

Close of Play

PJ Whiteley



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To Michael.

In our thoughts every day.

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Charles Dickens, Isabel Allende, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Manuel Puig, Donna Tartt, Miguel de Cervantes, John Walsh, Javier Marías – and of course the master of comedy himself Albert Camus. Many more would deserve mention, but these are the writers who produced works that moved me, or caused me to think differently, or made my jaw drop with astonishment, or caused me to laugh out loud, or in the case of *La Peste*, all four. And yes, that book was a recommendation from Mum. It is obviously a puzzle that the French intelligentsia never took to cricket, the most complete existentialist metaphor. If they had, perhaps Europe's problems would be a touch lighter than they currently are. There's a book to be written there, but by someone cleverer than me.

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PJ Whiteley

*'If you make a mistake in the corridor of
uncertainty, you may end up on the
highway of regret.'*

(with sincere apologies to
Geoff Boycott and Bob Dylan)

Preface

EVERYTHING ABOUT MY appearance, to the smallest detail, declares ‘Old school’. Short hair, side-parting. Tweed or corduroy jackets with leather elbow patches. Crease in the trousers, even at weekends. A shirt with a collar, and usually with a tie, which may sport a crest or badge associated with a club, school, or ex-alumni association.

You will form an opinion about me before my speaking a word, but some of these are likely to be mistaken. I don’t resist technology, unless it is hideous; I don’t dislike young people (quite the contrary), and I don’t hate change. I do, however, dislike vulgarity. Matters far beyond my control have determined that, in the late 20th and early 21st Century, British society features an apparently unstoppable rise in vulgarity: punk rock, celebrities, tabloid newspapers, the National Lottery, soap operas. Tabloid newspapers writing about celebrities, the Lottery and soap operas. Militant atheists who decide they are cleverer than God. BBC executives who pander to the clamour for more vulgarity for fear of appearing old-fashioned.

I believe in good manners, an appreciation of literature, a concern for society and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Not because these matters are old-fashioned, but because they are good. I was born to be on a collision course with the times I grew up in, but not all the jolts and de-railings have been unpleasant, as you'll begin to see as we pick up the story, around 20 years ago.



I

Walk, don't walk

I could hear the dressing room banter from the lads, before I entered the pavilion for the season's penultimate game.

'Do you think she'd go out with me, if I asked?'

'You'd have more chance if you didn't ask.'

'No but seriously?'

'Yes, but seriously – no. You're not in her league.'

'Leagues? There are leagues?'

'fraid so, son.'

'So, if there are leagues, is there promotion-relegation? Am I at least in with a chance of making the play-offs?'

'Yea, but she's Premiership, and you're Vauxhall Conference.'

'More like Mid-Sussex League Division 3,' chipped in another voice.

I could hear laughter. Then someone saying: 'Ere, where's Col? Not like him to be late. He'd better turn up soon or Bodger will have to open and he is a) still pissed from last night; and b) not here yet either.'

I appeared on the threshold. 'Ah, 'ere 'e is,' my team mate

Tony announced as I appeared. 'Sight for sore eyes. We're batting.'

I started to change and strap on the pads.

Derek Cooper, the skipper, enquired: 'Have we got a full team yet?'

There were sniggers around the small room, with its waft of aftershave, beer, canvas and leather. 'We got ten, Del. I think that's as far as we'll get today,' said Greg. 'Might have to call someone up from the seconds. It's only a friendly.'

'Isn't Bodger playing?' he demanded.

There were hoots of laughter. 'I tell ya,' said Greg. 'If Bodger's alive after last night, medical science ought to know. State he was in. Jeez!'

'Thought that German barmaid was going to have 'im barred,' offered Tony.

'Yea, she was scary.'

'Oh, I dunno. Thought she was cute.'

'Get away!'

'Well she can have me, any time.'

'Not saying much. You'd have anyone!'

'Fair point,' said Tony, good naturedly. At this point Eric Gray, he who was known as Bodger, appeared, looking grey, ill and triumphant. There were more hoots as he slumped on a chair near the door, lit a cigarette and supported his chin with his hands. 'Don't tell me we're fielding,' he said.

