Overture

'If I get this right, Tess Rampling will definitely want to have sex with me.' The idea slouches through my fifteen-year-old brain and disappears before I've had time to ask it exactly why a sixth-former of Rampling's cosmic beauty would want to have sex with a GCSE pit-sniffer like me.

I take Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up' out of its paper bag and gaze at his pink face. 'Oh dear, Rick Astley, you're not "gonna" like this. You really have no idea what's about to happen to you.' Gently, I lift the lid of Great-Auntie Trudy's wooden gramophone to reveal the record turntable within.

The gramophone used to be in Trudy's bedroom, and when I was chin-high to its wooden lid (about four years old) we would happily listen to Terry Wogan on Radio 2 while she brushed her hair and 'put her face on'. Or sometimes, she'd play a favourite LP like the soundtrack to *The King and I*. The first track of that record was called 'Overture' and seemed to be a non-singing medley of some of the other songs. I liked the 'Overture': a friendly invitation and a promise of what was to come. Some of the best tunes were missing, but I guessed that was to keep them as a surprise.

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It's not big, my room. The gramophone is among the wooden hand-me-downs that sprout from the walls and nearly meet in the middle. Here's a chest of drawers and a little bookshelf that Mum gave me recently. Here's the wardrobe that never yielded to Narnia no matter how faithfully I reached for the cold air.

The bedroom walls are pale green: pock-marked with Blu-Tack scars from sci-fi posters now replaced with Van Gogh prints from Woolworths. They have 'Vincent' written under them in swirly writing. Recently, and with great solemnity, I took down the huge *Empire Strikes Back* poster – the picture of Darth Vader offering his hand to Luke. 'Come with me,' he says to his defeated son.

There's a Greenpeace picture of a boat cleaning a polluted sea by magically drawing a rainbow in its wake. I get the point it's trying to make, but even I can see the thing has all the truth and beauty of Lester Piggott narrating his tax return. Anyway, it's there to show that I mind about the ozone layer or something. Similarly, there's a line drawing of a defiant-looking African boy against a horizontal tricolour which I vaguely associate with the ANC. In the impossible event that Tess Rampling ever sets foot in this room, she will instantly see that a) I disapprove of apartheid; b) I disapprove of pollution; and c) I now prefer post-impressionists to *Star Wars*. The first two parts are even true.

We live next door to RAF Coningsby. They've finally supplied us with double glazing to make up for the familiar scream of the Tornados. The condensation I used to draw pictures in now occurs between the panes rather than on the inside, like an itch you can't scratch. Thanks, lads. Still, the room retains its own unique and homely smell which I really like. It will be many years before someone points out that this smell has a name: 'damp'. Occasionally my

step-dad Derek loses an argument about turning on the central heating and the smell turns into what I would call the equally comforting 'grilled dust'.

Here, in 1987, it feels wrong to be using the gramophone in an enterprise even vaguely connected with sex, like trying to make erotic art out of Fuzzy-Felt. But then, extreme measures are sometimes necessary when it comes to the sublime person of Tess Rampling. Apart from being the Most Beautiful Girl Who Ever Smiled and Frowned at the Same Time and Tossed Her Auburn Hair Out of Her All-Forgiving, World-Comprehending Eyes, Tess is also two years above me at school and therefore a figure of demoralising maturity. I see her walking between classes, having intellectual-sounding conversations with male teachers who look very pleased to be able to help. I want to help her too. My God, I want to help her brains out. I want to help her like we just invented helping.

I take the shiny record from its sleeve and savour the smell of the vinyl even though I dislike this song with some energy. There was a nervous moment in Woolworths when I picked it up for the first time to check the back of the sleeve: 'Please let the B-side be just an instrumental. Surely it's just an instrumental!' And lo – Stock, Aitken & Waterman did not let me down. I impale 'Never Gonna Give You Up' on the central upright of the record player and the B-side wobbles down onto the turntable. This is sweet. Tess Rampling is surely going to want to have sex with me when she sees the way I stick it to Rick Astley.

