

ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY MORNING: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

By

MARCUS FREESTONE

COPYRIGHT MARCUS FREESTONE 2013

This e-book is licensed for your personal use only and may not be re-sold or given away to other people. The contents may not be copied, edited or redistributed in any way.

ALSO AVAILABLE BY MARCUS FREESTONE FROM [SMASHWORDS](#):

The Least Resistance

The Memory Man: T14 Book 1

Random Target: T14 Book 2

Just Murder: T14 Book 3

Two Serial Killers, A Wedding And A Funeral: T14 Book 4

Never Kidnap A Serial Killer: T14 Book 5

Positive Thinking and The Meaning of Life

Ethelbert's Sunday Morning

What To Do If Trapped In A Lift With A Dentist

101 Ways To Happiness

Tell Depression To #@%! Off

The Psychology Of Happiness: Unraveling Self Help Nonsense By Understanding Your Brain

Donald Trump and Brexit: Misguided Rebellion

[MISS CARRIAGE](#)

[SPYING](#)

[ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY MORNING](#)

[BREAKDOWN](#)

[I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ART BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE](#)

[MICHAEL AND THE BOSS](#)

[WHAT'S THAT SMELL?](#)

[LIKE FATHER](#)

[INTO THE CAVE](#)

[GOING HOME](#)

[BUDGET](#)

[TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE GRAVY](#)

[SPYING THREE YEARS ON](#)

MISS CARRIAGE

This is a strange dream. I'm lying in a cat scanner surrounded by beeping noises. Despite working in a hospital for twelve years I've never had a medical dream before.

Oh, I think I'm waking up.

What's happened to the scanner, where's the ceiling going?

Where the hell did this train come from?

Someone switch off that fucking dalek.

Oh brilliant, now I'm having a heart attack as well.

No, what's that on my chest? Oh, it's my phone. How do you open this bloody thing? What does this button do?

Stop beeping you bloody... bleeping bastard.

Hello? Come on, Keith!

Who said that?

Put the phone to your mouth, Keith.

Who are you? What are you doing in my bedroom?

You're on a train, Keith.

Aren't I supposed to say that?

Get it together, Keith, I know she didn't leave you any money but you've got to sort yourself out. You can't spend every Saturday night in a railway sidings. We need you here now.

Where are you?

I'm at the hospital, where you should have been hours ago. Obviously you can't administer the anaesthetic but you're the only person in a forty mile radius who knows how to turn the machine on.

What's that noise, it sounds like an exploding bee?

That was me telling you the patients name, the forty seven year old Polish woman who'll probably die if you don't get here soon.

She had loads of money, a few grand isn't much to expect. Not even mentioning my name in the will. Ungrateful bitch.

Bloody hell, I'm thirsty, I wonder if there's a buffet car on this train?

What the fuck? Where did this field come from? How long have I been standing here? What's that light over there? A cafe!

Sorry? How much? Oh, I've had seven coffees and three bacon sarnies, have I? In that case that's quite reasonable. There you go, keep the change.

Right, better phone work now. When did I switch this off? Oh yes, that exploding bee was annoying me.

Hello? Okay, I've sobered up and I'm fighting fit now. Let's deliver this baby.

It's too late now Keith, we don't need you any more.

Hey, the birds are singing, it must be morning.

Goodbye, Keith.

Excuse me – can I have another coffee, please?

SPYING

Matt knocked at the door. Julia opened it after a long pause and looked distinctly displeased to see him. A puzzled look flitted across his face before he gathered his thoughts.

"Hi, I'm back."

"I can see that," she said frostily.

He went to kiss her on the lips but she pulled away and went back into the flat. He shrugged and followed her in. He paused in the living room, looking at some home made rugs which hung over the back of the sofa. He waited for her to speak. She didn't. Nor did she meet his eye.

"I see you've been hard at work again. What's this one - dead man's trousers, old syringes, soiled bandages and catheters?"

"Don't be obtuse, Matt, I use recycled hospital waste but not that. I couldn't make a rug from catheters. Or syringes; trust you."

"Is that another regional stereotype?"

"What?"

"Syringes - I'm from Dundee not Glasgow."

Julia busied herself with tidying the rugs into a slightly neater pile, still avoiding his eye.

"Hmm. This wasn't exactly the welcome home I was expecting. She can't know, can she? Of course not. So why is she being so frosty? I was rather hoping for a shag after a hard week away."

"Coffee?"

"What? Oh. Please."

He followed her into the kitchen where she began a prolonged routine of collecting a tray, mugs and biscuits - anything to avoid talking. He watched her, wondering what on earth was the matter.

"Milk?"

"How long have you known me, Julia?"

"Sorry, I forgot, if you have milk your head falls off and your knees explode."

"It's a dairy intolerance, not a..."

She shot him a sharp look and he lapsed into silence.

"Is it her period? I'd better not ask, not when she has access to cutlery."

As the kettle boiled and punctured the awkward silence she fastidiously rearranged her fridge magnets. Turning back to the kettle she caught him watching her.

"Stop looking at my arse!"