'No, we're not,' said Derek.

'Thank Christ for that. I'll just go have a kip.'

'Yea well, you can't. You're number three.'

'What?' he looked up, aghast.

'You're so easy to wind up you are.'

'Bastard.'

'Also you're fined. Three times over.'

'What for?'

‘Turning up late, swearing at the captain, being in an offensive state.’

‘Great start to the afternoon.’

‘Yea, well. I’m the captain. I’m not nice underneath, you know.’

‘Never imagined you were, Del-Boy.’

‘Be fair Derek,’ said Tony. ‘He’s always in an offensive state. You can’t fine ‘im for that.’

‘Shut up and get your pads on.’

The team had a comprehensive system of fines: for turning up late, dropping a catch, being rude to the captain, being too deferent to the captain (‘arse-licking’), running the captain out, running the best batsman out, not chasing hard in the field, and generally for other incidents in the course of a match that prompted the captain, the on-field Fines Master, to decide that he didn’t like the cut of your jib. There was also a fine for not buying a jug when you were due. Given that the cost of eight pints of beer was considerably greater than the standard fine – 30 pence – it was often observed that the incentive arrangement needed adjustment; but generally it was concluded that the public shame should serve as incentive enough. These arrangements held for match day. For the tour, where 14 or so players were sharing accommodation for four or five days, an entirely new range of opportunities for levying imposts sprang into being. Many offences were delightfully contradictory: going to bed too early, staying up all night; dressing too slovenly at breakfast, dressing too smart. Others included phoning home too much and partaking of alcoholic beverages in the course of a game (this rule tended to be relaxed towards the end of the tour). These were the typical crimes, but the Fines Master, a duty which on tour was rotated on a 24-hour basis, was allowed considerable discretion to

invent arbitrary misdemeanours, such as a garish logo on your cricket boots, swearing in a foreign language (I once uttered the expletive '*merde*' when dropping a catch) or 'looking at me in a funny way'. In a typical year, fines yielded more revenue than the annual subscriptions, helping to pay for the new pitch and modernised pavilion.

I walked out with Tony to the middle and took my guard, scratching the damp earth and breaking the fresh white painted line of the popping crease. It was well into September, and the air was chilly. The rain had relented but the wind had not. Yellow and brown leaves studded the green outfield and the spikes of my boots sank gratefully into the mud.

I love to open the batting, as I dislike waiting my turn. Normally, I felt relaxed as the bowler began his run-up, but on this occasion I felt unprepared, struggling to focus with my eyes and adjusting to the light, even though it was not so bright. It was unlike me to be late to the ground. I made a vague link in my mind between my lack of organisation and sporadic feelings of melancholy in recent weeks and days, occasionally strong, especially in the evenings. I tried hard to concentrate on the familiar task of focusing on the small red object being hurled towards me, inwardly repeating the more effective mantras. 'See it early, hit it late,' Geoffrey Boycott had said. Still the best advice.

The bowler turned out to be one of those irritating exponents incapable of real speed or guile but who, on this day, hoped the wind would play tricks for him. He overpitched the first ball and I drove solidly, straight at the fielder. The next ball was a repeat but I found the gap and the ball fizzed quickly over the wet grass to find the boundary. The next seemed identical and I drove more ambitiously. There was a click and a thud and a shout as the wicket keeper took the catch.

I did not turn round to see the joyous fielders. For the first time in my life I waited for the decision. The umpire pointed his finger towards me. 'I find you guilty of driving over-confidently, treating the bowler without respect, being an inadequate and lonely person; and, moreover, of being out,' the raised digit seemed to say. I trudged back to the pavilion.

'Short and sweet,' commented Derek, as I arrived in the pavilion.

'It was short, anyway,' I replied, grumpily, falling into a morose silence.

When our turn came to field I stood cold and unhappy, throwing the ball in anger when it came to me. I was displeased with myself; not walking when out was unchristian and against the amateur code; I should have been better company for my colleagues and less grumpy in the field. They didn't particularly notice, however; each absorbed in his own personal battle as a bowler, or just trying to keep warm in the field. The game drifted to a draw. Just one left of the season.