What I'm doing here in my teenage bedroom is planning an end-of-term, school-hall sketch show. My form teacher, Mrs Slater, says that the correct term is 'revue', but I don't much like the word: it sounds square and not something

you would see on the telly. I can't imagine Rik Mayall saying 'revue'. At a pinch, Stephen Fry might say it, but there are limits to how much I get to copy Stephen Fry without attracting peer group ridicule. Bad enough that I've started to pronounce 'grass' to rhyme like a southern 'arse' rather than a native Lincolnshire 'lass'. No, it's a sketch show. I write a dozen sketches, cast myself in all the best parts, with friends taking up the feed-line slack, and then put on a show in the main hall at lunchtime. The ostensible value of this is to encourage team-spiritedness and raise money for charity. The actual reason, of course, is to get Tess Rampling to want to have sex with me.

The sketches this time include 'The Price is Slight' (TV game-show parody), 'Glue Peter' (children's TV show parody), 'The GAY-Team' (parody of children's TV action drama, also apparently watched by American adults) and, of course, my lethal take on 'Never Gonna Give You Up' in which I will mock Rick Astley's dancing while lip-synching to rewritten lyrics of the song which I'm about to pre-record over the instrumental.

Some of these sketches are less than fully formed, both technically and morally. 'The GAY-Team', for example, is currently no more than the desire for four of us to jump out in front of the curtain in Hawaiian shirts, brandishing hairdryers. What happens after that is currently anyone's guess, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to draw the line at doing 'the gay voice'. I suspect the other boys in the team will want to do 'the gay voice', but in my sophisticated opinion, doing 'the gay voice' has no place in the comedy of 1987, even in Lincolnshire where literally no one is meant to be gay.

Obviously I will get Matthew Finney to 'black up' to play B. A. Baracus. That's different. Finney is very short and even weedier than me. So he really only has to stand there wearing

dark-brown make-up and say 'Murdoch, you crazy fool' or possibly 'Murdoch, you crazy homosexual' and we're on to a winner. I see no reason why this might cause offence: although it's possible that there are gay people in Lincolnshire, it is not possible that anyone is black. Apart from my brother's friend, 'black Steve'. (I mean, there are a lot of Steves so what *on earth* else could they call him?) And black Steve won't be watching, so obviously there's no problem.

I look out of the bedroom window and think about Matthew Finney. I foresee that Finney will resist the make-up for some reason. Probably because he's a shocking little racist who didn't even go on the Drama trip to see *Woza Albert!* Yes, that's it. I turn from the window and start to punch an invisible Finney in the face for being such a racist. 'No, you don't like that, do you, Finney? You can dish it out but you can't take it!' I get into quite an involved fight with Finney, who is surprisingly agile and keeps head-butting me in the ear which is really annoying. He throws me to the ground and grabs me by the throat. Desperate for breath, I seize an old Rubik's Cube from under the bed and gash Finney in the eye with an unsolved corner. He reels back and –

Mum knocks on the door and pops her head round. 'Everything all right?'

It's good that she's started knocking, but she hasn't yet got into the habit of waiting for an answer.

I look at her from the floor, panting and slightly aglow. 'Yeah, fine thanks.'

'I heard . . . choking sounds.'

'Yeah, Matthew Finney was trying to strangle me.'

'Righto.' She adopts a relaxed smile and it takes her half a second to scan the room for evidence of actual danger as opposed to 'Robert doing that thing he does'. She has a word for it.

'Pretending?'

'Yup.'

She nods and makes to leave, and then: 'Fish fingers!'

'Brill.'

She glances at the Rubik's Cube I'm still holding and then goes, closing the door slightly too casually.

Buoyed by the thought of fish fingers for tea and grateful that this was a mere 'pretending-intrusion' rather than a full-scale 'wank-intrusion', I get up and turn back to the gramophone.