"It's hard not to, those jeans are tighter than an Edinburgh accountant. Anyway, I've seen your arse, and your..."

"Don't you dare!"

She looked flustered and turned away to pour the coffee.

"I was going to use an artistic term, not a gynaecological one! Anyway you can't regret posing for 'naked primary school teacher by moonlight'? It was big hit at my art school."

"That was years ago. Anyway, that's not what it was called."

"In my head it is!"

"You can forget any thoughts like that tonight."

"I see," thought Matt, "that's how things are. But why, for fuck's sake, what's the matter with

her? Everything was fine a week ago."

Julia finished arranging a mountain of biscuits on a tray and took it into the other room, leaving Matt's coffee by the kettle. He sighed inwardly and picked up the mug, following her into the living room. She stood by the sofa as if looking for something else to do to further avoid conversation.

He sat down. This seemed to annoy her.

"So, how was Ghent?"

"Oh, you know, like Brouge only more... Dutch."

"Did your group manage to focus on anything in particular?"

"Not after a crate of elephant beer - it's 11%! I felt like Keith Richards after an epidural. Besides it was just boring art stuff, nothing to interest you."

"What was the name of the hotel?"

"I can't remember, the... Phlegmingberg Hoidergurder Hotel, why?"

"Oh, no reason." There was no mistaking the venom in her voice.

"There's clearly a reason but what the hell is it?" he thought irritably. "Maybe I'll just finish my coffee, say nothing and leave, try again tomorrow."

Julia, who was still standing with the tray in her hand, put it down and went through to the bedroom. Matt watched in confusion through the open door as she opened the wardrobe and took out the Hoover, followed by an ironing board.

"Is she going to iron the Hoover?" he thought.

"Do you want a hand?"

"I can manage perfectly fine, thank you," she bristled.

"Pardon me for breathing. What the fuck is wrong with her?"

She unfolded the ironing board with great difficulty, almost trapping her fingers. She then marched back into the kitchen, filled the iron and strode back into the bedroom with a single tea-towel which she proceeded to iron vigorously for more than a minute.

"I bet that's a poor substitute for my face. Okay, Sherlock, she's pissed off at me for some reason. There's no way she can know where I've really been, so why is she interrogating me about Ghent? I didn't think I needed a cover story for my girlfriend."

Julia finished scorching the tea towel, folding it up and putting it on top of the wardrobe, before folding up the board with equal anger and placing it back in the wardrobe. She reluctantly came back into the living room, sat down and took a sip of coffee.

"Yuk, it's lukewarm."

"You should have ironed it."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"So, what have you been up to lately?" he asked in a final act of desperation.

"Oh, not much - keeping up with your meanderings via a private detective."

"Oh fucking arsing fuck balls! You stupid, stupid bitch. If he's found anything then we're in the shit up to our scalps."

He picked up his coffee absent mindedly and grimaced.

"God, that's stone cold."

"You should have blown some of your hot air on it then!"

He stood up, all humour gone from his demeanour.

"What was the name of this detective and where did you find him?"

"Ken Prenderghast. I found him online."

"Did you go to an office to see him?"

"Of course, I'm not stupid enough to give someone money without meeting them face to face."

"If he's really been following me then this is the stupidest thing you've ever done, not to mention him. I have to make a phone call."

He went into the bedroom and shut the door. Julia shrugged petulantly and stormed off to the kitchen.

A few minutes later Matt was sitting on the bed talking on his mobile.

"I don't know what he found, I thought you'd want to pick him up A.S.A.P. I've just found his website and emailed you the link, you should be able to find his home address in a few seconds from that. Of course I won't let her leave. Flat C, 52 Partridge Road, but don't come in mob-handed. He probably found nothing; if so there's no need to complicate my private life any further. Okay, fine."

He ended the call and threw the phone onto the bed. He ran his hand through his hair trying to gather his thoughts. After a few minutes of pacing around the bed he picked up the phone and put it into his shirt pocket. Standing up, he opened the bedroom door and returned to the living room. Julia was stretched out on the sofa with a glass of wine and a half empty bottle on the floor beside her.

"You'd better not have too much of that."

"Piss off, I'll do what I like."

"Clearly. Okay, just tell me why you had me followed and what this Prenderghast man found, if anything."

"You can't even be bothered to look guilty, can you?"

"I've nothing on my conscience. Look, Julia, I'm not fucking about, this is potentially deadly serious. Please just tell me what happened."

"I thought you were seeing someone else."

"Why...? Okay it doesn't matter, I'm not and I never have. What did the dick tell you?"

She got up from the sofa and went over to the sideboard. Opening a drawer she removed a manilla envelope, threw it at him and slumped back onto the sofa, slurping at her wine. Matt opened the folder and leafed through the contents.

"Is that it? Five photos of me going in and out of various shops?"

"Yes, but that's enough. Doesn't Ghent look just like Basingstoke high street?"

"If you could crawl out of that bottle for a moment and answer one very important question – is all you know that I wasn't in Ghent when I said I was?"

"You lied to me."