I showered at the pavilion, changed and returned home, not stopping for a drink in the club bar, keen to be home and with my own company. As soon as I was, however, sat in my armchair, pretending to concentrate on a news report about the terrible events in the former Yugoslavia, I felt lonely; and of course, guilty that I could not feel happier about my lot compared with those living in daily fear of warlords and their armies.

I met Graham in the pub later, as I often did on a Saturday, for a beer, a chat and a game of chess. It was the one evening that he typically did not spend with his family, being in the routine of taking turns with his wife Jane, who would spend Sunday afternoons with her sister while Graham looked after the children. He was one of those eager, bearded chaps who is never tired, never depressed, never out of sorts. This was all the more

remarkable given that he was wheelchair-bound, and had been since childhood. He was most extraordinarily resourceful and inventive, and quite the most intelligent person I had ever known. His home was a temple to gadgetry, many of the innovations designed by himself, with automatic doors, robot-controlled devices and the like. He was also an accomplished pianist and generous with his talent – sometimes helping at the church when our regular organist was ill. Given that he was a committed atheist, who preferred jazz, this was very decent of him indeed.

One of his most striking characteristics was a consistent ability to know of some new scheme or technology or whatever, which he would describe in great detail and would judge very firmly as either a remarkable innovation or an outright scam. His day job was in information technology of some kind, and he was often in demand by some consultancy or government. We took different views on automation. His attitude was: Technology can transform our quality of life. Mine was: We don't even make good use of humans, yet. We would debate the issue earnestly as young men but I guess, in retrospect, we were both right.

As I met him that evening he told me of some problem he had been having with a supplier, as a customer. I did not attend well, knowing that my duty mostly was to be quiet and not to comment and that, if I was needed in a professional capacity to support a claim, he would contact me with the details during working hours. He would often have a grievance over poor service from a company; not because he was eager to complain or seek compensation, but more typically because, being far more intelligent than the average corporate manager responsible for arranging customer services, he had thought of a far smarter way of organising things, and was quite genuinely baffled that it had not appeared obvious to anyone else.

He then offered some detail, as though I had pressed him for it, of technological developments in the banking industry. 'Before long,' he informed me. 'All our savings, mortgage accounts and bank accounts will be linked together and be available on the Internet. I won't have to visit the bank anymore! Just click on the screen at home. Brilliant for cripples like me.'

He pushed the bridge of his glasses firmly up his nose with his pudgy forefinger, its pink end whitening with the brief impact. Needless to say, I was not on the Internet, declining to take part in the craze for 'surfing' the so-called 'web', though I made a mental note to learn a little more about it.

'Shall I be black?' he asked.

'No,' I said firmly, straightening the chess board on the small wobbly table that sat between us. 'You will build your impenetrable Sicilian defence and we should be here 'til midnight. I'll be black.'

He won, as he customarily did. For all my supposedly cerebral air I have always been much better at sport than chess or crosswords; a fact that often surprises people but which I actually find rather pleasing. I took pleasure in confounding expectations.

There had been more of us in the late '60s and early '70s than you might think; we 'old school' chaps, though we were a minority at university: playing chess, attending debating societies, going to the opera, while the others organized sit-ins and went to Rolling Stones concerts. They revelled in their rock and roll, but never thought to attend the Royal Albert Hall to hear Jacqueline du Pré, missing perhaps the finest musical genius of their generation. They thought they were radical but I considered them childish. Anything – literally anything – would prompt a walk-out. They would protest over library opening hours as if it were a human rights issue. Although I do

recall one heavily bearded, long-haired chap, in tee-shirt and jeans, confide in me that he voted Conservative at the 1970 election, when Ted Heath won. They were bewildering times.

For all Graham's intelligence, I sometimes wondered if he had a capacity for reflection, and whether he masked his emotion, or felt less, or dealt with it more effectively. I showed little myself, but that was reserve. I had been particularly keen to have company that evening, and had envisaged during the cold two hours spent in the field that I might dare to confess to him my increasing sense of desolation, especially in the gloomy evenings at home on my own, and request solace or advice. I wondered if the subject would have been as alien to him as the suggestion that we might skip the pub in search of a Turkish bath. Chaps don't talk about feelings; at least, not innermost feelings – only those that don't matter.