It can't be easy for Mum, I think. Pretending is not Normal. Normal boys have real fights, not pretend fights. Nor are they virgins at fifteen. Nor do they write comedy sketches or keep a diary. And if they did keep a diary, they probably wouldn't write things like:

> Slater said in MS today [Media Studies] that Wogan is going to be on 3 nights a week instead of 1. I said 'he must be feeling under-exposed'. She really laughed but no one else did. They think I'm just up her arse. Tess didn't hear it, obviously. Thing is – if he does it 3 nights a week he might be bored of it by the time I'm famous so I get to be interviewed by Anneka fucking Rice or something. I'm joking but it's a real worry.
>
> Massive weird thing. Last night Mum was going out and coz I was going to be left alone with Derek, everything was suddenly horrible. She asked me why I looked all massively sad and I said 'nothing' for a bit and then completely lost it and cried my eyes out like a baby. Like a fucking BABY. We went in here and she gave me a cuddle, rocking me sort of from side to side and it was boring but also good really. She asked me again and I just said

> I didn't want her to go and Derek would just be watching his nature programmes about clubbing baby seals to death and that it was stupid of me and not to worry and all that jazz. She went out anyway but Christ knows why I went so mental.

I load a portable tape recorder with a blank cassette and press 'Play', waiting for the leading hiss to turn into the regular hiss, then 'Stop'. If I'm honest, I can't be sure if the recording quality of a boy singing in his bedroom over the instrumental version of a single played through a 1960s gramophone into the tiny external microphone of a cheap tape recorder and then eventually played through the speakers of a cuboid school hall is going to be – pristine. Neither, if I gave it a moment's thought, am I necessarily as good a singer as the international recording star Rick Astley, especially with my zero interest in singing and my recently broken voice which I still can't get the hang of. Why does it have to be so fucking *deep*? Dad's fault. Still, what I lack in technical expertise will, I feel sure, be more than made up for by stupid dancing. Everyone likes my stupid dancing. And then there's the new lyrics which have an undeniable verve, if not sophistication. I look at the chorus:

> First I'm gonna swing my hands
> Then I'm gonna twist my feet
> Then I'm gonna turn around:
> I'm quiff-ey!
>
> Then I'm gonna burst my zits
> Then I'm gonna shake my bits
> Like I've got the shits:
> I'm getting a stiff-ey.

I frown at these last two lines. I mean, it's brilliant – obviously it's all brilliant – but I just worry a little that the logic of having the shits and getting a stiffy doesn't really follow. Am I saying that Rick Astley is aroused by diarrhoea? Is that *really* what I want to say? But no, surely it's the way that he shakes his 'bits' that makes him look like he's 'got the shits' and his 'stiffy' is the effect produced by the whole performance. That's fine then. I press 'Pause' and then 'Play' and 'Record' on the cassette player. There again, 'shits' is going to be quite difficult to get past Mrs Slater. What could Rick Astley have, if not the shits? Wits, mits, fits, pits – PITS! 'Then I'm gonna smell my pits'. There's definitely a move he does in the video involving one arm being raised above his head in a sort of half-hearted circle that I could easily turn into a pit-sniff. 'Then I'm gonna sniff my pits.' Excellent. And that should become the second line, moving 'bits' down to line three so that it's the shaking of his bits that gives him the stiffy. Perfect.

I shove a can of Insignia up my INXS T-shirt and spray my own pits. Looking in the mirror, I wonder how long it will be before I need the brand-matching shaving foam and aftershave. Does Tess Rampling approve of Insignia? She surely doesn't approve of Rick Astley, but what if she doesn't like the way I smell? If she ever gets close enough to smell me. What if she sees the show and thinks it's crap? What if she doesn't even come? The appalling possibility sinks in. I look carefully in the mirror to see what happens to my face when an appalling possibility sinks in. Oh, it does that.

It's fine. There's the funny dance. When in doubt, do a funny dance. I already feel sorry for Mum who's going to have to listen to 'Never Gonna Give You Up' coming from behind this door about seventy-four times as I practise the dance. First, the words. I clear my throat, set the

record turning and release the Pause button on the tape. This needs to be good. This needs to be better than it needs to be.

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The dance isn't perfect, but I get through it just fine. Despite all the practice, this is the first time I've done it from start to finish without stopping. Moments before I went out on stage, someone in the wings had said, 'We reckon about seven million viewers.' I see. I wonder if Tess Rampling is one of them. The year is 2009 and this is *Let's Dance for Comic Relief*. I've just done my version of the audition scene from the eighties movie *Flashdance*.