"Okay, we'll deal with that, but first I have to make another call."

He took out his phone and pressed a few buttons.

"No it's fine, all she knows is that I wasn't in Ghent. Ghent, it's in Belgium. That's not important, it's all fine because there are only a few photos of me in Basingstoke. No, nobody else, just me

going in some shops in the high street... Nobody could possibly work out anything from that.... No, it's fine, I'll deal with it." He paused in disbelief. "What do you mean you've already sent out a team – surely you're joking?"

He glanced at Julia who was half dozing on the sofa, a nearly empty wine bottle cradled in her lap, seemingly oblivious to his conversation.

"Look, she's half pissed, she won't remember a thing. I'll come up with a convincing story, that's my fucking job, remember?"

The sounds of running feet and shouting could be heard on the stairs.

"I'll get you for this you asshole!" he hissed, dropping the phone on the sofa and reaching into his jacket pocket.

"Don't do the door..." he shouted just as the front door flew off its hinges and five men with machine guns ran in and immediately begin searching the kitchen.

"We're in here, you fuck wits, there's nobody else in the flat."

He held up the ID. in his wallet and the lead gunman screamed into a headset mic.

"Abort search!"

"Thank you, Tony. You can all fuck off now, there is no situation here."

"Pardon me, sir, but what about the woman?"

Matt looked around to see Julia, now very much awake and with an expression that suggested she was quite keen on receiving an explanation of why five armed men have just kicked her door down.

"Ah. Shit. Okay, there wasn't a situation until you clowns turned up. Five of you? For one primary school teacher?"

"Just following orders, sir," said Tony.

"I know; I'll strangle Donaldson when I see him."

"Would you like me to do that for you, sir? I've been on a course in strangling."

"I'm sure you have, but that won't be necessary, tempted though I am.

"Excuse me," said Julia in a menacingly quiet tone.

Matt nervously turned his attention back to her.

"I can explain."

She sat up and fixed him with an expectant glance. He looked at Tony and the other four, who were all either staring fixedly at the ground or suddenly finding something of interest in another part of the room. He looked over at the splintered remains of the front door. He looked back at Julia.

"Give me a few minutes."

Ten minutes later he sat on the sofa beside her and took a deep breath.

"You're a primary school teacher and you make rugs as a hobby. Well, being an artist is my hobby, my job is working for... a government agency."

"The paramilitary wing of the Child Support Agency?"

"Look, I know this is a bit much after all these years and you feel I've lied to you, but I work in Intelligence. I've signed the Official Secrets Act. If I tell you anything about my job I'll be in prison faster than you can say 'whoops, there goes my extremely generous pension'".

"Do you carry a gun?"

"Not usually," he laughed. "I don't run around like that lot, it's mostly quite boring: going through phone records, bank accounts, lots of admin. It's not glamorous at all."

"So what happened to my front door?"

"Crossed wires. Believe me, I will be doing some serious shouting when I see the clown responsible for this."

Tony walked in from the kitchen.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you need us any more Only it's costing about five grand an hour just for us to be standing here."

"Well go home then."

"Erm... there is just one matter, miss?"

"What?"

"Those tiles in the kitchen. They're just what my wife's looking for, where did you get them?"

"Home base."

He saluted smartly.

"Thank you very much, miss. Sir. Come on lads."

The five gunmen trooped sheepishly out.

"The replacement door has arrived," shouted Tony from the stairs.

Two very nervous looking young men carrying a door shuffled past the five gunmen.

"And you'd better do a good job," shouted Julia, "or he'll have you killed."

She pointed at Matt then stumbled inelegantly into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Tony tapped one of the men on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, sir, there'll be no killing tonight."

"I wouldn't fucking bet on it!" shouted Julia. "Get in here, Matt."

He looked at the two terrified men, crossed himself and opened the bedroom door.

ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY MORNING

Ethelbert was past ninety but had never really picked a direction in life, or a gender. He/she had undergone so many sex change operations that he/she couldn't even remember which way they'd started out. Therefore Ethelbert now compromised: a typical daily wardrobe consisted of black trousers and lilac jumper, cream skirt and football shirt, or leg warmers and a lumberjack shirt. A wispy beard was ever present. Time was spent veering randomly between woodwork and knitting, 'Top Gear' and 'Loose Women', 'The Sweeney' and 'Murder She Wrote', Andy McNab and Barbara Cartland. Two cats shared the house, one male one female. There was a vague memory of having been married once or twice but to what was unclear.

Having the first name Ethelbert was unfortunate enough but, such were the vicissitudes of having been born in 1920, that Ethelbert Gaylord had been cursed on both fronts. All thirty six cats over the years had been called Leslie to simplify matters and to use up the job lot of engraved collars Ethelbert had purchased during a drunken afternoon in Brighton in 1951. Recollections of

the exact reason for this fortuitous purchase had gone for good now but Ethelbert was still occasionally plagued by random memories of a small shop that only sold pet collars, envelopes and surgical trusses. That would explain why Ethelbert had written four thousand letters during 1952, but not why they had all been addressed to Lord Mountbatten and all contained a vociferous complaint about the lack of toilet facilities on Hampstead Heath.