Could I make an exception, on this evening? There could not be a better friend. I could essay an oblique way in, perhaps. I offered: 'I'm not impatient to look at my personal finances, to be honest, whether it's on the internet or not. Makes you think about the future. And the thing about the future is ...'

'... that it's inherently unknowable,' said Graham, interrupting. 'Past trends are often a poor guide to what will happen, but as humans we're wired to rely on them.'

I felt he was missing my intended point, but to be fair I had not really articulated it. 'Yes but I mean,' I began. Could I really say 'What's the point of it all?' It would probably trigger an analysis of the asymmetric nature of market patterns. 'I've thought of selling the house,' I said instead.

'Good time to sell,' he said straight away. 'House prices are back above three times average earnings. Yours would fetch a packet.'

'Yes,' I said, becoming rather despairing.

‘Can I say something Brian?’ he asked suddenly, leaning forward towards me and brushing his brown, rounded beard with thumb and forefinger. ‘It might not be a bad idea to move on, and I don’t just mean because the price would be good. I mean, it’s your Aunt Kath’s old house, isn’t it?’

‘And her parents’ before her.’

‘Quite. Well, are you sure you want to be surrounded by the memories? Does it actually make it easier to live on your own?’

‘I, er, haven’t quite looked at it that way,’ I said, somewhat taken aback. ‘It’s always seemed kind of blasphemous to sell, but it’s hardly the place for an ageing bachelor.’

‘I’ve lived on my own as well, Brian,’ he said, stroking his beard quite vigorously. ‘It can be better if it’s somewhere that actually is your own.’

I stayed silent a little while, looking down into my drink, in equal part astounded at this new dimension to my companion and stung by the apposite nature of his remarks. A roar of conversation from the public bar erupted as a couple pushed open the door behind Graham and entered. The noise subsided as the door swung back.

‘I’m sorry if I’m appearing to intrude,’ he continued.

‘No, not at all. I raised the subject myself after all. Good advice anyway. Can I buy you a drink?’ I asked.

My worst fear materialised that night. I awoke before dawn and felt the depression anew. There was a softened quality to it, however; like the difference between drizzle and rain. I felt more comfortable and almost inured. My room was the back room, which was sizeable enough. I had left the master bedroom, with its grand bay window, empty since Aunt Kath had passed away, save for a few shelves of books and a rocking chair. I went to sit in it and listened for ghosts. I had no gift for the supernatural, and could see nothing but the dusty darkness,

the frame of the window, the patterned wallpaper. I tried to hear her voice, but I could hear only the rattle of a milk cart.

She had a tendency to be indulgent towards me, but the exception was on grammatical points. I recalled one winter's afternoon, bursting into that same room after I had come in breathless from playing on the ice with some friends. 'We went up Sissons Hill and skated down the bank, Aunty Kath,' I gasped. 'And the pond at the bottom is frozen solid. Not bad for Sussex standards.'

She looked at me and frowned, placing hands on hips, and I awaited a lecture on the folly of our recklessness. Instead she said: 'Don't use a noun as an adjective dear, most especially a proper noun. It's most vulgar. Now go wash your hands while I make the tea.'

I enjoyed the memory. She had had a good innings, I thought. There would not have been rousing cheers on her walk to the pavilion, but the knowing observers would have given her a good hand. 'We never know when we will go,' she would often say. The certainty of our end is our very frame; but the emptiness of my stretched canvas filled me anew with despair. The sun re-emerged. I felt warm in my pyjamas and dressing gown and eventually dozed.



2

This is Elizabeth Giles

Tired and disconcerted, a feeling akin to jet lag, in the morning I went to church. Perhaps the spirit might revive the body, if he could be awakened by the 9.30 sung communion at All Saints. The Reverend Godfrey Charlton was an earnest and intelligent soul, younger than such a Christian name might indicate, and deserving of more attention than I gave. He would speak articulately and quickly, somewhat self-conscious of his learning; forever justifying his carefully couched assertions or questioning his authority to make them. It made him engaging as an individual but less than effective as a preacher. Some of my fellow congregation muttered at such indecisiveness since he had joined us in the spring, but I found such cautious phrasing and conscientiousness reassuring. Life is complex and I rather imagine that God is too.

