

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Join Me

Danny Wallace

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Copyright

**Bored people can do the stupidest things.**

**How about placing a whimsical small ad in the local paper, simply saying ‘Join Me’?**

Within a month Danny Wallace was being mobbed by strangers from all over the country, eager to proclaim him Leader and pledge allegiance to his cause – even though no one knew what it was. Leader of all Danny.

This is probably the only chance you will have to read the story of how an ordinary man became a global cult leader by accident and we strongly recommend you take it.

## About the Author

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DANNY WALLACE is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author who lives in London. His first book, *Join Me* was described as a ‘word-of-mouth phenomenon’ by *The Bookseller* and ‘one of the funniest stories you will ever read’ by the *Daily Mail*. His second book, *Yes Man* – in which he decided to say ‘Yes’ to everything – became a hugely successful film with Jim Carrey in the lead role. *GQ* magazine has called him ‘one of Britain’s great writing talents’.

His column in *ShortList* magazine reaches more than 1.3 million readers weekly and he was the *PP* Columnist of the Year 2011.

His acclaimed first novel, *Charlotte Street*, is available now.

Also by Danny Wallace

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*Yes Man*  
*Friends Like These*  
*Awkward Situations for Men*  
*More Awkward Situations for Men*  
*Charlotte Street*

# Join Me

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Danny Wallace



*This is for my grandma, Irma Breitenmoser.*

*And, of course, for Gallus.*

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*'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.*

---

*Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'*

*Margaret Mead*

# PROLOGUE

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Hello there. My name's Danny Wallace. I'm very pleased to meet you.

First things first . . . This was never meant to be a book. It was a piece of whimsy. A silly little hal project. But thanks to a huge and diverse group of perfect strangers, it became something much bigger. I'm still trying to work out how.

You look lovely today, by the way.

In all but a very few cases, the names of the people I've written about are completely accurate. Same goes for the photos. In those few cases where I've changed one or the other, I've done so to save anyone any embarrassment, or because they're bigger than me and they asked.

You've lost weight. Are you working out? I like those shoes.

So I hope you enjoy the book, and once again – thank you to everyone who took part in the following few hundred pages. I think you're great.

Cheers!

*Danny Wallace  
Volgograd, March 200*



*Joinee Jonesy*

# CHAPTER 1

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1. *In the beginning was the Word.*
2. *And the word was There.*

THERE IS A man who lives in Camden, North London, who once made me very happy.

He'd written me a letter.

This is what it said:

*To whom it may concern,*

*As requested, here is my passport photo. I have also troubled myself to include our local Indian restaurant menu, and can recommend the Chicken Dansak if you're ever in the area and feeling hungry. I look forward to hearing about the next step in our endeavours.*

*Cheers*

*Christian Jones  
London NW1*

I'd opened it immediately and excitedly, and then read it over and over again. I found it one of the most incredible letters I'd ever received. Why? Because it was a reply to my advert. The advert I placed on a whim. And it contained a passport photo of Christian, smiling. Smiling at me; the blob he'd joined.

'Wow,' I'd said to myself. 'Someone actually did it . . .'

I was overawed. I had my first joinee. A new best friend, of sorts. I mean . . . imagine it. From now on, whatever happened, I would always have this; I would always have Christian Jones of London NW1. Even if no one else ever deemed me worthy of joining in the future . . . even if no one in the entire world ever wanted to accept my offer again . . . Chris Jones was mine, and mine alone. My friend. My mate. My cheeky-faced pal.

Granted, we hadn't actually *met* yet, and if it came down to it and the whole world treated me with disinterest and scorn, why would he feel any different? But I had a hunch Jonesy wouldn't desert me. We'd come this far, me and him, and besides, I was already calling him 'Jonesy'.

\* \* \*

I should probably explain.

You see, like all good books, this one takes place just after the death of an old Swiss man. And, like all good books – modern classics, you might say – this one unwittingly began life in spring, on a farm in a village, in a Switzerland sprinkled with sunlight and dew.

It's early afternoon, and the old Swiss man is tired.

