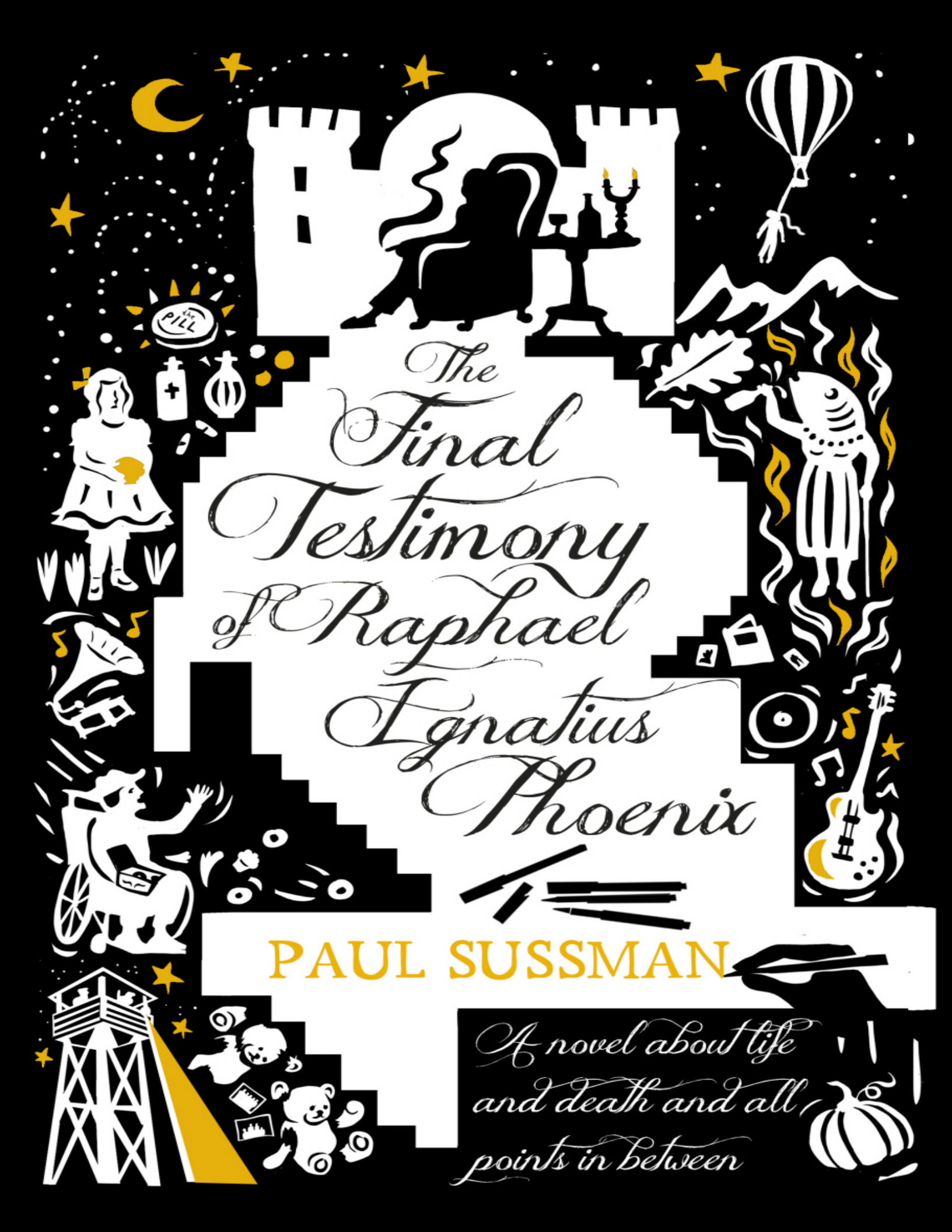

The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix

PAUL SUSSMAN

A novel about life and death and all points in between

About the Book

‘My name is Raphael Ignatius Phoenix and I am a hundred years old – or will be in ten days’ time, in the early hours of 1st January, 2000, when I kill myself . . .’

Raphael Ignatius Phoenix has had enough. Born at the beginning of the 20th century, he is determined to take his own life as the old millennium ends and the new one begins. He has The Pill to help him end it all, but before he does he wants to get his affairs in order and put the record straight, and that includes making sense of his own long life – a life that spanned the century.

And so he decides to write it all down and, eschewing the more usual method of pen and paper, begins to record his story on the walls of the isolated castle that will be his final home.

Beginning with a fateful first adventure with Emily, the childhood friend who would become his constant companion, Raphael remembers the multitude of experiences, the myriad encounters and, of course, the ten murders he committed along the way . . .

Here then is one man’s wholly unorthodox account of the twentieth century – or certainly his own, often outrageous, somewhat unreliable and undoubtedly highly individual version of it.

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Paul Sussman

For Ezra, Jude and Layla

Foreword

When Paul's agent suggested that we revisit an early manuscript that he had written prior to his published novels, my initial reaction was one of guilt: I was Paul's wife – and I should know more about this book.

Paul was writing *The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix* when we first met. It was the mid-Nineties, he had just turned 30, and after a faltering career as an actor was starting to make a name for himself as a journalist and columnist. His writing was being published in magazines, broadsheets and on the radio, and lauded both for its intelligence and witty irreverence.