Tall, Welsh and handsome, the presenter Steve Jones beckons me over and says, 'I'm almost speechless, what the hell just happened?'

'Something,' I say, trying to catch my breath, 'very intense.' Co-presenter Claudia Winkleman randomly says, 'I actually love you.' The audience are still making a huge racket. Right . . . so it went better than I thought. Be cool. Steve Jones turns to the judges. Anton Du Beke says, 'It's a complete thing of beauty.' Baby Spice Emma Bunton says she thinks I must be a trained dancer. That leaves Michael McIntyre, whom for some reason I identify as a threat. Naturally, I lean an elbow on Steve Jones's shoulder and glare at McIntyre as if I'm about to kill him. I imagine this looks like Han Solo leaning against Chewie, except this is Han Solo in a black leotard with a massive curly wig. Michael blinks and then starts saying something about how he used to have a French girlfriend. The audience likes this, so I soften up and try to give him a sweet smile. I cross my hands over my crotch: now that the dance is over and I've dropped the lunatic aggression, I'm suddenly just a

bloke dressed as a woman. Even if Tess Rampling isn't watching, I know that Dad is.

McIntyre has been listening to the audience too and senses that he's under-doing it. He ends with a shower of compliments and I nod gratefully to him, even though part of me still wants to head-butt him in the ear à la Matthew Finney. This is, after all, a charity event. So it's no time to be 'minty'. I had a 'minty moment' earlier which I now regret.

The term 'minty' is used for that precious moment in the life of an actor where he or she is in possession of a complaint about the way they feel they're being treated but haven't yet expressed that complaint. Try it now: keep your mouth closed while running your tongue over your front teeth – savouring that *minty* freshness – while rolling your eyes at the ceiling with long-suffering patience. It's safe to try this at home, but I wouldn't recommend doing it in public or you may be mistaken for Trevor Eve.

I was as frightened before the dance as I feel shy now. Michael gets cartoon super-aggression; the make-up artist just got passive-aggression. Either way, the solution, apparently, was aggression.

Earlier, in the make-up room, Roxy had driven another hairpin through the curly wig and the sensation was like a Smurf ice-skating on my scalp. She might as well have been using a staple-gun. 'I think it's probably quite well fixed on now,' I say as I try to relax my grip on the arms of the make-up chair, 'you can probably stop now, if you like.'

'No, darling, just need a few more,' she says. I've known Roxy, the TV make-up lady, for about eight minutes and this isn't going well. Young, distracted and phenomenally good-looking, she's the kind of girl who wouldn't have

given me the time of day at school. She doesn't look like Tess, but she has a Tess-like aura. I try not to hold this against her, despite the fact that she keeps stabbing me in the head. She's blithely reaching for another kirby grip and I suddenly know what it's going to be like when we have androids for dentists.

'It's just – it's on so tight already that I've got a massive headache. I'm a bit worried that if my head hurts this much I won't be able to remember the dance.' Roxy is only half listening. In the next chair along, Les Dennis is discussing the terms of his mortgage in bitter detail. Another pin makes a forced landing into the back of my neck, strafing three layers of skin on the way. The room judders. 'The thing is, Rocky –'

'Roxy.'

'Yeah, the thing is, I know it's a big wig, but I'm really, really sure that you can give it a rest with the pins now.'

Ooh, that came out a bit minty.

The tone I'm aiming for is suave and avuncular, a professional gravitas which may or may not be undermined by the fact that I am currently wearing a sparkly leotard and a padded bra. I've also attracted some attention. Les Dennis has broken off from his mortgage monologue and sips his coffee in the mirror with studied nonchalance.

Roxy hesitates. 'If it falls off during the dance, I'll get the sack.'

'I promise you it won't fall off. Even if it did, I will make sure that everyone knows that it was my fault and I promise you won't get the sack.'

The fear, the adrenaline, the headache, the thing the bra is doing to my chest and the thing the 'dancer's support garment' is doing to my testicles all contribute to the following: 'I promise it won't fall off. I swear *on the grave of my dead mother* that it won't fall off.'