He's not as young as he used to be – because he's old – and the farm he once ran with tireless efficiency has got the better of him, as it does every day now. He hasn't many animals, nor many crops, but he still tries to clean out the cowshed and find fresh hay for the goats and keep up with the weeds, which never seem to tire as he does, the weedy green bastards. He is ninety.

His wife died some years before, leaving the old man to cook himself some lonely and basic meal of potato and ham, and it's some time after lunch, when the day is already nine hours old for him, that he decides to head back to the untidy wooden house to take his afternoon rest. There are still things to do, but they can wait, they can wait, because he must rest, he must rest.

He washes his face and hands with one of the lavender soaps his wife had collected but rarely uses. He lies on his bed, closes his eyes, and exhales. The sun is draped around the room, sneaking through the dark slats of the window, dousing the place in muted amber. The only sound is the distant clank of a dozen cow bells on the hillside, and the whistle wheeze of this old, tired man.

He falls into the deepest of sleeps, the last one he'll ever need, the last he'll ever be given.

And the old Swiss man pops his old Swiss clogs.

If indeed the Swiss have clogs. I don't know. I'm only half-Swiss. And it's not even my best half. I'm still at home in London, probably playing on my PlayStation, or staring at my feet, unaware that any of this has even happened.

I soon would be.

And how.

\* \* \*

I studied the menu Chris had enclosed with his letter. 'The Madras Valley . . . 123 Castlehaven Road, northwest London'. It looked great. Maybe I was romanticising it slightly because of the mood I was in, but I don't think that any restaurant has ever seemed so appealing as the Madras Valley did at that moment.

'We are proud of our chefs and our management,' it read. 'We are proud that you the customer choose us to satisfy your appetite'. Well, that was lovely. They hadn't needed to write that, but they'd done it anyway. What a great world my joinee lived in. A friendly world, where restaurants are proud of themselves, and you get a free bottle of Coke with every takeaway order over £15.

And this sealed it for me: 'Our chef has twenty years experience as a chef.' Oh, Jonesy knew his stuff when it came to restaurants, alright. He was a man of taste. A man of quality. A man I knew I should know.

I imagined our shared future. I imagined our summers in the park, drinking cool beers and kicking a battered old football around, laughing like ladies in the afternoon sun. I imagined us marrying twin girls and living next door to each other, and going halves on a caravan we'd take to the Lake District twice a year. I imagined growing old with him, maybe by now having to share just the one twin wife, trading in the caravan for a timeshare on the coast . . . and you know what? Life would be good. Life would be great. Because Jonesy would be there.

'Who is that a picture of and why are you staring at it?' said Hanne, my girlfriend, suddenly there, interrupting my dreams of what might be. She was drying her hair and smelled of coconuts.

'It's Jonesy,' I said.

'Who is Jonesy?' she said, moving closer to take a look. 'And why are you grinning like that?'

'I can't help it,' I said. 'He makes me happy. Look at his face!'

I held Jonesy's picture up. Hanne didn't react. I pointed at it with my finger, as if that would somehow help. Hanne looked at Jonesy, and then looked at me in the way I imagine some people glare when they look at after treading on a kitten.

'Right,' she said, unsurely. 'And why does he make you happy?'

'He just does,' I said, tucking the photo into my shirt pocket. 'He's got a happy face.'

'You know who have happy faces? Simpletons.'

I made a point of ignoring this unnecessary slight against my new friend by merely grinning at her, but suddenly felt as if I were proving her point for her.

'Anyway, why do you have a picture of this man?' she asked.

I decided to try and subtly change the subject.

‘Shall we go out now?’

It’s as subtle as I get under pressure.

‘Where?’ said Hanne.

‘I don’t know. I have absolutely no idea where we could go or what we could do once we got there.’

I left a pause long enough for me to fake having an idea.

‘How about we go to northwest London for a meal at a quality restaurant?’

\* \* \*

I realise, now, that I haven’t really given you ample explanation as to what this whole ‘joining’ business is all about. Well, like those who have joined me, you’ll just have to trust me for a bit. At least you know what my name is. You know I’m a bloke. You know my girlfriend sometimes smells of coconuts. You’ve probably guessed I live in London, given that I was about to head off to a restaurant there. And you know I was excited.