Like so many other up-and-coming writers, Paul also harboured ambitions of becoming a published novelist. Evenings and weekends would be spent writing, locked away in the tiny cupboard that he had converted into an office in his flat in Balham. He didn't talk much about the details of the book, and for the most part I didn't ask. I was too busy falling in love. And, besides, I had so much faith in this funny, clever man that I simply assumed I would read the finished book on publication.

But the much yearned for publication never happened – despite Paul's ambition, talent and enthusiasm for life, he was plagued by self-doubt. Privately, he worried that his writing wasn't good enough, and an early knock-back from a potential agent prompted the following entry in his journal: 'Everything I had dreamed of and hoped for has failed. I am a failure. It feels so horrible to say that. But it's true.'

Despite finding a new agent who did believe in the book, Paul continued to doubt his ability. I was offered the completed manuscript to read only once – hundreds of loose-leaf A4 sheets stacked in an enormous pile – but a week later Paul decided that I was reading it too slowly and took it away again before I could finish it.

The prospect of sending the book to publishing houses was almost too much for him to bear: 'It's on my mind all the time – that desperate, futile hope that someone will buy it. Not even buy it, just like it. It was better when I'd stuck it in the cupboard and forgotten about it – when I'd given up on it.'

In the end, that's what he did. He took the manuscript back from his agent and hid it away. But he didn't stop writing – he had another idea – an archaeological thriller set in the Egyptian desert, with a Muslim detective – Inspector Khalifa of the Luxor Police – as its central character. Gathering dust in a cupboard, *The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix* became the book that he talked about coming back to once he had finished with Khalifa. Of course, he never finished with Khalifa – instead he enjoyed phenomenal success with a whole series of thrillers – selling across the globe in over 30 languages, and upwards of 3 million copies.

It wasn't until 15 years later that I finally read the unpublished manuscript in its entirety. But this time, there was no Paul to offer my thoughts to. Six months previously, he had suffered a totally unexpected and fatal brain haemorrhage. My world had fallen apart and, still reeling from the shock of losing him, my emotions were jumbled and raw. First, the guilt at not having read the manuscript before, and then the bitter-sweet agony of becoming immersed in his world again – but not being able to reach out and talk to him about it.

But in *The Final Testimony of Raphael Ignatius Phoenix* I found a very different world from the highly charged, fast

pace of his thrillers. As the story of the book's maverick narrator unfolded, so too did an altogether more humorous, magical, sometimes dark and slightly surreal world. And, in it, Paul's voice was unmistakable: loud and clear, singing out to me – his offbeat humour, his eye for the most eccentric of details and his wonderfully vivid descriptions. Perhaps more than any of his other books, this is just so recognizably him.

When Paul's publishers, Transworld, agreed to publish, I was over the moon – just like Paul, this book was unique and funny yet also beautifully moving. Here was a chance for others to glimpse this side of him and enjoy a very different Paul Sussman novel.

The challenge of editing the manuscript – along with Simon Taylor, Paul's editor at Transworld, and his agent, Laura Susijn – was to stay true to Paul's voice. The process gave my grieving brain some respite. I was able to lose myself in his words – understand how he wove together his complex plots into a story that flowed effortlessly, and appreciate the depth of his characters. All the qualities so admired in his subsequent novels are very much in evidence here.

Ultimately, we changed very little. A loose end needed tying up, and there was some cutting back where Paul's fevered imagination had got carried away. As much as possible, I gleaned information from the journals that Paul kept throughout his adult life. They are a fascinating insight into his creative process and, of course – this being Paul – the self-doubt is there from the outset: 'I am terrified I shall become a man of first chapters – a writer who never gets beyond the opening ideas and paragraphs of a work.' But like the book he was writing – and so typical of him – there are life-affirming, even laugh-out-loud moments too: 'Today, at about 10 a.m., I finally finished my first draft . . . I'm pretty happy with the last chapter – it ends on the sort of upbeat I had always envisaged for the book. I didn't feel

euphoric about my achievement . . . but I was contented and quite excited, and went into the bedroom to have a bit of a dance in front of the mirror.'

I will always be heartbroken that my funny, clever, kind man has gone, but I hope that, by publishing this book, another small part of him can be celebrated and enjoyed by others. In life, Paul had a wonderful way of lifting a room and leaving everybody around him feeling better about themselves. I hope that this book does the same.

Alicky Sussman, London, October 2013

Chapter One

THIS IS GOING to be the longest suicide note in history. A titanic epitaph. A monstrous obituary. A real rolling spouting blue-whale bloody whopper of a confession. And since it's going to end with The Pill, I might as well start that way too.

Small and white and round, like a powdery tear, with no obvious defining features save a slight nick in its otherwise perfect circumference, The Pill was made by Emily's father, a pharmacist in turn-of-the-century London. It is not, admittedly, on the face of it, an object to particularly capture the imagination. Certainly not one to start as extraordinary a story as I shall forthwith be recounting. As with so many things in my long and convoluted life, however, there is more to The Pill than meets the eye. It is, you see, despite its bland and unassuming exterior, absolutely deadly, its constituent parts – one and a half grains of strychnine, one and half grains of arsenic, half a grain of salt of hydrocyanic acid and half of a grain of crushed ipecacuanha root – guaranteeing a swift, painless and permanent demise to any who might happen to swallow them. Which is exactly what I shall be doing in ten days' time, washed down with a glass of fine, blood-red claret (a Latour '66 perhaps? Or maybe a '70).