Ethelbert cleared away the breakfast things, having, on principle, eaten a sumptuous fried breakfast every single morning since the day they abandoned rationing. Once again it would be a running battle between clogged arteries and flatulence, but the flatulence would probably win again today and Ethelbert would live to fry another day. The two Leslie's ate a far healthier breakfast of smoked kippers and exhibited far less flatulence.

The kitchen was unchanged since the day in 1943 that Ethelbert and Leslie's one and two had moved in to the house. The smell of washing up liquid and Gin mingled with the dense cigar smoke that swirled around the room; the cats were very lucky to be at ground level with only the smell of damp slippers and mothballs to distract them from their opulent daily diet. Indeed, bearing in mind the amount of cigar smoke, fried-bacon- meets-burnt-saucepan smoke, and the occasional Gin spill ending up in their water bowl, it was surprising that the average lifespan of all thirty four previous Leslies was nineteen. This meant that, at their peak, there were seventeen Leslies resident at once – that was when Ethelbert bought the trunk.

Colin yawned expansively and looked at his watch but the hands had stopped – so had the feet. The decision to buy a watch that was also an eighteen inch scale model of Arthur Mullard was one he had seldom regretted during the last seventeen years but he had to now admit that, as the battery had run out eight years ago, it may be time to invest in a more practical timepiece. Nevertheless he estimated that about seven hours had passed so it was probably safe to come out from under the kitchen table.

Gingerly and pedantically he stood up, banging his head on the kitchen table.

“Thatcher!” he exclaimed, which was the generic, all purpose swear word he now employed in all situations since an unfortunate episode in a Basingstoke crematorium in 1987 had forced him to fore go all foul language.

Pressing himself to the wall he crept inexorably and tangentially towards the hallway. He knew that possible evil lurked in the hallway, or that evil possibly lurked in the hallway, or that possibly lurking in the hallway was some evil, but there's a limit to how long you can play 'count the kitchen chairs' and Colin had reached that limit after three hours.

He didn't have any kitchen chairs. He ate breakfast standing up to avoid the onset of piles. He also ate breakfast by pouring alternate mouthfuls of cornflakes and milk into his mouth to avoid wear and tear on crockery and save on washing up liquid. Colin saved up all the money he would otherwise have spent on washing up liquid in a special jar. Once a month he used the money to treat himself to a new ball bearing.

Colin had lots of special jars. In fact he had a special room in which to keep all his special jars in. One of the jars contained two hundred and twenty eight ball bearings. Another contained the wrapping from a pork pie he'd particularly enjoyed in Buddleigh Salterton in March 1992. Another contained the condom which had aided him in losing his virginity in 1983, along with a variety of

as yet unidentified lifeforms and a primitive prototype for some sort of farming implement. Next to this jar was one containing his mother's ashes and the spleen of an old school friend, which Colin arranged next to each other to illustrate the juxtaposition between life, death and having your spleen removed with a spatula by a defrocked archdeacon.

Passing by his special room Colin couldn't help noting with satisfaction that the hand-engraved sign reading 'Colin's special room, no trespassers, hawkers or anthropologists' was glinting nicely in the sun. It had definitely been worth the effort in moving his kitchen three feet to the left in order to allow the sun to properly penetrate the hallway.

Colin settled in front of the television and took out his Snooker Audience Bingo card. There was no prize because it was a game of his own devising that only one other person in the world was allowed to play.

As this was a World Championship quarter-final it should be plain sailing, although he and his competitor had each chosen one of the days matches to watch on the red button by rolling a dice so a full house was highly unlikely.

Over the next half an hour Colin enthusiastically ticked off many familiar faces. The dice had been kind to him today. There was the bloke who looks a bit like the bloke who used to be Nigel in 'EastEnders'; the woman who dresses like a mayor; the woman who sits next to the woman who dresses like a mayor; the bloke who looks like Ritchie Benaud would have looked in 1978 if he'd been a pub landlord in Caerphilly; the bloke who looks like he's wearing a wig from an 'Absolutely' sketch; the bloke who looks like Darren Gough but confusingly wears football shirts; the nice looking woman with the glasses; the bloke with Kenneth Kendal's nose, Peter Wyngard's eyebrows, William Woolard's teeth, Brian Cant's elbows, Terry Scott's knees, Jenny Agutter's toes and Felicity Kendall's handkerchief; the bloke with the tie who looks as if he's about to spontaneously combust; the bloke who looks like the actor Nicholas Grace; the bloke who looks like Stuart Hall; the bloke who doesn't look like Tony Wilson.

During the mid-session interval Colin made himself an extra strong cup of tea to celebrate his success. It was only then that he noticed an opal fruit pile up in his kitchen cupboard. This required immediate attention.

Colin had formed the habit of going for an afternoon walk every day since July 1991. However, he did not take any water with him due to the total lack of public toilets within a five mile radius of his house. It was therefore his penchant to partake of opal fruits to quench his thirst during these perambulations.