I could scarcely contain myself, in fact. I was about to visit a restaurant recommended to me by the first person ever to have joined me. The first person to have sent his passport photo in, and consequently, the first to have committed himself to my cause. My grand quest. My very important mission.

What cause? What quest? What mission? I’m still not telling you. Not yet.

But I had to hand it to him: he’d acted bravely. After all, as you’re beginning to understand, I’d given precious little away. He’d simply seen, in that week’s copy of *Loot*, a tiny, boxed small ad saying:

### JOIN ME

Send one passport-sized photo to . . .

And then my address. That was all. All I’d written. All he had to go on. And yet he’d done it. Done so without knowing who he was joining, or what he was joining, or *why* he was joining, or even what ‘joining’ meant. Truth is, at this stage, even I wasn’t bothered about any of that stuff. I was just overjoyed that he’d joined.

I’ll be honest: I instantly wanted to meet him. But what would we talk about? How would I introduce myself? Would I just say ‘Oh, hello Christian Jones, my name’s Danny, and you agreed to Join Me without really knowing who or what or why you were joining . . . Fancy a curry?’ He’d scream and run away, and it’s better to have no joinees at all than one who thinks you’re probably about to try and get off with him.

But anyway, I wasn’t going to actually *meet* Christian Jones. Not tonight. That’d be crazy. Creepily so, even. No, I was simply going to take my girlfriend to a local curryhouse for a local curry. The fact that it was *Chris’s* local curryhouse and not mine was by the by.

I grabbed my coat. We were off.

Well, I grabbed my coat, waited the best part of an hour for Hanne to choose between one pair of black trousers and another virtually identical pair, had a cup of tea, approved the trousers, and *then* we were off.

Now, all this talk of restaurants, tea and black trousers may all *sound* very exciting, but rest assured my life wasn’t always this enthralling.

Two weeks earlier, in fact, I was bored.

~~I'd been bored for a while, but this one day in particular was actually a day I found especial boring. That's not to say it had been uneventful – far from it. Already, today, I'd stubbed my toe and burnt an egg. So I think you'll agree, it was all happening, round my way.~~

And I'm not even usually someone who gets bored. I'm a go-getter, a jet-setter, a heavy-petter. I know what I want out of life, and by gracious, I know how to get it. But what I want out of life is usually a nice cup of tea and a biscuit, and how to get it involves nothing more than a short stroll round the kitchen, so I'm not sure if that really counts alongside the achievements of others.

But please don't start thinking this is because I'm lazy. I'm not. I can find plenty of ways to fill my days. Plenty of ways that I find completely entertaining and important and vital, but which my friends and acquaintances – and probably *their* friends and acquaintances – find rather . . . well . . . pointless. But then, that's half the point. Why commit yourself to a life of entirely admirable research? Why dedicate yourself completely and utterly to the pursuit of things that might actually make a difference? Yeah yeah . . . it's *useful* and *worthy* and *useful*. But when's *useful* ever been *fun*?

So these days, I seemed to be doing a lot of sitting down. A lot of glancing about. A lot of wondering whether or not I should be doing something else. Something more important. Something for which someone would actually pay me some money. In an ideal world, of course, I'd have Patricia Moore's job, already being his number one rival for just sitting on a chair, staring into space.

I used to work for the BBC, an organisation guaranteed to impress elderly relatives, but had found myself hankering after the good old days, when I'd had no real responsibilities, no one asked me about budgets or to look at a spreadsheet, and, most importantly, when I could sit about for hours in my pants. I'd agreed to work on one more programme – a lighthearted documentary about the merits of astrology – and then I would return to my previous life for a while. I'd managed to convince a few friends who work on magazines to throw some reviews my way, so I could spend my days watching films, playing videogames and scratching. Although that implies that I have friends on magazines dedicated to scratching, and I would like to stress at this point that I do not.

