



FROM THE CO-FOUNDER
OF THE CHASER AND
AUTHOR OF DISCO BOY

A NOVEL OF STUDENT POLITICS

COMRADES

DOMINIC KNIGHT

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MANNING BAR

With the exception of Moscow in 1917, Eddie Flanagan could think of nowhere he'd rather spend a Thursday afternoon than drinking on the balcony of Manning Bar. Every student who took their socialising as seriously as their studying was there, in the golden period between lunchtime Theatresports and whichever local indie band the University of Sydney Union had booked for that evening.

Eddie basked as much as anybody could in the wan July sunshine, and put his feet up on his companion's plastic chair with a proprietorial air while she went to the bar for another round. Since he'd been neglecting his schooner of VB during their conversation, he raised it to his lips and drained the dregs.

In truth, he didn't care much for the stuff. But he wouldn't have dared order his preferred tippie, Corona, even if the bar had stocked it in the same quantities that his father did. For Eddie was a man of the people, and so when on campus, he resolutely ordered Victoria Bitter.

While the uni's marketing brochures lured foreign students

with its picturesque, not-quite-ancient sandstone buildings, most Sydney graduates' fondest memories of their time on campus involved exactly what Eddie was doing: drinking subsidised lager on this ugly, cement balcony. There wasn't much to learn there besides how to fold sodden coasters into origami genitalia, but the average Sydney Arts graduate spent far more time at Manning Bar than they ever did in a lecture theatre.

In 1999, the bar was unrenovated, and not so much shabby-chic as genuinely decrepit. But the solid stonemasonry and grand wooden roof-beams allowed it to retain some of its original grandeur even in its state of disrepair, like one of those elderly alcoholics in three-piece suits you see polishing off a bottle of cheap red on the way to work. Any pretensions to elegance, however, were undermined by its distinctive aroma: stale beer, mixed with the body odour of students whose meagre budgets prioritised drinking above deodorising, and spiced with the persistent hint of chunder that was usually the fault of the dodgy nachos. It was fortunate that the room was carpeted in an ancient paisley material whose bright pattern effectively concealed the seemingly endless stream of vomit.

As he waited, Eddie cast an eye across the crowd. There were nests of goths whose pallid skin contrasted with their faded black indie-band shirts, the skunklike pattern warning of a lethal cigarette stench. There were ferals clad in flannelette, their unkempt beards petri dishes for the evolution of new kinds of fungus. There were the amateur actors, whose clothes appeared to have been stolen from a costume shop with a philosophical objection to mothballs. And there were even a few college boys in chinos and boat shoes who were under the misapprehension that Manning Bar's dress code was the same as their golf clubs'.

Shortly after three on this particular Thursday afternoon, the bar was packed, both on the balcony and in the dingy interior.

Arts students never had lectures on Fridays, so Thursdays served as the end-of-the-week drinks, and they went late enough to guarantee that those attending wouldn't get out of bed until the following afternoon.

It was the first week back after the midyear break, so everyone who considered themselves a PUI ('prominent university identity', in the mocking popular acronym) was guaranteed to rock up to Manning to reassert their exalted position in the pecking order: the comedians, the media types, the drama crowd, and the political hacks like Eddie. As he sat there waiting, fellow members of the campus social elite regularly stopped to high-five him as they passed; or exchange the odd pleasantries. And so they should have, because Eddie was one of the most prominent university identities of them all.

Though he had ongoing concerns about East Timor, among other places he'd read about in the Amnesty newsletter, Eddie felt that all was well in his little corner of the world. And it was *his* little corner of the world, he reflected with great satisfaction – and not so little, even. Because of the university's 30,000 undergraduate students, he, Eddie Flanagan, was the one who'd been elected President of the 71st Students' Representative Council.

This high office would have eluded the onlooker observing him on the balcony in a faded red-and-blue flannelette shirt and a pair of jeans that were too cheap to be cool. Eddie was marked out as a student by the shaggy brown hair he could have tied into a ponytail if he'd had any interest in looking neat, and the single earring which gave him a slightly alternative air. But while he dressed like he was living from one student welfare payment to the next, and was scrawny enough to raise doubts about whether his budget afforded enough calories for survival, Eddie was hardly a member of the proletariat on whose behalf he liked to speak.

He'd never invited his socialist colleagues to the substantial family home in Hunters Hill, with the charming view of the river. And when his parents had offered to hold his 21st there, he'd politely declined, opting for a downtrodden pub near the university and denying his mother even her attempt to book a jazz trio. And while Eddie was proud of having attending a public school – albeit a selective one in a middle-class area – he knew that if he hadn't made it into North Sydney Boys' High School, his parents would have happily sent him to the Sydney Church of England Grammar School down the road.