He removed the five packets of 'starburst' from the cupboard, crossing himself as he did so, conducted the ceremonial burning and flushing of the wrappers and set to work replacing them with his own facsimile of the original wrapping emblazoned with the correct nomenclature. He also did this with Marathons and Jif.

After the daily ritual of a video episode of 'Murder She Wrote' Ethelbert went out to the garden. It was a generous plot of land with an enormous bordering hedge that obscured all but the roof of the house from view from the road. This was probably a good thing considering some of the things that had happened in the garden over the years.

Ethelbert ensured that this was the exact spot requiring weeding before kneeling down.

Although very sprightly for ninety one it would nevertheless take a while to get down and then back up again so precision was the order of the day. Okay, it wasn't exactly weeding per se, just digging, but it involved the same cranking up of motor-cortex and knee joints. The garden didn't really need weeding but Leslie had been looking a bit peaky over breakfast so preparations had to be made.

Normally, of course, Leslie would be embalmed and go in the trunk in the attic with all the previous Leslies but after thirty eight years the trunk was now packed to capacity. Indeed Ethelbert has been mildly perturbed upon closing the trunk on Leslie number 34 when, due to the unexpectedly springy nature of thirty three other embalmed cats, Leslie number 34 had half popped out of the trunk, causing two paws to be chopped off when the lid was closed.

As always on these occasions, Ethelbert fell to pondering his/her own mortality. Despite years of assiduous research it appeared that self-embalming was physically impossible – who could Ethelbert possibly trust to do the job properly? Cremation was not an option because Ethelbert's body contained so many steel pins and other paraphernalia that the casket would in all probability explode like a faulty firework.

After preparing a suitably feline-sized hole, the idea of Sunday lunch suddenly popped into Ethelbert's mind like an MP. popping into a bush on Hampstead Heath. A tedious leftwards shuffling motion eventually brought into proximity the cabbage patch. As the digging progressed, Ethelbert was momentarily startled to strike something hard. Just a stone probably but no, this object was far too big for that. As more earth was moved aside it revealed a thigh bone and three fingers. From the general size and condition of the bones Ethelbert estimated that they had lain there for about fifty years and belonged to a man of roughly six feet two inches with a penchant for cravats, pickled onions and snooker.

“Of course,” exclaimed Ethelbert, “it's Terry! I can't remember putting him there.”

With a shrug Ethelbert began to cover the bones and look for a better spot for Leslie number 36. It would be inconvenient for 36 to go before 35 because it spoiled the pattern but so be it. Patting down the earth Ethelbert experienced a few dislocated memories of Terry in a church with a top hat and a flower in his buttonhole, but their significance remained elusive.

An hour later and the cabbage was steaming away horribly. Nobody in the house liked cabbage at all but Ethelbert tried to eat something green at least once a week; it was a penance of a sort, but it would take several million cabbages to wipe out all the sins committed in the house and garden since 1943.

Elevesens meant home-made cake and Darjeeling for Ethelbert, Pepperami and milk for Leslie and Leslie.

The cats settled down by the fire and went to sleep, Ethelbert switched on 'Granada Men and Motors'.

Colin slid along the hallway like a hamster on boxing day, in other words with a sense of increasing terror and a small buzzing sound in his right knee.

He used his ninja training to approach the porch with the required stealthiness; when he was sure the coast was next to the sea, he quickly opened the door and retrieved the evil piece of small card from the special 'things that come in through the letter box collection device' mat he had

knitted from the embalmed remains of a family dog.

“I thought so,” he grimaced as he read the words written in language on the card: you could save yourself money by switching your oxygen supply to us. He threw the card into his special 'disinfecting evil' waste basket and went to wash his hands fourteen times.

Putting on his balaclava and blond wig, Colin went out to the back garden to feed his pet hedgehog Dinsdale. It was costing him rather a lot these days as Dinsdale was now 800 yards long. He'd struck it lucky this week though when he'd had the good fortune to accidentally run over 17 cows while test driving a steam roller. That would see Dinsdale through to the weekend and all it had cost Colin was the price of the sesame seed baps and gherkins, without which, for some reason, Dinsdale would refuse any meal and kick off big time, which was something Colin always tried to avoid when dealing with 800 yard long hedgehogs.

Going back inside the house Colin removed the balaclava and wig he always wore in the back garden to confuse the watching MI5 operatives into thinking that there were in fact 2 people living in the house. He had been conducting this charade for 17 years, ever since returning from Buddleigh Salterton though it was nothing to do with the pork pie. It was an exhausting charade to have kept up for 17 years but Colin was confident that it would soon pay dividends and give him precious seconds in which to destroy the evidence when MI5 finally raided the house. From tuning into their radio broadcasts he knew that it would be weeks rather than months so he was already planning his escape, indeed the tunnel was nearly finished.