Hanne hadn't been particularly happy with my move away from the BBC. She'd liked me working there. She'd liked the fact that – despite no one really knowing what one is or what one does – she could call me a 'producer'. She'd liked having lunch in the BBC canteen, and drinking in the BBC bar and getting ten per cent off BBC mugs and pencil cases. Plus, it was all a lot more respectable than telling people your boyfriend just sits at home in his pants, scratching, which is something she'd actually once tell someone. But while I'd imagined my days working at home would be the perfect tonic to the drudgery of office life . . . well . . . things could actually get a little dull. Even with naps around.

The problem was, I'd only recently moved into my flat, having come out of a happy flatshare with my good friend Dave. We'd been flatmates first of all in Harrow-on-the-Hill, and then in the East End of London, where we'd got up to all sorts of mischief and japes. But since the day we'd decided that our flatmate days were over, I'd had rather a lot of time on my hands. There was something about having a flatmate which made it alright to do nothing. To just sit there, commenting on the world as it observed it go by. Chatting there, with him, was only one step away from being an intellectual, in my opinion. In fact, it may even have been one step *up* from being an intellectual. We got a lot done. Put the world to rights. Solved a lot of very difficult problems, over cups of tea and cans of Stella. It is my considered opinion that if, say, a celebrated intellectual such as Samuel Pepys had had a flatmate, he would have got a lot more done, and perhaps his so-called diaries might be a little more helpful to modern man than they are.

Now, fair enough, many of the conversations I enjoyed with Dave revolved around what you civilians might term ‘the trivial’ . . . but to us, the trivial was to be celebrated. Dissected. Discussed. It was a good way to live, and I missed it sometimes. Like today, for example. Sitting alone, telly on, with Dave an entire East End mile away from me, probably doing precisely the same thing as I was, I stood up and walked to the corner of the room, picked up the phone, and dialled his number. He wasn’t in. I made a cup of tea. I rang him again. He still wasn’t in. This was odd. *I* was in. Why would *he* be out?

I wandered aimlessly around my flat, from window to window, peering out from time to time to take in my East London view. The railway line that ferries commuters from Liverpool Street Station to their homes in deepest, darkest Essex. The bus garage, which, late each night, welcomes all the number 8s that’ve been driving from Bow to Oxford Circus and back again all day, and lets them rest until very early the next morning. The council high-rises, lined up in a neat row, with their dodgy hallway lights that blink, twitch and stutter. In the distance, Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome. Closer, the corner shop. A magpie nest in a tree. A bloke on a bike. Some lampposts. A dog. A fence. A car. A van. A bin.

Christ, I was bored.

And then the phone rang. I looked at it. It could only be Dave.

It wasn’t. It was my mum, and she was close to tears.

That afternoon, one of our family had died. Not someone I’d been particularly close to – the fact that I had to strain to remember if we’d ever actually met pointed to that – but someone whose presence had always been felt. My great-uncle. A farmer by the name of Gallus Breitenmoser.

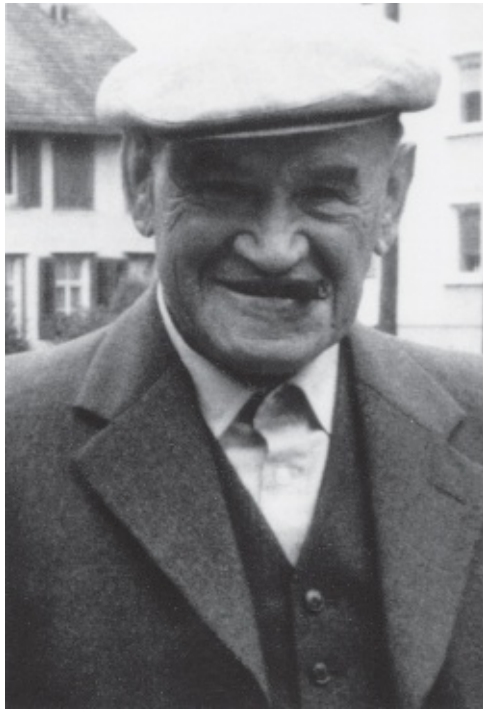
He’d passed away that afternoon, in his sleep, in his bed, on his farm, in his village, in his clog which he’d popped.