I say it with enough emphasis to make half a joke of it, but I know that this is a low move. In any argument, the 'dead mum' card is the one you play as a last resort. It doesn't change anyone's mind, but it usually embarrasses them into a more receptive mood. This is cheap. I want the dance to go well, but it's always important to remember that there's a very fine line between being a perfectionist and being a minty fuckwit.

I cross one bare leg over the other. Roxy obviously thinks I'm nuts. 'OK, Robert, I won't put any more in and I'll take a couple of the top ones out.' She says this loudly and slowly, as if to an old geezer in a care home who just complained about the exact number of baked beans on his toast. An old geezer in a leotard. 'That would be great, thanks.' I look across at Les Dennis. He gives me a smile and a wink, which is nice of him but now I feel even worse.

Not long after, I'm in the back seat of a car on the way home from Ealing Studios. I didn't forget the *Flashdance* routine. And twenty-two years earlier, I didn't forget the Rick Astley one either.

I check my phone: on Twitter, a man who used to be very important to me has said something kind. And I have a voicemail from another man who is even more important who has been even kinder. These two messages will change things, and my reaction to them informs this book. But the journey will be a slow one. That night, I'll get back to the flat to find a bunch of friends who came round to watch the show with my wife Abigail, who is pregnant with our first daughter. And after everyone has left and Abbie has gone to bed, I'll sit in our little garden and drink another two bottles of red wine and smoke about thirty Marlboro Lights. Tomorrow I'll do something similar – but in the pub in the middle of the day. This behaviour won't change when

our daughter is born, and the moment will come when Abbie will tell me about these months and say as she looks at me steadily: 'You let me down.'

I don't know what I'm doing. I haven't got the first clue what I'm doing. In the car, the London streetlights liquefy as I cry all the way home. I think of my fifteen-year-old self in his bedroom practising that other dance in what feels like that other lifetime.

15: Bit self-indulgent, isn't it?
43: What?
15: This. You, talking to yourself.
43: You were expecting to grow out of it?
15: I wasn't 'expecting' anything. Christ.
(*Pause*)
43: Can you please stop that?
15: Stop what?
43: Looking at my hair. It happens.
15: Sorry. Just a bit of a shock. I mean, what the fuck –
43: It just fell out, OK?
15: Right.
43: Look, there's good news, all right? I came to give you the good news.
15: Like Jesus?
43: If you like.
15: Like Jesus with a massive bald patch?
43: Mate, get over it. I have.
15: Really?
43: No, not really. But look, I'm a TV star!
15: Oh my God.
43: Good, isn't it?
15: No, I mean 'Oh my God – what a penis'.
43: Well –

15: Hark at cunty. 'My name's Robert Webb and I'm a TV star!' Is that how you talk?
43: Look, if you're just going to be horrible –
15: How big?
43: What?
15: How big a star?
43: Erm, well, I don't really think about it in those terms.
15: Like fuck you don't. Bigger than John Cleese?
43: No.
15: Bigger than Rik Mayall?
43: Er, no, not really.
15: Well, it doesn't sound very fucking –
43: Nigel Planer.
15: What?
43: I'm about as famous as Nigel Planer, if you must.
15: (*Considers this*) Right. Well, I suppose that's –
43: Actually, Rik Mayall didn't have a sketch show, so –
15: Yes he did! He was in *A Kick Up the Eighties*.
43: Oh yeah, I forgot that.
15: You FORGOT *A Kick Up the Eighties*!?
43: Look, a lot's happened, all right? A lot of good things. I'm married with two children.
15: Oh, OK.
43: You pleased?
15: Yeah, course I'm pleased. I mean, I get to have sex at least twice, right?
43: Well, yes, that's one way of looking at it.
15: Oh, Mr Mature, Mr Fucking VICTOR MATURE isn't bothered about all the sex. I suppose you have sex all the time.