Nevertheless, Eddie always denied being rich, and his finances were certainly tight, unless you counted his share of the family trust. But as he often said, he hadn't chosen his background – what mattered was what he did with it. And nobody could deny his egalitarianism, which extended, in that usual Australian way, to being suspicious of the rich – or in other words, his parents' friends.

Few of Eddie's colleagues in the Labor Club came from humble origins. But in this, they were continuing a proud socialist tradition dating back to the days when a 'workers' revolution' had been staged in Russia by Lenin and a bunch of other middle-class intellectuals. The sad fact was that most of the genuine members of the working class enrolled at the University of Sydney had no time for student politics. They were far too busy actually working.

Which is more than could be said for the students at the tables adjacent to Eddie's, whose only moneymaking activity was collecting as many empty schooner glasses as possible. Thanks to a misguided environmental measure which primarily encouraged drinking competitions, the bar refunded a 15c deposit for each glass returned, and some of the more committed patrons had constructed towers of empties that were almost high enough to

buy them another whole beer, which it was safe to assume they didn't need.

Eddie listened to the conversations around him. Some long-haired science students were giggling about how they'd succeeded in releasing a toxic chemical during a chemistry prac, resulting in the evacuation of the lab, which had allowed them to get to the bar nearly two hours ahead of schedule. While at the next table along, a young student was reading a tortuous love poem of his own composition to a girl who, judging by her blushing, seemed highly embarrassed and yet highly flattered. Eddie thought the bard's chances of getting some action far outweighed his chances of getting the poem published.

Over in the corner, a trio who bore the weary air typical of English literature PhD students were having a passionate argument about Roland Barthes' essay on the 'Death of the Author'. One inebriated corduroy-jacketed fellow was threatening to throw his goateed colleague off the balcony if he didn't stop talking rubbish, illustrating the mortality of at least one author. It was a typical afternoon at Manning Bar, then, and the thought made Eddie smile with satisfaction.

He was willing to bet that he was the only person in the bar who was locked in an important political conversation that could determine the governance of the entire undergraduate body. The other students could go about their business, confident (or in truth, ignorant) that Eddie had their backs. So it was with what might have been paternal affection – if his Caucus hadn't passed a policy on gender-neutral language – that he gazed down at the students meandering along the road below towards their lectures. It was great to be back at uni.

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EDDIE EVERYWHERE

‘Maintain the rage,’ Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had urged his supporters when Sir John Kerr evicted him from The Lodge on 11 November 1975. And Eddie’s parents, devoted Labor voters who’d married two months earlier in the hope of many years of connubial bliss under the first Labor PM in decades, took his command to heart. The Flanagans nursed their rage as conscientiously as they would later tend their backyard worm farm.

Until Bob Hawke defeated him in 1983, the Flanagans refused to say Malcolm Fraser’s name, referring to him instead with the Whitlam witticism of ‘Kerr’s cur’. And when Fraser turned up in the foyer of a seedy Memphis hotel without any trousers, they refused to believe he was the innocent victim of a practical joke. They maintained they’d been expecting it, because the man who’d ousted Gough as Prime Minister had proven during the Dismissal that he didn’t have two principles to rub together.

Eddie’s parents’ admiration for Whitlam had survived the realisation that his Treasurer hadn’t been joking when he suggested the Government pay its overdue bills with Middle

Eastern oil money sourced by a mysterious businessman called Khemlani. And it had survived Whitlam's shellacking in the subsequent general election. In fact, they insisted he was the rightful Prime Minister even after a substantial majority of their fellow Australians had ensured he never would be again. After that, it was clear that their rage over Whitlam would survive anything, even their acquisition of considerable wealth. And so it was that on a pleasant October afternoon nearly two years after the Dismissal, their wholly intact rage led them to conclude that their firstborn son could bear no finer name than Edward Gough Flanagan.

Along with his breast milk, Eddie had ingested his parents' certainty that Whitlam had been right about just about everything. And how could their son have doubted the great man, when he'd made universities free at precisely the moment his parents had enrolled in one, and saved his father from the horror of Vietnam as well? And when his mother had a skin cancer scare when Eddie was 15, it was Whitlam's Medicare that covered the operation to remove her troublesome mole, which she'd duly christened 'John Hewson'.

Eddie had been taught by his parents to view the Liberals as, if not Satan incarnate, then certainly his earthly minions. So it was natural that he joined Young Labor at 14, and began attending branch meetings and handing out leaflets for their election candidates. And when Paul Keating dedicated his unexpected victory in 1993 to the true believers, Eddie felt that the Prime Minister was speaking directly to him.

It was equally natural that on arriving at Sydney University in 1996, he'd joined the campus Labor Club, and risen up the ranks to become its President in 1998. In that capacity, he'd invited Gough Whitlam to be the guest of honour at the annual Club Dinner, and his hero had graciously attended to hear himself being lionised. On that night, when he had introduced

his starstruck parents to the man after whom they'd named him, Eddie was convinced that being part of the nation's oldest political party was just about the best thing anybody could be.