I’m not certain about that last bit. I suppose I added it for some kind of vague comic effect, but the truth is, it wasn’t that kind of day any more. My mum’s voice cracked with emotion on the other end of the line. I hadn’t known Gallus too well – I’d grown up in Britain, after all – but the sound of my mum’s voice, as flat and down as ever I’d heard it, was enough to trigger a real sadness in me. It was a day I’d remember for that. But it was also a day I’d come to remember as one that would affect my life in a thousand different ways.

Ways that would confuse me, bewilder me, make me happy, sad and proud. Ways that I still can’t fully comprehend or appreciate. Ways that changed my world.

Yep. This day, this dull and boring day . . . this is the day it all began . . .





*Gallus Breitenmoser (1912–2002)*

## CHAPTER 2

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6. *It came to pass that Daniel entered the land of the Swittish, wherein were gathered a multitude of his elders and kinsmen.*
7. *And they lifted up their voice with instruments of musick, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.*
8. *And it was a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day.*

‘SO, DANIEL,’ SAID my auntie. ‘What are you doing with yourself these days?’

I thought long and hard about how to answer her. Probably *too* long and hard, because she wandered off and started talking to someone else.

I was in the small Swiss town of Mosnang, an hour and a half out of Zurich, and it was ten minutes after Gallus Breitenmoser’s funeral. In those ten minutes I had been asked by nearly every member of my family what it was I was up to, and struggled each time to answer them adequately. In the old days, I’d been able to just mutter something under my breath, and so long as they’d heard the letters ‘B’, ‘B’ and ‘C’, all was well with the world. Now, though, I didn’t really know what I was doing with myself. I’d lost my sense of purpose. My sense of direction in life.

I broke away from the crowd and wandered around Mosnang for a while – an achingly Swiss town with vast wooden houses, dozens of green slatted shutters and elaborately painted facades, scattered across daisy-covered hills, and surrounded by happy cows and goats. The kind of town you’d have drawn when you were a kid, and had only the slightest grasp of basic town planning. Past the houses and cows, the mountains in the background make every view from every angle a timeless picture postcard in itself. Nothing ever changed too much here. This could have been any year, any era. I stood and stared for a while. It was just past noon and the sun was shining, the air was warm, and a fly was trying to mate with my face.

I decided I shouldn’t worry too much about what I was doing with my life. I mean, look at this place. It was beautiful. Sure, I’d had to lose a great-uncle to see it, but that’s what life is all about: give and take.

Gallus had been lucky to see this kind of thing every day of his life, smoking his pipe as he sat on the hillsides. I’m sure *he* hadn’t worried about where he was going or what he was doing. He was, by all accounts, a deeply happy man. Content with his lot. Satisfied. I knew I needed to be more like Gallus. Just slightly less farm-based, and, crucially, considerably more alive.

I decided I’d buy a pipe. Maybe that was what was missing from my life.

I made it back to the church in time to meet my family for lunch. We sat on a long table, on the lawn outside the local tavern, on wooden benches that creaked with every burst of laughter. There were fourteen of us in all; not a bad turnout for the old fella, though many of us, I suspected, may have seen the funeral as a handy excuse for a family get-together.

I was placed between my grandma and one of my great-aunts.

‘So, Daniel,’ said my great-aunt, who despite pushing 90 took up English lessons only two years ago. ‘What do you do now with you?’

I thought long and hard about how to answer her, hoping that she too would lose interest and maybe start eating her baguette, or something, but she wasn’t budging. Great-aunts rarely do. That’s why you can never get a seat at an old people’s home.

‘Oh, you know, keeping myself busy with this and that,’ I said. ‘But I’m really enjoying it.’ This seemed to satisfy her, and she tucked into her baguette.

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‘And how is Hanne?’ asked my grandma.

‘She’s great,’ I said.

And she was. Hanne and I had been going out for over three years. We’d met at university, and discovered an uncanny amount of things in common. She was two years below me, for example, and the first night she invited me back to her university room I was somewhat surprised to find that it was the same room I had occupied two years earlier. We chose to interpret that 1-in-800 chance as fate, and we had been together ever since. It was a happy relationship. I was prepared to forgive her slight Norwegian quirks, she was prepared to forgive my entire personality.