Colin looked at his shopping list as he waited for the coast to become clear:

Pickle some scepticism

invalidate a biscuit

counteract a magnetic field with Lego

follow Nick Clegg around for a few days shaking my head and muttering quietly to myself until he gets the message

butter no parsnips

hear no evil but see loads of it

amplify the concept of infinity until it becomes so huge it actually becomes really small and then try to sell it to Pakistan as an alternative Test ground

belatedly wave goodbye to a tryst

Marmite

bin bags

hedgehog toothpaste

Ten minutes passed fairly uneventfully, then they completely stopped doing so.

At first it seemed as if the sound of the front door being battered down was coming from the episode of 'The Sweeney' currently playing on the television. As the noise became louder, Leslie 36 woke up and looked around the room with an expression of mild interest.

After a few seconds the battering ram finally won the fight and the door which had withstood all manner of weather and other more painful stresses for sixty eight years crashed to the floor, to be immediately trampled over by eight men with machine guns.

Four of them burst into the living room like overexcited puppies in a biscuit factory. The rest ran upstairs and began tearing apart the various bedrooms.

"Nobody move!" screamed the first man to enter the room, pointing his gun at Ethelbert's head while the other three searched the room and then trained their guns on the two cats watching languidly from the fireplace.

Ethelbert impassively took another sip of tea and very slowly, with exaggerated effort placed it down on the table before picking up the remote control and muting the sound on the television.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you!" screamed the man with his gun trained on Ethelbert's head.

"Cake? It's an old sponge recipe I picked up in Brighton in 1951."

Ethelbert began the process of leaning forward to pick up the cake tray.

"Move away from the cake!"

"I'm afraid that would take up the greater part of an hour. Now then, what can I do for you gentlemen?" Ethelbert's posture shifted imperceptibly and a million thoughts began to jostle for priority. "I don't think that the cats are going to give you any problems, do you?"

The two men who had Leslie and Leslie held in a pincer movement shuffled nervously and looked rather sheepishly at the other one.

"Go and help upstairs!" he hissed at them.

As the two men left the room Ethelbert tried very hard not to break into a smile and also to calculate how long it was since one of the men had opened her bedroom door. About ninety seconds, time to concentrate.

"So," said Ethelbert, drawing out the words deliberately slowly with the timing perfection of a seasoned newsreader, "are you going to tell me why your friends are currently trampling their muddy boots all over my house and disturbing my cats?"

The line was times to the millisecond.

Just as the man's eyes flickered slightly to indicate that he was forming the answer in his mind, Ethelbert's spare wardrobe exploded, releasing plumes of CS. gas and nicely distracting the one man left downstairs. With practised efficiency Ethelbert removed the Gloch pistol from behind the sofa cushion and shot the man in the side of the head. Then, pausing to pat Leslie and Leslie reassuringly the 91 year old picked up the machine gun and crept slowly towards the living room door. Three sets of footsteps could be heard thumping down the stairs, then three bodies fell in a heap at the bottom.

"Five down, three to go," thought Ethelbert, steadying the gun. "Now where did I put that spade, this is going to require a really big hole."

Before commencing the shopping operation, Colin had a couple of errands to run.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, how can I help you, sir?" said the man with an air of heavy resignation.

"This is the tourist information centre?" asked Colin.

"Yes it is," said the man, glancing sideways at the massive sign proclaiming the booths purpose.

"Good," said Colin, "just checking. It always pays to be accurate in these matters – I once accidentally bought some crack when I thought I was in a shoe shop. That's five months I won't get

back. Anyway, I'm looking for some information."

"Regarding what?"

"What I should do about my hedgehog."

"That's not the sort of information we carry."

"I'm a tourist, I demand that you inform me or else I shall sue you under the Trades Contradictions Act."

"That is a made up act, sir."

"Like homosexuality?"

"...No."

"Well, you say that, but have you ever actually seen a gay? I've heard they don't show up on film."

"That's vampires."

"What about gay vampires?"

"What about gay vampires?"

"Perhaps that's a double negative and they cancel each other out."

"What?"

"Perhaps you can photograph gay vampires but not normal vampires or gay non-vampires."

"Normal vampires?"

"Yes, you know, the ones that don't perform acts of immoral anal-based behaviour on each other. Perhaps you can photograph them."

"Perhaps you can, sir, I however do not have a camera."

"That's very careless of you my good man or boy, one never knows when the necessity may arise to photographically capture an incident involving a celebrity bumming in order that one may inform the authorities."

"I really will have to discontinue this transaction with the utmost haste."

"Would you care to tell me why?"

"I don't care but I'll tell you anyway, you've been coming here every day for the last three years and I really must insist that you piss off and don't come back."

"Well done, you have passed the test. I shall immediately inform the squirrels that live under my bath. You can expect a visit from them in about three thousand years."

Colin ticked the item off his list and then proceeded with the utmost haste towards the newsagents.

"Hello newsagent style servant, I'd like to buy a Mars bar, please."

"To eat? Well, all the chocolate bars are right there in front of you."

"Yes, I am currently locating them via the method of refracting light through my eyes and optic nerves."

"So you're not completely stupid?"