I have, to this day, no certain knowledge as to precisely when The Pill was made, nor for what specific purpose. What I can tell you is that it was there the first time I ever visited Emily's home, resplendent on a small glass dish in the poisons cabinet in her father's pharmacy. And it was still there four years later, on 1st January 1910, the

afternoon of my tenth birthday, when, aided, abetted and encouraged by Emily, I stole it. (Oh there are far worse crimes to follow!)

The day we purloined The Pill was, if memory serves me right, a Sunday. A fine, windy Sunday, with a smell of woodsmoke and roast-chestnuts in the air, and the clatter of hansom cabs on the London cobbles. It being my birthday I had been invited to Emily's home for the afternoon, where we had eaten a large celebratory tea of cream cakes and crumpets and then – on my instigation – set off around the house for an energetic game of hide-and-seek. Emily had had a nasty fever over Christmas, and was still feeling a little weak, so soon tired of traipsing up and down the stairs as I snuck between hiding places.

'Let's go downstairs to Father's shop,' she said, leaning on the bannister as she caught her breath. 'We're bound to find something interesting there.'

Her father's pharmacy occupied the ground floor of their house, and was closed for the day, it being New Year. Normally the shop was strictly off limits, but since its proprietor was out for the afternoon, and Emily's governess, Miss Wasply, had retired to her room to write letters to her eight sisters, there was no one to stop us having a nose around.

'If anyone finds us we'll say we heard a noise and came to investigate,' advised Emily. 'Just let me do the talking.'

We had, of course, been in the shop before, but always in the company of an adult. Alone, it took on an altogether more thrilling aspect; an Aladdin's cave of brightly coloured jars and bottles stacked on shelves from floor to ceiling, each with the name of its contents emblazoned on the front in tall gold lettering (Bermuda Arrowroot; Violet Powder; Chlorate of Potash; Extract of Henblane, etc.). Glass cabinets displayed the brand-name medicines of the day – Eno's Fruit Salts, Page Woodcock's Wind Pills, Jacob Townsend's American Sarsaparilla – whilst tall, swan-

necked carboys glowed luminously and alluringly at either end of the long mahogany counter. A pair of mirrors on opposite walls reflected the shop between them into infinity.

‘Don’t break anything,’ said Emily sternly. ‘And don’t put anything in your mouth, especially from the bottles with the ridged glass. They’re dangerous.’

We pulled down a couple of jars from the more accessible shelves and sniffed their contents, and opened a tin of scented Russian bear’s grease pomade, some of which I smeared on my hair. Then we crept into the workroom at the back of the shop and had a poke around amongst the mortars and scales and tincture presses and root cutters. Emily spent some time fiddling with a teat pipette. I found a large Büchner Funnel, through which I blew as though it were a bugle.

‘Ssssh!’ hissed my companion. ‘Miss Wasply will hear us and we’ll be in all sorts of trouble. Put it down and come back in the shop.’

We had a rummage through the labelled rosewood drawers lining the wall behind the counter, and spent some time playing with the till, standing on tiptoe and depressing its keys as though they were the notes of some large musical instrument. Then we sniffed a bottle of sal volatile, which made our eyes water, and sent us both into a fit of coughing.

‘What did you get for your birthday?’ inquired Emily when we had recovered from our sputterings.

‘Some chocolate from Mrs Eggs,’ I replied, ‘and a special bible from Father.’

‘What’s special about it?’

‘Well, you can pull out the New Testament and wear it as a sun hat. He invented it himself. Thinks it’s going to make a lot of money. But then that’s what he always thinks about his inventions.’

(More about my father later.)

We opened a cupboard behind the counter and pulled out a curious-looking, pump-like contraption, labelled ‘Dr Eugisier’s No. 2 Mechanical Reservoir Enema’.

‘What do you think this is for?’ I asked.

‘Putting out fires, I think,’ said Emily. ‘Better put it back or you might break it.’

I did as she ordered, and wandered to the far end of the counter to examine a set of graduated glass dispensing measures.

‘If you could have anything in the world for your birthday,’ asked my companion suddenly, ‘what would it be?’

There were, of course, many things in the world I would have liked at that particular moment, such as a pistol, or a sailing yacht, or a machine that would do all my schoolwork for me. A Rudge-Whitworth bicycle, of the type currently advertised in all the papers, would have been nice, as would a wireless, or a set of Siege of Mafeking toy soldiers. One thing, however, stood out head and shoulders above the rest – had, indeed, stood out head and shoulders since the day I’d first seen it four years previously – and I named it now.

‘The Pill,’ I replied, crossing to the poisons cabinet and pressing my nose against its thick glass front. ‘That’s what I’d have. That’s definitely what I’d have. I wish I *could* have it.’

Emily looked at me in surprise and then, turning to the rosewood drawers behind her, opened one labelled ‘Rhubarb Powder’ and inserted her hand therein, removing it a moment later with a small brass key clutched between her fingers. This she wriggled into the lock of the poisons cabinet, turning it two full revolutions before easing open the door and removing the small glass dish on which The Pill sat. ‘Do you want to touch it?’ she asked, smiling, holding the dish towards me.