‘Christ said, “Judge not; and you shall not be judged”’, Godfrey told us. ‘This does not mean that one should never judge. We judge all the time; sometimes a little harshly –

I know I do myself. He was reminding us – and this is a personal reflection; you may wish to make your own – that the standards we set will often be the ones by which we are judged. Christ was not, I think, always meek and humble, but neither did he send curses upon humans for being weak. Indeed he was as complex as he was divine, and defies all attempts to paint him into a corner, and pretend he was a simple caricature.’ This was a typical excerpt: wise but not necessarily inspirational.

He greeted me after the service. ‘Hello Colin,’ he called out warmly as he shook my hand outside the church door. I wondered if I could ever inform him that my name is not Colin.

‘Hello Godfrey. You remember me then?’

‘It’s good to see you,’ he said effusively. He was incapable of a sarcastic remark hinting at my recent absence from services. ‘Coping with the change in season?’

Departing from my custom of obeying protocol, I replied, ‘Not so well, this year, as it happens.’

‘Ah well,’ he said brightly. ‘It is only three months until the days start getting longer. And the winter test matches are on the telly now, aren’t they?’

‘Yes,’ I said, somewhat surprised. I was not aware he followed sport closely.

‘Colin,’ he said in a lower voice, shepherding me a little to one side. ‘So glad you’re here: I want you to meet someone.’

We stood a moment or two next to two ladies who were chatting breezily. Both had flecks of silver in their dark hair, but one was quite elderly while the other was about my age. Godfrey was far too polite to interrupt but, awaiting his chance, succeeded in attracting the attention of the younger woman, who disengaged herself as soon as courtesy would permit.

‘This is Elizabeth, Elizabeth Giles,’ he said to me. ‘Elizabeth, this is Colin; terrific fellow and a fine opening bat.’

She smiled. It is possible to perceive intelligence in a face; and kindness. I noted both, as well as a most natural reserve. The few lines on her face had added a touch of grace to looks that I assumed had always been fine. Her hair was stylish and quite short, with just a fleck of grey here and there. She wore a smart but very modest blouse and long dark skirt. No make-up, but little need – she possessed the fine complexion of one who lived healthily, together with a faintest hint of sadness at pleasures foregone. I have to say I also was in possession of a little uncertainty at being introduced. I recognised her as the earnest new lady who had been sat near me in the pews, confidently inserting the language of equality into our centuries-old Creed: so ‘...was made man’ became: ‘... was made human.’ And she omitted the word ‘virgin’ before ‘Mary’. Such trendy vocabulary grated with my traditionalist soul, but I did not wish to appear curmudgeonly as well as conservative, so remained polite. The trend-setters liked to call their terminology ‘inclusive’, but they quite cheerfully excluded the more conventional Christian.

At that point one of the parish council members, whose name I habitually forgot, emerged suddenly and said to the cleric, ‘Godfrey, dear, please come and sort out this mess.’

‘Do excuse me,’ he said politely to us both, and departed.

‘So what do you do, Colin?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Um, my name isn’t Colin, actually, it’s Brian, Brian Clarke.’

She laughed out loud. ‘Oh dear, is our young vicar here really so absent-minded?’

‘No, no, no! Not at all. Colin is a nickname for me. It has been for 15, maybe 20 years. I first met Godfrey at the cricket ground in early summer, which must be where he picked it up. I haven’t really worked out how to explain it to him, and it’s kind of stuck.’

‘What an odd nickname.’

‘After Colin Cowdrey. It’s quite a compliment to my ability, if not my figure,’ I offered, blushing out of a fear that I appeared immodest. ‘Colin Cowdrey was ...’ I began.

‘Don’t worry,’ she replied. ‘I know all about cricket, through my family. Godfrey just told me about a new book, I think it’s called *Rain Men*, that refers to a vicar who could never walk down the aisle of his church without wondering if it would take spin. What do you think?’

‘What? Oh, very funny.’