"My stupidity has been officially measured by NASA. and falls well within the safe levels outlined by the safe levels outlining committee. And now I begin my next sentence after this colon: I cannot see anywhere a sign stating clearly and rectangularly that they have been tested."

"I can assure you that there is no listeria, salmonella, e-coli or anything else in our chocolate."

"Yes, that much is beyond the horizon and the pale and my ken and the thunderdome, but have

they been tested for drugs?"

"Drugs?" thought the newsagent, "this is a new one."

"What do you mean?" he asked, hoping to expedite matters before the next ice age.

"Drugs. Amphetamines, dope, crack."

"I'm sorry I don't understand."

"Don't change the subject, have they been tested?"

"Tested for what?"

"Muscle building drugs. Have, in short trousers, your current stock of Mars bars been tested, thereby to ascertain whether they or whether they do not in deed or in fact contain muscle building drugs or not?"

"Are you serious?"

"No, you're the serious one and I'm the crazy wacky one, I would have thought that was obvious."

"Geography."

"Don't change the subject, have they been tested?"

"Of course not, why should they have been?"

"To ascertain whether or whether not certain substances have or have whether or have not have been or haven't have not to have been..."

"Yes, we've established that..."

"I'm so pleased."

"Well I'm not, buy something now or leave my shop. Anyway, why would they contain stimulants?"

"Athletes are always failing drug tests and a large number of athletes eat Mars bars."

"That's a very tenuous link."

"Thank you, my good man or woman."

"Look, will you, during the next ten seconds before I hit you very hard in the knees and eject you from my shop like a Betamax video tape onto a beige carpet, be buying some bloody chocolate?"

"Of course not, if there are no drugs in them what's the point?"

"Because they taste nice?"

"Yeah, and I eat pickled unicorns for breakfast! Disgraceful! Never darken my stools again!"

Colin stormed out, noting with satisfaction the MI5 operative lurking near the greeting cards with what he erroneously thought was a hidden video camera.

After finishing his shopping he perambulated over to the park for a relaxing lunch.

"Excuse me," he asked an unfortunate woman.

"Yes?"

"Do you require the entirety of this bench in order to complete your culinary processes or is there a section of it which I can use for my own masticatory purposes, heretofore the oral consumption of pre-prepared sandwich style sandwiches?"

The woman clutched her bag to her chest and shifted as far away as she could without actually falling off the end of the bench.

"No, it's free."

"You mean they haven't introduced a congestion charge for benches yet?! Excellent! They'll be charging us for breathing next, the crafty fascist bastards!"

"Yes, I suppose so," mumbled the woman, trying to ignore him.

"Really! I was being facetious but you actually think it's going to happen – I'm absolutely astonished! Is there a white paper in the offing?"

"I really couldn't say."

"My god, have they made it subject to the Official Secrets Act! I can't believe the depths to which these scum will sink. Do you think we're being bugged now? Should I put a radio on to drown out our conversation? Perhaps we should communicate in code?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," said the woman, finishing her sandwich as quickly as possible.

"Ah, of course – you've already checked the bushes for MI5 agents and listening devices. Quick thinking, sir. Yes, the last thing I want is for Special Branch to insert a mind-reading probe into my head and rummage through my memories – I still get headaches."

"Oh dear!"

"Thank you for the sympathy, my good sir, but the scar has almost healed now – it used to look like a map of Britain but now it's shrunk to the size of Anglesey. These modern laser probes really are very efficient – even if they do bring back unwanted childhood memories about the cupboard under the stairs. I still get hiccups whenever I hear a dog whistle."

"I really have to go now!" the woman almost shouted.

"Good idea, yes, I'll wait 5 minutes before leaving in case they follow us."

"Excellent idea, please ensure that you do," said the woman, all but sprinting away.

"Right," said Colin, "orange alert... orange alert. They won't catch me with my curtains down again!"

Ethelbert managed to clean up most of the blood in time for 'Antiques Roadshow' and a well earned pint of gin.

Leslie and Leslie had observed with their usual detachment as body after body had been rolled down the hill to the bottom of the garden. Having never seen the trunk in the attic, they obviously assumed that that would also be their final resting place and were beginning to wonder if there would be enough room.

This time Ethelbert had also taken the precaution of trying out a new type of acid that had been bubbling away in the spare airing cupboard for a few months. If calculations were correct, it should render the five men down to bones within a fortnight.

After 'Antiques Roadshow' Ethelbert switched over to the snooker and began rummaging around for a fresh bingo card.

It occurred to Colin that it had also been 17 years since he'd last cleared out his loft so he went up to have a look at his non-jar bound archive. Putting the light on he was pleasantly surprised to find only 6 items in the whole loft space – obviously all the others had either been eaten by mice or abducted by aliens so he didn't have to worry about them. He assessed the six items in reverse order of his attachment to them: a life-size plasticine replica of Nicholas Parsons trying to pacify

Kenneth Williams in a 1978 edition of *Just a Minute*; a non-life size model of the Post Office tower made from eye lashes, widgets and frozen urine; a map showing the hidden location of Douglas Bader's legs; 163 photographs of Winston Churchill and Clement Atlee, both dressed as Vicars, throwing buckets of fermenting cheese at some squirrels; a shit in a bottle; and finally, his favourite of all, a parody of the Bayeux tapestry made from retread tyres, burnt matches and the hopes and dreams of a thousand disillusioned poets, depicting the finals of the 2005 World Snooker Championships where Mathew Stevens lost to Sean Murphy by recklessly taking on a middle distance blue left handed.