‘Can I?’

‘If you want. Be careful, though. Very careful.’

I held out my hand, and she tipped The Pill into my palm, where it sat like a dull white stigmata. I closed my hand about it, making a cage of my fingers as though to hold in a dragonfly, or a moth.

‘I never thought I’d get to touch it,’ I said, awed. ‘I thought I’d only ever be able to look.’

‘Don’t put it near your mouth,’ urged Emily. ‘It’s very poisonous.’

‘I do so wish I could have it,’ I sighed. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything so much in my life. It’s so . . .’

‘Pretty?’

‘Not really that, more . . .’

‘Magical?’

‘Yes, that’s it. Magical. It’s like a magic thing. The start of great adventures. I do so wish I could have it.’

Emily stared at me, her head tilted to one side, a quizzical smile pulling at the edges of her mouth.

‘Is that really what you’d choose? Of all the things you could have in the whole world you’d really have that pill?’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Definitely. I’ve always liked it, ever since the day I first came here. It makes me feel powerful just to hold it. Like I can do anything I want. Silly, I know.’

Emily raised her eyebrows – she had very fair eyebrows, and very thin ones, like snippets of golden string – and tugged at a golden forelock, apparently deep in thought. For a moment she was silent. Then, suddenly, she leant her head close to mine and whispered, in tones of utmost confidentiality:

‘I have a plan.’

Even now, so many long and wicked years later, an old bent man tightrope-walking around the very cusp of life, I can still feel the excitement that rippled down my spine when Emily uttered those words.

‘A plan?’

‘Yes, a plan. To get you The Pill without Father knowing. Are you game?’

‘Yes, yes!’ I whispered. ‘I’m game for anything! What are we going to do?’

‘Follow me,’ said Emily. ‘And do exactly as I say.’

She held out her hand for The Pill, which, once I had passed it over, she replaced on its dish, sliding the latter back on to its shelf in the cabinet. She then led me upstairs to her bedroom, where, falling to her knees, she thrust her hands beneath her bed and pulled out a large tin of Farley’s Mints.

‘Are mints in the plan?’ I asked, intrigued.

‘Mints *are* the plan,’ she replied. ‘Look.’

She shook the tin twice, its contents rattling within, and then removed the lid. Inside were some two dozen sweets, small and white and round. I guessed her intentions immediately.

‘They’re just like The Pill!’ I cried.

‘Precisely,’ she said. ‘We’re going to switch them. There’s work to be done yet though.’

We took one of the mints and scampered downstairs again, hearts thudding at the audacity of our scheme. First we went into the kitchen, where we used a filleting knife to cut a small nick on the edge of the mint, like that on the side of The Pill itself. (What, I have often wondered, was the cause of this small chink in the casing of my death?) We then returned to the pharmacy, where, hands trembling with excitement, we swapped the real pill with the fake one, returning the latter to its shelf in the poisons cabinet and closing and locking the door behind it. Even up close it was impossible to tell the difference between the two.

‘It works!’ I hissed, barely able to contain my euphoria. ‘They look exactly the same! We’ve done it! It’s like Sherlock Holmes!’

Emily smiled, balancing the real pill in her hand. I reached out for it, but she stepped backwards and fixed me

with a look of utmost seriousness (Emily had the most serious look of anyone I have ever known. It really did stop you in your tracks).

'Not yet,' she said. 'First you must tell me what you're going to do with it.'

'Do with it?'

'Yes. I have to make sure it's safe to give it to you. It's dangerous, you know.'

'I'm not really going to do anything with it,' I said. 'I just want to have it. To keep it. I like it.'

I was silent for a moment, before adding:

'I'm not going to use it to kill anyone, if that's what you think.'

'Do you promise?' she said.

'Of course I do. I'll never use it on anyone. It's quite safe with me.'

'Vow it,' she insisted.

'I do vow it, Emily. I vow it on my life. I vow it more than I've ever vowed anything before. Oh, let me have it now?'

She held me in her eyes for a moment – her big, burning, green eyes – and then passed The Pill across.

'And make sure you don't tell anyone what we've done,' she said. 'Or we could be in real trouble.'

I barely had time to clutch my prize before a clatter of feet on the stairs alerted us to the descent of the dreaded Miss Wasply. I glanced swiftly, triumphantly, at The Pill – my pill now – and then stuffed it into the pocket of my breeches, whereupon Emily's governess swept furiously into the shop.

'What on earth do you two children think you are doing in here?' she shrilled. 'You know full well that entry into your father's shop is forbidden!'

Emily opened her mouth to protest, but before she had the chance to proffer her excuses Miss Wasply had manoeuvred her considerable bulk across the shop floor

and positioned herself behind the two of us; a hand placed firmly on each of our backs.

'You two should be outside, getting some fresh air,' she said, herding us purposefully towards the back door, 'not meddling and causing mischief where you are not wanted.'

'But my fever, Miss Wasply,' pleaded Emily, dragging her feet. 'I don't feel well. Can't we just go back to the nursery?'

Miss Wasply snorted and thrust coats and hats into our hands. 'It'll do you good!' she said and swung the back door open; an icy blast swept through the cloakroom. 'Hurry up now, you can have half an hour in the garden before it gets dark.'