‘No – I was being serious. The aisle here at All Saints, would it favour spin bowlers?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘Hard, fast and true. Quite a shiny surface. I would go with an all pace attack. Run-ups, however, might pose a problem for a left arm fast bowler from one end, given the position of the font, while the altar would be tricky to negotiate from the other. For a return match at St Peters, however, I would take along a spin bowler or two. There’s a nice bit of timber flooring at one end and the polish has worn off.’

There was a pause. I began to feel anxious already. Despite my generally calm exterior, I was invariably more socially insecure than people recognised, and typically convinced that I was a terrible bore to a woman, especially if I was attracted to her. ‘Are you new to the, er town?’ I asked. Our growing conurbation could have been described as a village when I was young, so I felt uncomfortable with the word ‘town’.

‘No, I’ve just moved into the neighbouring parish – St Peters, as it happens. I don’t know how many spin bowlers live there. But I know Godfrey from a few years ago and I was anxious to catch up. It’s beautiful round here.’

‘Is it? Yes, I suppose it is,’ I replied. I looked around. I guess it was. The church, solidly Saxon with its square tower,

ancient burial ground with gnarled yew trees, drew visitors and admirers from beyond the town. The celebrated common featured our cricket ground, and led on to more expansive woodland just beyond a twinkling brook and a road. A semi-circle of mature silver birches, only a few of which were felled by the great storm of '87, framed an English scene picturesque enough to attract Japanese tourists, who loved to film, especially as a cricket game was in play. For a participant in a keenly fought competitive match in which we concentrate fiercely, it was odd to be forming part of what was, for a visitor, a quaint moving tableau. I often cast my eye proudly at the green fields and woodland that extended from the common, but also nervously, gathering that the developers probably monitored this precious terrain also. For now, the housing estates had been developed steadily on the other side of town, behind the long and winding high street, populated with an array of shops and half a dozen pubs. As the town grew, so did the club: there had been two sides on a Saturday and one on a Sunday when I began in the 1970s; this had become three and two respectively.

‘Have you lived here all your life?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Yes I have. I’ve never really thought about how beautiful it is. Familiarity and all that, I suppose. I tend to associate the rural scenery with decline. Can’t find lost meadows with skylarks any more.’

‘Oh, but you can,’ she countered brightly. ‘Perhaps you have to look harder. I was on the downs yesterday, and I was planning on going again today,’ she said. ‘There are still enough spires and green fields and woodland to make me believe that we haven’t quite ruined God’s work.’

‘You must have caught your death!’ I exclaimed. ‘It was a grim day yesterday.’

‘Oh no,’ she said, looking down briefly and returning her gaze. ‘I have my sturdy jacket, waterproof trousers and walking boots. I love the autumn, and to feel the wind through my hair, as if God himself was passing through. Sorry, I’m getting carried away.’

‘Not at all,’ I ventured. ‘I’ve always regarded the summer as the pinnacle of the year, and neglected the other seasons. Perhaps I should learn to appreciate them.’

‘Summer’s only short,’ she reminded me.

‘I know. Sometimes in June and July I long so much for the next one that I can scarcely enjoy the present. Did you know that cuckoos are only in the country for six weeks? They’re basically an African species.’

I felt that I was losing my audience. People often thought my presentation of knowledge was conceit when, far more frequently, it was a symptom of nerves – some fact vaguely related to a subject of conversation entered my head and left my lips because it could; because I found that mentally leafing through an encyclopaedia to be safer territory than digging even a shallow way into my own emotion, or daring to inquire into another’s.

‘Indeed. Listen, er, Elizabeth, It’s been nice to meet you. I hope to see you again, but I have to be off now.’ I tried to smile but it was probably an effort distorted by nerves.

‘That would be nice,’ she said, turning sedately to rejoin her companion.

I crossed the gravel yard, the yellow leaves swirling around my ankles, conscious of a quickening of the pulse, a surging temperature around my collar and in my cheeks despite the cool air, and a vague sense of guilt that I had departed Elizabeth’s company as swiftly as I had, recognising that I had left not because I disliked her company, but rather the opposite. I recall a mildly perplexed look on her face as I departed.