The family ate, and laughed, and reminisced. My uncle Rico got his guitar out and sang a song. My cousins clapped along. Everyone – apart from me – told stories about Gallus; Gallus the ladies’ man, Gallus the adventurer, Gallus the clown . . . and I was fascinated by what I heard. Fascinated by one thing in particular. The one thing people kept mentioning, but not elaborating on. Much of the talk was in Swiss German, a language I only barely understand, so that may have been part of the problem, but what I picked up sounded rather interesting. It seems Gallus hadn’t always been the happy and satisfied man I’d thought he was. And at one point I was sure I’d heard the German word for ‘commune’ thrown in, followed by intense laughter. I tried to ask questions, tried to get a word in, but they were laughing too hard, the conversation was moving too quickly, and soon everyone was talking about different, unrelated things.

‘Grandma,’ I whispered. ‘What was all that about Gallus and communes?’

Grandma laughed.

‘Nothing, nothing. We were just remembering. Just a silly idea of his . . .’

‘Of whose?’

‘Of Gallus. Just a silly idea. He could be a silly man. Silly.’

I wanted to know more but it was time for coffee, and my grandma stood up to pour. Whenever I was a kid and with the family, they’d all opt for coffee after a meal, while I would still be drinking my Coke. My grandma would, *absolutely without exception*, mistake my Coke for coffee and proceed to top it up with milk. For years I thought that was how you were supposed to drink it, despite the tea and retching.

Later in the afternoon, we visited Gallus’s somewhat dilapidated farmhouse to take one last look around. Most of his possessions had been packed away and stored by now, a dark and dour process my grandma had taken care of, but there remained a few odds and ends. We were ordered to take a souvenir each. I felt guilty. I’d hardly known the man. I elected to leave the others to pick something that would genuinely mean something to them, and I took a walk around the garden for a while.

‘Daniel!’ called my grandma. It was time to take something.

What was left was spread around the old wooden dining table Gallus had made himself back in the 60s, from wood he’d collected in the forest near the house. It was scratched and marked from years of use, battered from being at the centre of family gatherings since the day it was made. I looked at the few things that were scattered across it, and picked up a pipe, and some letters.

I popped the pipe into my mouth to try it on for size.

‘Yes!’ said my grandma. ‘It looks good!’

‘Maybe I’ll give it to Hanne.’

‘Yes!’ said my grandma, again. To be honest, I don’t think she’d understood me there. But we were alone now, and her full attention was mine. So I asked her again.

‘Grandma, what kind of silly idea?’

‘Idea?’

---

‘Gallus. What kind of silly idea did Gallus have?’

‘Ah . . .’ she chuckled. ‘Long time ago.’

‘What do you talk about?’ asked one my cousins, suddenly there.

‘Lara, what’s all this about Gallus and communes?’ I asked.

‘You don’t know this?’ she said, in disbelief.

And then she proceeded to tell me.

\* \* \*

I arrived back at Heathrow to be surprised by Hanne.

‘I thought I’d come and collect you. You’ve been to a funeral, after all. And also, I wanted to see you’d brought me a present.’

‘Here you go,’ I said, pulling out the first thing I found in my pocket.

Hanne looked at it. ‘You have brought me a pipe,’ she said, matter-of-factly.

‘I thought it would suit you,’ I said. ‘You know I’ve always fancied girls who smoke pipes.’

We hugged and found the Heathrow Express together. I’d only been gone three days, but I’d missed her, and was pleased to be back in her company. We headed into London, where we had a drink and then found a restaurant in Chinatown.

What my cousin Lara had told me was still on my mind, though.

‘If I said the word “commune” to you,’ I said as Hanne dropped her chopsticks for the fourth time, ‘what would you think?’

‘“Commune”? Like, hippies and stuff. Or mad people, like cults,’ she said. ‘Why? Are you going to live on a commune?’

‘Not me. Gallus. Well, not now he isn’t. But once.’