With one final push, she propelled us outside into the frosty winter air and closed the door firmly behind her.

Emily sniffed despondently, shivering as she pulled her woollen hat down to cover her ears. To my shame, my thoughts were not primarily for the welfare of my dearest friend, and while I did momentarily offer an arm around her shoulders to fend off the bitter chill, my mind was elsewhere. Buoyed with the excitement of my recent acquisition, I raced to the end of the garden and started turning cartwheels.

'Keep moving, Emily! It's the only way to warm up!'

'Thank you,' she sighed, now perched on the garden bench and resigned to her fate. 'But I think I'll just watch.'

And so the afternoon continued. We did eventually return to the warmth of the house, and until last night, the affair was never again mentioned between us.

Which is, in a nutshell, how I got The Pill. My pill. The pill of death. And if I vowed never to use it on *anyone*, you will note *I* made no promises whatsoever with regard to using on my own self. Whatever other crimes I might have committed, I'd never dream of breaking my word.

I've now possessed The Pill for ninety years (or perhaps I should say, The Pill has now possessed me for ninety years). Sometimes I've kept it in my wallet, sometimes in a glittering gold locket around my neck, sometimes Sellotaped beneath my armpit, sometimes in a ring on my finger, but it's always been within reach. Always present. Death has never been further than a few inches from my outstretched hand. Aside from The Photo, it is by far and away my most treasured possession.

It's with me now, as I write this note. In the pocket of my cotton pyjamas. I dip in and tickle it, gently, reverentially, as a worshipper might an icon, a lepidopterist a rare butterfly wing. One and a half grains of strychnine, one and a half grains of arsenic, half a grain of salt of hydrocyanic acid and half a grain of crushed ipecacuanha root, and soon it'll be time to take it. 'Not long now, my old friend,' I whisper. 'Not long now. At last your moment is nigh.'

My name is Raphael Ignatius Phoenix and I am a hundred years old – or will be in ten days' time, in the early hours of 1st January 2000, when I kill myself. Observant readers will notice that my initials spell R. I. P. A most fitting coincidence, as you will shortly discover.

Chapter Two

I COMMITTED MY last and most recent murder 14 years ago. In 1985. It was at Nannybrook House, and her name was Bunshop. Mrs Ethel Bunshop, née Boocock. I can smell it even now: the acrid, nose-searing perfume of burning flesh. And hear it too. The whoosh and the scream and the crackle. Hideous old trout.

Her removal falls into that group of murders to which I can ascribe a very definite motive. In some instances I have killed on but the most flimsy of pretexts; in others done so without really meaning to kill at all.

With Ethel Bunshop née Boocock, however, I had a veritable sackful of valid inducements. Her nocturnal farts, for one thing. And those awful droopy knockers, and the way she said 'Sherry, Mr Phoenix?' as though offering me a sexual favour rather than a glass of tepid amontillado. She was in every respect a vile old bucket, and her immolation a source of deep and continued satisfaction to me.

That said, even with so many justifiable reasons for knocking her off, her death was in no way a premeditated one. I had not thought about it, or planned it, or prepared the ground beforehand. Rather, it was a sudden, intuitive, spur-of-the-moment type affair, an unavoidable rush of circumstance, and one that took the perpetrator (i.e. me) as much by surprise as the victim (i.e. old fruit bat).

Such has been the case with so many of my murders. Some I can justify to myself, some I can't, but all, with the possible exception of Miss Wasply, have come completely out of the blue, with little by way of intent on my part. I am not, so to speak, a thinking murderer. More an instinctive

one. A natural-born killer, if you like. Yes, that's me. A natural-born killer.

It was Emily who got me into Nannybrook. Made all the arrangements, filled out the registration forms and paid my fees for the nine years I was there. Or at least I presume it was she who paid my fees. She never mentioned it, and I never asked. I can't think who else would have done it. I have no other friends.

God alone knows how she found me, a foul drunken vagrant slumped in a urine-sodden doorway in the middle of London. God alone knows how she ever finds me. But find me she did, and take me in her arms, and raise me up on to unsteady feet.

'Come on, Raphael,' she said. 'You can't live like this. You'd better come with me. I'll sort you out.'

And so we got in a black London cab, windows wound down because after five years on the tramp I stank abominably, and drove through the spring morning to Nannybrook House. And at Nannybrook they seemed to be expecting us, because I was met at the front door by a puffing, red-faced doctor, and taken upstairs, and bathed and shaved and examined and clothed and installed in a bright and airy room at the back of the house with a view over the flowery rose gardens beneath. And there I remained for nine years.

Nannybrook was a retirement home for the elderly. During the Fifties it enjoyed a certain celebrity when its warden pioneered a method of counteracting the ageing process by suspending residents upside down for an hour each day inside a specially adapted greenhouse. The Nannybrook Treatment, as it came to be known, made headlines around the world and sparked an international inversion craze amongst the over-seventies. Subsequent research, however, suggested that far from prolonging their lives, suspension of the elderly merely exacerbated their varicose veins, and

by the time I arrived the experiment had long since been abandoned. In the nine years I was there nothing half as interesting happened, except when the brakes failed on Mr Guttleib's wheelchair and he rolled out of the front gates into the path of an oncoming laundry van (shades of Lord Slaggsby there). Nannybrook was, above all else, a very sedate place to while away one's twilight years.

