as outlined by the venerable Marquis. It was during this argument that Jeremy would habitually take a more extreme stance to force Kyle to react. Kyle would himself become more defensive and resort to arguments that pushed him into a position that made him sound bigoted and reactionary.

'So, you see, de Sade shows how the libertine must take responsibility for driving his own pleasure – the impact on those he bends to his will is irrelevant!' Jeremy finished, simultaneously downing his Jack Daniels chaser as if to put an exclamation mark at the end of his exposition.

‘No – you’re wrong and I don’t believe you feel that way anyway!’ Kyle exploded. The alcohol had really got to work on him as he’d been drinking in the flat before Jeremy interceded. ‘You wouldn’t condone rape! Whatever consenting adults get up to is up to them – they can do what the hell they like to each other. But “consenting” is the critical factor!’

‘So it has to be consenting has it? What happens if one of them doesn’t know what they want?’ and with that, Jeremy leant over and planted a full on kiss on Kyle’s lips, his tongue forcing its way into his mouth whilst his hand reached under the table and grabbed his crotch.

For one second, Kyle was too shocked to do anything – almost passively accepting this extreme violation of his personal space. Time seemed to catch up with him – he realised his best-friend was both groping and snogging him; worse was that he was beginning to respond to it, positively and physically. Kyle mentally regrouped and stood up, pushing Jeremy bodily away – forcing him over backward on the bar stool.

‘Get off me you fucker!’ Kyle explodes at Jeremy now lying on the floor in a heap. ‘Why the fuck did you do that? Jesus Christ, I thought we were mates!’

‘Oh come on Kyle! You know it’s what you wanted – you just don’t have the balls to admit it to yourself. You fucking hypocrite!’ But Kyle had already turned and was striding out the pub, face flushed purple with rage and embarrassment.

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The next day, Kyle packed his bags and left the college, leaving a cursory note for the porters to pass on to whoever they felt needed to see it. His father picked him up in the battered family Ford Escort estate and took him home. Kyle wept most of the way, refusing to speak to his father, and once home didn't leave his room for several days. His family couldn't get much sense out of him, so they couldn't update the college on his sudden departure. As it was so close to the end of term, the college agreed to keep his place open for the summer, pending his "return to sanity".

It was in late August, that Kyle's mother received a call. Kyle had been working in the local MacDonald's whilst he sorted himself out – deciding whether to return to university – perhaps to East Anglia or Kent, but certainly not back to Cambridge, or else pursue some other course. He'd tried to pick up his relationship with Marie-Ann but his attempts to contact her had been half-hearted at best, and she didn't return his calls. Strangely, he felt more relief at this than he had thought possible. Kyle felt confusion – what did he want? Who was he now? Had he changed this much?

'Kyle – I've had a call from one of your friends at St. Augustine's – he said his name's Jeremy. He says he needs to talk to you. He's very ill.'

Kyle's emotions seesawed from elation at hearing his friend's name to bitterness at the memory of the events to distress at what might be wrong with him. He took the number his mother proffered and went to the hall to make the call.

'St. Saviours – can I help?' The receptionist's voice was neutral but the words struck a cold fear in Kyle. 'Ermmm. Can I speak to Jeremy Harrington, please? He called me yesterday. My name is Kyle Appleton.'

'Of course, I'll put you through to his room,' she responded.

The line went dead with just an occasional click and then Kyle heard his friend's voice – it sounded weak and weary, 'Hi Kyle. How are you? I tried to contact you but your parents said you didn't want to talk to anyone after you left – and I gave up after a while. I'm sorry we parted like that. I went too far. I'm so sorry.' The brief speech had exhausted Jeremy, and it seemed to Kyle that small sobs interspersed each sentence.

Kyle didn't know what to say. He had missed his friend dearly over the last few months and had been desperate to get back in touch, but frightened by the implication for his own sexuality. 'How are you Jeremy? Mum said you were ill?'

'Yeah – pretty ill,' wheezed Jeremy. 'I've got pancreatic cancer and it's progressed really quickly. I didn't know I had it – just started losing a bit of weight, then started aching. They never suspected because I'm so young to get it so didn't get properly treated. Real outlier case as you economists might say.' With that he gave a short chuckle which quickly turned into a gasp and choking cough. 'Can you get over to see me? I'd like to patch things up. I haven't got too long.'

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Kyle spent what remained of the summer with Jeremy. He realised that Jeremy was right...love is not gender specific, and he did, indeed love Jeremy – although they never did indulge in the sexual gymnastics Kyle had once viewed Jeremy engaged in – Jeremy was just too ill to even broach the subject, and Kyle never revealed to Jeremy his onanistic voyeurism.

In early October, Jeremy died peacefully with his family beside him and Kyle holding his hand.

Love, Kyle reflected, was no respecter of class; and neither was death.