It was almost a foregone conclusion that he'd run for the most important undergraduate representative position – SRC President. And since he'd been blessed with an endearing smile, no shortage of charm and a gift for public speaking, it was a surprise to nobody that in September 1998, at the end of his third year on campus, he'd been elected.

By the time second semester began in July, his 'reign' – as he liked to call it when joking with his friends, but occasionally thought of it with considerably less irony – was more than half over. He felt he'd accomplished a lot: reforming the academic appeals process, expanding the Legal Aid programme and leading a dramatic protest against full fee-paying students, to name only the highlights. At the rally's climax, an SRC activist had broken one of the Senate Chamber windows and climbed in, and although he'd been arrested, his action had certainly had an impact. From that day on, the university's top governing body had convened on an upper floor.

Eddie had also scored a significant victory by convincing his parents that, with such a busy schedule, it would be sensible to defer his Arts studies this semester to focus on the job, having barely scraped through a part-time load in his first. They were even happy to subsidise his rent in a terrace right opposite the campus so that he could make the most of a role which, they knew very well, would sit rather nicely on their son's resumé once he graduated.

He would have liked to devote his remaining months to making trouble for a Government that seemed determined to ensure that only the very wealthy could afford to attend university, as opposed to the middle classes who'd traditionally attended Sydney. But he had another crucial responsibility.

Eddie's predecessor, Rosie, had worked tirelessly on his campaign – and they'd gotten so close in the process that shortly after his victory, they'd begun going out. So, Eddie felt equally obliged to ensure that the President for 2000 also came from within the ranks of the Labor Club. With the election only a few months away, the Caucus' leading lights had already begun counting their numbers, and as the incumbent, there was no-one whose support would be more influential than Eddie's. And that was why, in only the first week of second semester, the lobbying had already begun.

3

SUCCESSION PLANNING

As he spotted her approaching with a fresh schooner and an orange juice, Eddie reluctantly removed his feet from his companion's chair. At 20, Sunita Shahane was a year younger than him and studying combined Commerce/Law – an unusually career-oriented degree for a member of the Socialist Left faction to which they belonged; but then that was Sunita for you. Her clothes unambiguously marked her as a political type, though – beneath a purple cardigan, she was wearing an old campaign T-shirt for the feminist Bluestocking ticket. Her skirt was faded yellow batik, sourced from an op-shop near the campus, and her stockings were black, which Eddie felt somewhat undermined her T-shirt.

She'd dressed more formally when she'd first arrived on campus, in blouses and tailored skirts. But she'd realised within days that a student's wardrobe was the most reliable indicator of their social position, and Sunita was determined that nobody would make the mistake of thinking she was some kind of square. There were days when Sunita left the batik at home and worked as a paralegal in a large corporate law firm. But

she wouldn't have been seen dead on campus in her favourite charcoal grey pants-suit.

Some of the more hardline political types had accused her of working for the enemy, but as Sunita pointed out, it wasn't her fault that the lamentable state of education funding forced students to have part-time jobs, and she might as well do something that helped her career instead of making coffees. Besides, what better way to get an understanding of the insidious capitalist culture they were all trying to change? It was always difficult arguing against her, since she was one of the best intervarsity debaters on campus, and her fellow Caucus members had learned that it was rarely wise to try.

Sunita was one of the SRC's Ethnic Affairs Officers, and had succeeded Eddie as the Labor Club's President. Now she'd confided in him that she wanted to succeed him in the SRC presidency as well. Today, they were supposed to be meeting about the lack of transport concessions for international students, which fell within Sunita's portfolio. But instead she kept gently nudging the conversation towards the upcoming election.

'So can I count on your support?' Sunita asked, smiling but with a fierce intensity in her eyes.

'You know I have to be impartial,' Eddie replied, his grin genuine.

'Oh, of course, *procedurally*,' she said with some disdain, 'as you'll be the Returning Officer when we have our vote. But it does matter who you support – it'll influence a lot of the others. And I checked our standing orders, and they don't say anything about the Returning Officer not being allowed to speak in favour of a candidate.'

'Don't be such a law student. Sometimes you have to look at the spirit of a rule as well as the text,' Eddie said, his grin broadening into a smirk. 'Don't get me wrong, though,' he continued. 'I think you'd be a great candidate. You've done a lot

with Ethnic Affairs, and it's high time we had an SRC President who wasn't white for a change. The Union's already had one.'

'And that was a man, anyway,' Sunita replied. 'Plus, I was talking to the Dean of Economics at a faculty barbeque the other day, and he was saying it would be great for the faculty's marketing in the region to have someone like me in a prominent student office.'