It occupied a large ramshackle Edwardian building at the top end of Putney Hill to which, over the years, various annexes and extensions and conservatories and wheelchair-access ramps had been added, so that, taken as a whole, it resembled something a dysfunctional child might have constructed out of Lego bricks. It had an enormous red front door, a weathervane that, even in the strongest winds, never pointed in any direction other than south, and was fenced off from the main road by a high stone wall with broken bottle shards cemented into the top, although whether the latter was to discourage vandals from getting in, or pensioners from getting out, I never discovered. The building was girded by a covered wooden veranda, and boasted extensive gardens to the rear, including a defunct orchard, several rose beds and a large vegetable patch wherein rheumatoid residents would cultivate curiously rheumatoid courgettes.

My room was on the second floor, at the back of the house. I had a bed, which was made for me every morning and which could, by the manipulation of various attached cranks and pulleys, be raised or lowered or tilted or swivelled depending on how one liked to sleep; also a desk, a lamp, an armchair and an en suite bathroom with special hand-grips beside the lavatory to stop me falling off when I was having a crap. I had my own phone, as did every Nannybrook resident, although I never used it because I had no one to call; whilst everywhere, all over the room like a pox, were strategically placed red electronic buttons which I could jab if I felt a coronary coming on. In nine

years I never felt even the ghost of a coronary, but that didn't stop me jabbing the buttons anyway, just to annoy the staff.

There was also, in one corner of the room, built into the wall, a large, warm cupboard, and here I hid my most precious possessions: The Photo and The Pill. During my vagrant years I had kept the latter Sellotaped beneath my left armpit. With my arrival at Nannybrook, however, I was able to provide a more refined abode, wrapping it in a green silk handkerchief and secreting it each night in the cupboard behind a loose brick, removing it in the morning and transferring it to the pocket of whatever trousers I happened to be wearing that day. Needless to say, no one knew of its existence, and needless to say, I didn't tell anyone. The Nannybrook warden was bad enough about smoking. If he'd found out there were one and a half grains of strychnine, one and a half grains of arsenic, half a grain of salt of hydrocyanic acid and half a grain of crushed ipecacuanha root on the premises he'd have gone quite apoplectic. (Incidentally, this was not the same warden as had pioneered the Nannybrook Treatment back in the Fifties. He, by all accounts, had emigrated to South America to continue his research in a Bolivian prison.)

I was, I believe, one of some 50 people in residence, although it was difficult to put an exact figure on it because, what with old residents constantly dying, and new ones arriving to take their place, the population of Nannybrook was in a constant and bewildering state of flux. In one week alone, for instance, the entire house bridge team expired (a result, I suspect, of the pressures generated by their forthcoming grudge match against a home in Croydon). With such a high turnover any accurate census was impossible. There could have been as few as 30 residents, or as many as 70. I put the figure of 50 simply because that's how many turned out to cheer Eric

Morecombe when he came to open the new physiotherapy room.

I was at the lower end of the Nannybrook age scale (76 when I arrived and 85 when I bumped off Mrs Bunshop). Most residents were well into their nineties, and several were over a hundred. One woman, the unfortunately named Mrs Yurin, celebrated her 106th birthday whilst I was there, although, somewhat to my amusement, she died in the middle of it. Just keeled over into her birthday cake whilst trying to blow out the candles. Her 88-year-old daughter, also a resident, was inconsolable, not least because she'd spent four days icing the bloody thing.

Although I wasn't the youngest person at Nannybrook – Mr Chudleigh was only 71 and, if the rumours were to be believed, Ms Clissold was a prematurely aged 26 – I certainly looked it. Indeed, judged on appearance alone I shouldn't have been there at all, for the wrinkles and cracks and droops and fissures so evident on the faces of my co-residents were markedly absent from my own long, pale-skinned visage.

After half a decade of living rough I did, of course, have a rather haggard look about me, and I certainly wasn't as sprightly as I had been in my youth. Given my age, however, I was in a most remarkable state of preservation. My back remained straight, my eyesight as good as ever and my muscles bouncy and active. Say what you like about murder, it certainly keeps you spry.

My fellow residents were, I suppose, a decent enough bunch, although there were few, if any, to whom I was close. Bernie Mtembe, Nannybrook's sole black resident, was always good for a game of backgammon; and when Mrs Goshen – she of the Australia-shaped birthmark splatted in the middle of her face – drank too much vermouth the results could be most amusing. Naturally I kept a good supply of vermouth concealed in my bedroom and regularly spiked her afternoon tea. She eventually fell

down the stairs and broke her neck after her Margaret Thatcher-inspired pussy-bow blouse became entangled with the bannister, but as I hadn't done any spiking that day my conscience was clear.

I was, I think, quite popular, in a removed sort of way. People said good morning to me, and engaged me in faltering conversations, which I would reciprocate with as much interest as I could possibly muster. I always received several Valentines cards, most of them, I suspect, from an elderly woman with Alzheimer's; and was never forgotten at Christmas or on my birthday. On 1st January 1983 I was given a beautiful gold-plated fountain pen, inscribed 'R.I.P., from all at Nannybrook House'. There was a little tea party in my honour at which I made rather a witty speech and was arthritically applauded by all and sundry, bent and wrinkled hands slapping together like appreciative porpoises.