‘Your great-uncle? Really?’

Yes. Really. It appears that in the 40s, in the months after he’d spent his days lying on the ground with his friends on the Swiss borders, rifles aimed towards Austria and the Nazis, Gallus had become disillusioned with the small-town way of life. He’d made a few petty enemies in the town – a town of only 1000 or so – thanks to his big opinions and his big ideas. Those who ran the town looked upon him as a bit of a loose cannon, a bit of a troublemaker. Gallus wasn’t happy there. But he didn’t want to move to Zurich or one of the other big cities . . . they were too *zinvoll* for him. And then, one day in June, he decided he’d had enough.

‘So he decided to start a commune?’ said Hanne, surprised. ‘What a nutter!’

I didn’t think he was a nutter. I thought he was a visionary. I had an amazing new-found respect for the great-uncle I’d never really known. And anyway, it wasn’t really a ‘commune’, in the strictest sense of the word, was it? He’d simply wanted to live alongside likeminded people. He had some land through various family connections, and decided he could start a large-scale farm, provided enough people joined him in the venture.

‘How many people did he want?’ said Hanne, smiling.

‘One hundred or so,’ I said. ‘Which is actually very ambitious. I mean, he had a lot of land, but there were only 1000 people in the whole town in the first place.’

‘One hundred,’ said Hanne, shaking her head. ‘How many did he get?’

‘Well . . . three,’ I said.

Hanne laughed. There was no need for that. I'm sure badgering people to join you in starting something new like that can't be all that easy. All credit to him for trying.

'He wanted one hundred and he got three,' Hanne giggled. 'That's not exactly a community – that's more of a houseshare!'

Hanne was starting to annoy me now.

'Well, *I* think it was very brave of him. And I'm sad that he gave up.'

I was. Genuinely. That spark of passion could have gone so far. But Gallus, demoralised by a lack of interest, and, I suspect, somewhat bullied by his wife, had given up about a week after having the idea. Ten years later he sold the land. With the money he made he gave up the shop he'd been running and bought the farm he lived on until he died.

And that was that. He'd been mocked in the town, and even now, sixty years later, my grandmother couldn't talk about Gallus's efforts to get people to join him without having a little granny-chuckle.

'I'm glad you don't take after him,' said Hanne, finishing her wine.

*I* wasn't glad. Gallus had found precisely the kind of direction in life I wished I had. He'd made a decision, and he'd followed through. Not for long, but for a bit, and that was more than I was doing. I was sad that he hadn't gone all the way with his idea. I was sad that he hadn't found his hundred people. I couldn't help but feel he'd given up too early, that he'd caved in under whatever pressures he was under, that he should have given it another week, at least.

'How do you mean you're glad I don't take after him?' I said.

'Well . . . you're more sensible. Apart from ditching your job and sitting at home all day, at least. You wouldn't do what he did.'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'Well, because for one thing, you don't have a farm.'

'I've got my own flat,' I said, slightly too defensively.

'And you'd invite one hundred people to live there with you, would you?'

'Well . . . no. But I don't think that's the important thing. I think Gallus wanted to link with people. He wanted to connect with people who thought like he did, rather than with the other people in the town.'

'No, Gallus wanted to live on a big farm with all his pals and probably do ritual sacrifices and make everyone wear orange.'

'It wasn't a cult. He wasn't starting a cult.'

Hanne was winding me up and she was enjoying it. 'I think he was. I think your great-uncle Gallus wanted to be a cult leader.'

'It wasn't a cult. It was . . . a collective.'

'Of three people.'

'Plus Gallus.'

Hanne laughed.

And then I realised how ludicrous our conversation was, and I laughed too.

\* \* \*

But the next day, when Hanne had left my flat bright and early for work, I lay in bed thinking about Gallus. How must he have felt when he only got three people to say they'd believe in his idea? In hindsight, was he embarrassed? Humiliated? Had he taken it in good faith? Had he only done it to prove a point? To let the other people in the town know how strongly he felt? Or had he genuinely wanted to make

go of it?