'Sure – although I'm not sure the Caucus will be pleased to think they're helping the Economics Faculty!'

'Yes, because of course capitalism is dead,' Sunita said, laughing.

'Yeah, I keep telling my dad that – and yet he refuses to sell his share portfolio!'

'Well hey, just because we want to socialise the means of production doesn't mean the evil capitalists should get all the profits in the meantime, right?'

'Of course not, and nicely reconciled. I'd love to read some of your economics essays,' Eddie said, smiling.

'Not on your life – I'd barely pass if I started advocating socialism to most of my lecturers. So, what would you advise me to say to the Caucus?'

'Oh, there's no magic formula. Just talk about all the work you've done. You've put in a huge effort so far this year – it shows that you'd be a great President.'

'So you will support me, then?'

'Well, like I said – it's a bit more complicated than that.'

The clouds above them had now parted, and the unexpected sunshine was inspiring several anaemic-looking goths to slowly accumulate the energy to move indoors. Two of the bar staff were languidly setting up the free sausage sizzle, and the mood on the balcony was very much a holiday one. Since none of the students had any assignments due yet, they devoted themselves even more thoroughly than usual to the challenge of

amusing themselves. One table of eager linguistics students was conducting a drinking competition entirely in pig Latin, while several pimply first year boys were playing some complicated card game that involved dragons, orcs and not having any female friends.

Most of the bar's patrons, though, were watching the Pharmacy faculty's self-appointed partier-in-chief toss ice cubes off the balcony, aiming for a rubbish bin in the courtyard two floors below. He was more accurate than he had any right to be after so many beers, and every successful shot was met with a massive cheer from the rest of the balcony, some of whom had already begun making plans to register ice basketball as an official university sport.

But two students were oblivious to the sporting history being rewritten across the balcony as they faced off, Sunita intent on divining Eddie's intentions and Eddie just as determined not to reveal anything.

'I mean, there might be other good candidates,' Eddie continued offhandedly. 'I'm going to have to wait and see who else puts their hand up. Lloyd might run, for instance, and he stepped aside for me last year, so perhaps it's his turn.'

Lloyd Watson was one of the Caucus' most prominent gay activists, and the thought of him becoming involved made Sunita frown perceptibly. She'd been hoping to get the nomination unopposed, as Eddie had the year before.

'Has he told you he's running?'

'Well, he might want to go for NUS Sexuality Officer instead, I don't think he's decided.'

'And if he decides not to?'

'Now, Sunny, it's a secret ballot,' he said, deftly sidestepping the question. 'And that means it's, you know, *secret*.'

Sunita found this exasperating, and suspected that Eddie had decided to support someone else. Everybody always cut a deal

to pledge their vote – it was how the Labor Party worked. She decided to apply some pressure.

‘I was hoping you’d be more helpful,’ she said casually. ‘You know, given what happened last election night . . .’

She and Eddie had drunk so much at the previous year’s victory celebration that they’d woken up in his bed the next morning with only the vaguest recollection of how they’d gotten there. They’d agreed to keep it to themselves, not least because she’d been in an on/off relationship with Chris Higgins, Eddie’s counterpart at the University of Technology Sydney down the road. At the time, things had been technically off between Sunita and Chris, but this year things were very much on.

Still, Eddie needed to keep on good terms with him, since Chris was an ally – the UTS Caucus was also affiliated with the National Organisation of Labor Students. Its membership of this body had also given the Sydney Uni Labor Club its nickname among political types – ‘NOLS’, pronounced to rhyme with ‘voles’.

‘Did Chris ever find out about that?’ Eddie asked warily.

‘No, and I’d be happy to keep it that way. He does get a bit jealous, even though as I always tell him, that’s *such* a patriarchal response. We weren’t even properly together then.’

‘Well, one or two people in the Caucus might suspect we didn’t just share a cab that night – which is why I have to be impartial,’ he said, a tinge of pink appearing on his cheek, and not because of the cold or the alcohol. ‘But if you’re the candidate, I’ll do everything I can to get you elected.’

Sunita was relieved. She’d become attracted to Eddie the previous year, but when he hadn’t even bothered to call her after their night together, she’d quickly decided sticking with Chris was a better option. In hindsight, she felt she’d made the right call. Nevertheless, she felt the experience had left Eddie somewhat obliged to support her.

‘Will you manage my campaign, then?’ she asked. ‘If I’m the candidate?’

Eddie thought it over. He was already working long hours as President, and it seemed unreasonable of Sunita to expect him to devote the little free time he had to her potential campaign. But he was honour-bound to help the Labor Club’s candidate, and since they were both members of the Caucus, they were theoretically supposed to be friends.

‘Of course I will,’ he said. And this time it was Sunita’s smile that was the only genuine one.