My only real friend at Nannybrook, however, if such he could be called, was Archie Bogosian, a small, pinch-faced leprechaun of a man who had, depending on what mood you caught him in and how much Guinness he had drunk, been a diamond smuggler, a big game hunter, an arms dealer, an astronaut, a mercenary, a racing driver and a bodyguard to the Shah of Iran.

'Let's cut the shit, Phoenix,' he'd whisper, leaning across to me as we sat downstairs in the day room. 'I've killed people and I don't mind admitting it.'

'Me too,' I'd sigh, patting his arm.

'Good, good,' he'd chuckle. 'We're professionals; not like these other fuckwits. We've lived, by God! Done things. People like us have to stick together. I remember during the war when I was airdropped over Berlin . . . have I told you this one?'

'No,' I'd lie.

'Well, it was a midnight drop, very hush hush, direct orders from Churchill . . .'

And off he'd go on some wonderfully exotic tale of how he'd been sent to assassinate Hitler or perform some equally unlikely mission, for which he'd been awarded a veritable fruit salad of gallantry medals. I later found out from his sister that he had been unable to fight in the war because he had a spastic colon. He had done his bit for the voluntary fire service, and then spent the rest of his life working for a large company selling ladies' underwear in Swindon. It didn't matter. He had, if only in his mind, made of his life something fantastic, and I respected that. At least he didn't go on about gout and pension payments, which was the staple conversation of everyone else I lived with.

Thrown together by a shared sense of mischief, Archie and I became the Nannybrook pranksters, a task for which I was particularly well qualified, following my years with The World Freedom League.

We didn't do anything too outrageous; just dumped a small spanner in the works whenever the opportunity arose. We would, for instance, press the alarm bell in the lift, and then watch gleefully from round the corner as nurses came rushing with oxygen masks and flapping rubbery stethoscopes. Or pin small notes to the Residents' Notice Board with messages such as 'Bugger the Warden' and 'Want a blow-job? Contact Mrs Yurin Jnr in Rm 10' written on them. So intense became our note pinning, indeed, and so disgusting, that the entire board was eventually moved into the house office so it could be kept under constant surveillance, whereupon we took to graffiti-ing disgusting limericks on the walls of the downstairs lavatory.

Ultimately, however, our small revolutions caused little stir, for Nannybrook was essentially an easy-going place. There are, I have heard, retirement homes run along the lines of some Russian gulag, their residents herded back and forth like dangerous political malefactors, but Nannybrook, at least during my time there, was not one of

these. Of course there was organization if you cared for it, and it was more than easy to spend one's entire twilight years in a tightly regulated round of communal calisthenics, cribbage competitions, Batik classes and trips to places of outstanding natural beauty. If none of that interested you, however – and it didn't interest me very much – one could simply do whatever one wished.

For myself, I didn't really do very much at all. I watched television – I was a particular fan of Mike Yarwood, and *The Two Ronnies* – and cultivated the odd, abortive crop of runner beans in the Nannybrook garden. I spent a lot of time sitting out on the front veranda smoking cigarettes and staring at The Photo, did the odd crossword, and supplemented my meagre pension by regularly drubbing Bernie Mtembe at backgammon. ('You done me again, man!' he would wail. 'I gotta stop this bloody backgammon. You wiped me out!')

Most days, however, I would simply go out wandering, setting off early in the morning directly after breakfast, and returning late in the afternoon, tired and sweaty, just in time for tea. These excursions were not at all to the liking of the Nannybrook warden, who discouraged residents from venturing forth alone because so many of them tended to get lost or run over. Since I was clearly in full possession of all my faculties, however, there was little he could do, and I wandered on unchecked.

I went all over the place. To Wimbledon Common, or Richmond Park, or right the way up the King's Road, past the scene of Rick's murder, and so into the very heart of London, where I'd spend the day in the British Museum, or in St James's Park, or rowing about on the Serpentine. Sometimes I'd head over to Baker Street and stare at Emily's old home, now converted into offices, or go up to Regent's Park to gaze at the site of White Lodge, scene of my birth and first murder, now demolished and replaced with a gaggle of park amenities buildings. I never lingered,

however. It made me unbearably melancholy to see my past so comprehensively obliterated.

Occasionally Archie Bogosian would accompany me on these jaunts, although he tired more easily than I and we tended to spend long periods in pubs and cafés, eating peanuts and supping Guinness while he got his breath back. Here he would regale me with intricate tales of his lifetime's adventures before suggesting a quick saunter up to Soho 'just to get the blood to the extremities'. We'd duly set off, Archie scampering ahead excitedly like a beagle on a scent, eventually ending up in the front row of some musty subterranean porno cinema on to whose mildewed screen would be projected scenes of quite breathtaking explicitness. We would watch for an hour or so, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, and then leave, Archie making a point of going up to the ticket booth and politely asking the woman therein whether they would be showing *The Sound of Music* the following week.

Aside from all that, there were two further pastimes in which I engaged during my years at Nannybrook.