A hundred people. I started to think about it. If I had a farm, who'd come and live on it with me? Not just *say* they would, but actually *do* it? Well . . . no one, clearly. My friends live largely in rented accommodation, where they have central heating and their own rooms, and don't have to worry about mucking out cowsheds or strangling chickens. They wouldn't join me. No one would. I shouldn't feel too downhearted about it; no one joins *anything* any more, apart from the gym, and even then that's only for show. If you're me.

I got up and jumped into the shower. Well, I got up, walked to the bathroom, and *then* jumped into the shower. I don't want you thinking I've got a shower within leaping distance of my bed, or that I sleep on the toilet. That'd be crazy. But Gallus continued to dominate my thoughts. It was stupid, and it was silly, but I still felt sorry for him. I felt guilty that Hanne had laughed at him, guilty that his actions had still caused such amusement at his own funeral, guilty that no one had wanted to join him.

What if I could make that up to him? What if I could get him his hundred people? The world's a different place now. People are more open-minded. And there are more than 1000 of them. It was a stupid idea, and I put it out of my mind immediately.

And then it popped back in.

Who'd join me? And why? Hanne had been right last night – I don't even have a farm for them to live on. But what if *I'd* been right, too? What if it *wasn't* about living on a farm? What if it was just about connecting with people? What if it was about faith in the unknown? What if it was about getting people to trust in something they had no idea about?

I was now standing in the shower staring at the ceiling. I hadn't even really noticed that I was beginning to run out of hot water. Because I was lost in the possibilities.

What was I really saying here? Was I saying that I could get people to join me for no apparent reason? That I could get one hundred people to agree to let me lead them to a better way of life without telling them what that better way of life was – without even knowing myself what that better way of life was? And, furthermore, get them to take me seriously while I was doing it?

No. Surely not.

I got out of the shower, dried myself, brushed my teeth. I wandered into the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea, and tried to forget about it.

Anyway, how would I know they were serious, these so-called 'joinees'? Anyone can say yes. I need some indication that they were serious. They'd need to prove themselves to me somehow.

And this is where I genuinely should have stopped thinking about it. I should, at this point, have drunk my tea, switched my PlayStation on, and got on with reviewing some new videogame or other. But I didn't. Somewhere inside me, some of Gallus's genes were swimming about, asking odd questions, causing some mischief. This is certainly the excuse I use when I try and explain what I did next that morning.

I got a piece of paper. I wrote on it. I phoned the London small ads newspaper *Loot*, and I read it out.

Three days later my small ad was printed.

## JOIN ME

Send one passport-sized photo to . . .

Join Me. Two words that summed up perfectly what I wanted people to do. Join Me. Not to live on a farm in a village in Switzerland with me. Not to all dress in orange and learn chants and bang a bong.

and kidnap and brainwash our family members with me. Not to do *anything* with me, really.

Just to Join Me.

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I was just interested to see whether people would. And if nothing else, the small ad was a late personal tribute to my great-uncle Gallus, to show him that at least *I* believed in what he'd tried to do. It was just a gesture, in many ways.

And then I forgot about it.

But a few days later, somewhere in Camden, northwest London, a man named Christian Jones was studying that small ad over breakfast. He read it, and read it, and didn't understand it. He was intrigued. He acted on a whim. He replied.

And with his reply was his passport photo. The one thing I'd asked for, so that I'd know he wasn't just someone who says 'yes' to things. To know that he's someone who *does* things. That small amount of hassle, effort and expense – the same amount that would have put off so many other people who'd seen that ad and read those words – told me I'd found someone like me. Like Gallus. A do-er. A joiner. My first.

Had I told Hanne what I'd done, and who'd written back, I dare say that this would be the final chapter of the book, and you would have asked for your money back. I would have stopped there and then, red-faced and suitably chastened. I would have shoved the picture of Christian Jones in a drawer somewhere and put it all down to a moment of lightheaded madness. I would have given up, just as Gallus had done.

But I didn't tell her. And I wasn't going to. Not now. Not yet. Not when I was starting to have fun. And now, I think, you're up to speed.

So . . . as I was saying . . . we were on our way to the Madras Valley, in northwest London . . .

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