43: No, not really. I suppose 21 might turn up later; he's at it constantly.
15: I like the sound of 21.
43: I think he's a bit of a wanker.
15: Sounds like he does less wanking than you.
43: Right, I'm going.
15: No, sorry, hang on. Sorry.
(*Pause*)
15: I like your accent.
43: My accent?
15: You sound quite posh.
43: Ah yes. Well, that was your idea. You want to sound like Stephen Fry, don't you?
15: What's wrong with that?
43: Nothing. I mean it's a bit –
15: Look, I just don't want to sound like fucking Dad, all right? I want to be the opposite of Dad.
43: You've just said two different things and the second one is impossible.
15: Worth a try.
43: Waste of time. Close your eyes and don't think of a pink elephant.
15: What?
43: Close your eyes and don't think of a pink elephant.
15: OK . . . (*Closes eyes*)
43: What are you thinking of?
15: A pink elephant.
43: You've got – you can open your eyes now – you've got this idea of Dad as an abrasive northern male with an over-developed sense of adventure who takes women for granted and drinks too much. And you're about to spend twenty-five years trying to be 'not that'.

15: So?
43: So you're screwed.
15: So I should just give in and be a macho bullshit arsehole like other blokes.
43: Other blokes aren't all like that. Listen, a few years ago, I did this charity dance thing on TV and it went really well. Lots of people said kind things but there were two messages that really mattered. One was from Stephen Fry and the other was from Dad. It was the one from Dad that was the most important by a long way. You want his approval and you're much more like him than you th –
15: What did Mum say?
43: What?
15: This dance thing. What did Mum say?
43: Mum, she . . .
15: She liked it too, right?
(*Pause*)
43: Yes.
(*15 looks at 43*)
15: What's the matter?

A year or so before *Let's Dance*, I'm driving a car for the first time since getting married. It's a smart navy-blue Audi A3, given to Abigail by her dad. I'm alone but in a mysteriously good mood. What, I wonder, has gone so right? Is it the free car? The free car certainly helps. Abbie's dad had just retired and says he doesn't need it any more. Yes, the free car is a bit of all right; an absurdly big engine for a little car and much sportier than the second-hand Datsun Cherry ('Chesney') that I blew my inheritance on when I was seventeen. But no, it isn't that. What is it? What's that noise?

Tap. Aaah . . . there you are. Abbie and I have been married for a while but this is the first time I've driven a car whilst wearing a wedding ring. Every time I change gear I hear the tap of the ring on the gearstick. And suddenly I'm seven again and sitting on the back seat, and Mum is driving us between the golf club where my grandparents (and Auntie Trudy) work in the kitchen and our new bungalow in the next village. It's a journey we make many times a week and that *tap* is one of the happiest sounds of childhood. It means that I'm alone with Mum.

'Quiet boy', 'painfully shy', 'you never know he's there': these are some of the phrases I catch grown-ups using when they talk about me. But not here, not in the car with Mum. And definitely not when 'Sailing' by Rod Stewart comes crackling over the MW radio. The gusto of our sing-a-long is matched only by the cheerful lousiness of my mother's driving.

'We are SAAAAILING' (tap, second gear), 'we are SAAAAILING' (tap, into third), 'cross the WAAAATER, tooo the SEEEA' (tap, stall, as she tries to take a left turn), 'we are sail –' (tap, handbrake, ignition), 'we are s –' (tap, ignition, choke, window-wipers), 'to be NEEEAR you' (triumphant re-start, cancel window-wipers, tap, crunch into first), 'to be FREEE!'.

I like it here. There are no men, and there are no other boys. I don't seem to be very good at being a boy and I'm afraid of men.

One man in particular.

'Hello, boy, only Dad. You're probably already in the pub. I watched y'dance on the box. Your, erm Comic Relief . . . spectacular. Huh! Bloody well done, mate. Bloody well done. I saw you being interviewed and worrying what I'd think. Dressed like that. Cobblers, mate! You looked *good*! You looked bloody marvellous, on that stage. I couldn't

stop laughing. I'm proud of you, boy. I probably don't say it enough. You know me, silly old sod, I go me own way and I'll probably die on me own. Haha. [*brief pause*] Proud of you, Rob. [*another pause*] I'm sorry I wasn't much of a family man when you was a little boy. Couldn't help it, mate; couldn't help it. [*voice cracking*] All right, boy, I'll let you go. Have a pint for me. You know how I feel about you. Cheerio, boy. Cheerio.'

I didn't call him back. When I first heard that message, I didn't know what to do.

I know what to do now. Come with me.