The first was ballroom dancing. Every Friday afternoon, regular as clockwork, residents, or at least those of us who were still able to walk, would gather in the dining hall, where Mr Minghella, a dapper little androgyne with blue-rinsed hair and a red velvet waistcoat, would take us through a bewildering array of foxtrots, polkas, waltzes, rumbas, tangos, quadrilles and hip-juddering bossa novas, beating time against the panelled walls with an old snooker cue whilst deftly operating a monstrous gramophone which he brought down from his room each week specially.

There were always more women than men at these Friday-afternoon dance sessions, and many of the old ladies would thus have to dance together, clutching each other like star-crossed lovers. This delighted Archie Bogosian, who would waltz round the room whispering 'No kissing,

you filthy old lesbos!’ at any all-female pairings he happened to pass.

I didn’t go every Friday, and politely declined to take part in the over-seventies competitions for which Mr Minghella was forever entering us, but it was, in its own way, thoroughly enjoyable. I would practise my steps alone in my room with a pillow, and, having suitably spiked her afternoon tea with vermouth, would generally get up a real head of steam with Mrs Goshen on the Mexican salsa. When Mrs Bunshop arrived, however, I stopped dancing, and never took it up again. The sight of her in the jazz disco session was, frankly, one of the most repugnant things I have ever seen in my entire life.

Finally, and what suicide note would be complete without such an admission, I had sex. Not with the residents, of course (what an abominable notion!), and not, perhaps, as much as I would have liked, but given my circumstances I think I did pretty damn well. Better, certainly, than I had any right to expect at my age.

My sex life has always been something of a cyclical affair, swinging from the strenuously active to the depressingly dormant and back again. When I was a film star, for instance, I had an awful lot of it; even more when I played in a rock band. At Cambridge I did OK, and whilst maybe not prolific, my years in Liverpool were by no means barren either. In the prison camp, on the other hand, I had none whatsoever, whilst the 24 years I spent at Tripally Hall were, with the exception of the local baker’s wife, almost exclusively chaste. The insalubrious half-decade before my arrival at Nannybrook had been unmitigatedly sexless, and I now therefore felt I had a deal of catching up to do.

I started about a week after my arrival at Nannybrook with a large-breasted Irish nurse named Madeleine who wore a starched cotton uniform and had a small mole on her left cheek.

‘You’re very young-looking for your age, Mr Phoenix!’ she said one evening, standing beside my bed with a cup of cocoa and three garibaldi biscuits on a plate. ‘I could fancy you myself.’

‘Do you?’ I inquired, raising my eyebrows seductively. She blushed red as a sunset.

‘Oh Mr Phoenix, what a question!’

‘Because I fancy you,’ I said.

‘Mother of God, I work here!’

I said nothing.

‘I work here!’ she repeated.

Again, nothing.

‘It’s quite out of the question. You’re 76.’

I ran my hand gently up her thigh and across her hip, and then leant over and turned out the light. By the time I got round to my cocoa it was quite cold.

After Madeleine, there was Pam, who worked in the kitchens, and Ms Crux the physiotherapist, and Cindy, who did the gardening, and a couple of other nurses, and even the warden’s spinster sister. I had sex in my bedroom, and in their bedrooms, and in the backs of cars, and on Putney Heath, and even, once, in the downstairs lavatory, for which occasion I graffitied a special limerick:

> I hope the warden will treat with lenience
> This terrible act of disobedience,
> For where most people dump
> I’m having a hump
> Hooray for the great British convenience!

I enjoyed my sex – as I always do – and so, hopefully, did my partners. (The warden’s spinster sister certainly seemed to have a good time, if her cries of ‘Oh Christ, it’s been so long!’ were anything to go by.) I steered clear of any emotional attachment, however. Quite aside from the obvious impracticality of the thing, I had neither the desire

nor the capacity to bestow anything beyond the most perfunctory of affections on those with whom I slept. When it comes to feelings, I've only ever had room for Emily.

And that, pretty much, sums up my life at Nannybrook. Walking, reading, backgammon, television, runner beans, dancing and sex. A little straight-laced by my standards, but then I was in my eighties, and I made up for it by doing for Mrs Bunshop. Not that anyone knew I'd done for her, of course. They all thought I was trying to save her. That's the funny thing about murder. It's so open to misinterpretation.

I had been at Nannybrook for eight years when Mrs Bunshop took up residence in the room beside mine, to the left as you looked at them from the corridor.

Archie Bogosian, with a certain prophetic foresight, had sniggeringly dubbed this room 'The Morgue', for more people had died in it than anywhere else in the house, six whilst I was there alone, two within a couple of weeks of each other. 'One for the morgue!' Archie would announce as each new occupant arrived. 'Break out the embalming fluid!'

So high, indeed, was the death count amongst my next-door neighbours, so regular and frequent their decease, that I began to wonder if perhaps mere proximity to me could kill people, without my even raising a finger. I mentioned the idea to Archie, who thereafter insisted I spend as much time as I could sending out my killer rays beside the Nannybrook warden. The latter remained resolutely and disappointingly alive, however, and my friend eventually put the whole thing down to the large metal floodlight bolted just beneath The Morgue's window.

'Too much electricity,' he explained. 'Pollutes the air. Worse than radiation.'

The Morgue had been empty for almost a month when Mrs Bunshop arrived, its previous occupant having died of a heart attack whilst practising yoga in his bathroom. I was