Later that day, Colin was startled but not unprepared when the silent alarm mounted in his hallway began to flash bright red. Shouting a quick goodbye to Dinsdale he drew up the drawbridge, armed the automatic gun turret and hurried down into the tunnel to begin digging the final few feet that would lead him out onto Bodmin Moor. From then he would catch a train to Exeter before passing through Ottery St. Mary, Honiton, Yarcombe and Chard before backtracking down to Lyme Regis, Seaton and Salcmobe Regis on his way to the final location of Operation Doomsday.

The following morning Ethelbert was satisfied that the house would now pass all but the most rigorous inspection.

The knock at the door was timed to the second.

"Hello, Colin," said Ethelbert, "it's been a while. How is Dinsdale?"

BREAKDOWN

"Just my sodding luck to run out of petrol in the middle of nowhere," fumed Bob. "Still, looking on the bright side, the taxi firm promised thirty minutes."

Having spent fifteen years driving around persuading people to buy shit they didn't need, his car was always well stocked for emergencies. He opened the boot, taking out a large rucksack and the suitcase he'd need for his hotel stay. He didn't anticipate needing much from the emergency rucksack, but his radio was broken and he wanted the book he kept in there, and a torch.

It was a still night with no wind, so the rustling of leaves caught his ear. He shut the boot and swept the torch around in the direction of the sound.

"Jesus, that's a big dog," he thought, as the shape disappeared into a small wooded area. "Was it a dog? Of course it was, what else could it be?"

The country lane was pitch black except for his pocket torch and the lights on his car. He listened intently for any further sound before getting back in and engaging the central locking.

He put the torch on the dashboard and tried to read a book but he couldn't concentrate. Something about that dog was bothering him. He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes until the taxi, if their estimate could be believed. He suddenly felt strangely vulnerable sitting in his car; a sitting duck lit up like a Christmas tree. He'd broken down before, of course, but never so far from civilisation.

“Maybe I should get out of the car,” he thought, “better than being trapped.”

What was the matter with him tonight? He'd never felt anxiety like this before. Something was nagging away at the back of his mind and it wouldn't let go.

He tried to figure it out. He didn't have any more appointments till tomorrow. The hotel was only three miles away, he could walk if the taxi didn't show up, it would just be hassle with the suitcase. There was absolutely nothing to worry about. So why was he now glancing nervously in his rear view mirror?

The dog, that was it. There was something about the...

Oh fuck, you've really lost it now, Bob.

He replayed in his mind the sighting of the dog, and his memory told him implicitly and unquestioningly that the dog had a human face.

“That's beyond absurd,” he said aloud, such was his indignation that his own mind had conjured up something so stupid.

To prove to himself that there were no mythical creatures haunting this dreary country lane, he opened his window half way. Within seconds he could hear a faint noise, as if something were scabbling in the road-side dirt.

“Of course there's something out there,” he reasoned, “it'll be a squirrel, a fox, a hedgehog.”

He tried desperately to think of more non-threatening animals as his brain replayed again the fleeting image of the dog with a human face. This time it was even more bizarre and unlikely in appearance.

His attention was drawn to a louder sound: whatever was ferreting around outside was now right next to his open window. Ferrets – were they scary?

He told himself to get a grip and solve this once and for all. Pointing the torch out at where the last sound had come from, he leaned towards the window.

Well, he thought, there it is. Unless I'm dreaming this whole scenario there's no denying what that is. He continued to stare in disbelief at the... well, thing would have to do for now until he could consult David Attenborough.

The thing was indeed the size of a large Alsatian, but there all resemblance to anything resulting from natural selection ended. Its fur was patchy, as if several different animals had been hurriedly sewn together. Its hind legs and tail were more like that of a fox or wolf; its torso was – well, Bob had no clue what that was like, certainly not any animal he'd ever clapped eyes on. It had a small, lion type mane on its neck, large, pointy ears and whiskers. Bob was trying very hard not to look at the teeth/fangs.

And yes, he could now confirm that the facial features were human. He was transported back to his childhood, and H.G. Wells' 'The Island of Dr. Moreau'.

He could not take his eyes from the thing, until it finished washing its face and turned its eyes on him. The facial expression was one of childlike curiosity, as if it was pleased to meet a new friend. But the nonsensical appearance was too much for Bob and he hastily closed the window, leaning back inside the car and away from whatever it was.

As the window was an inch from closing, the thing jumped up at the car, gripping the top of the window with its claws. It yelped as its paws were crushed and let go, falling back to the ground.

Before Bob had time to consider just what the fuck was going on, a movement confused him

momentarily, until he realised that it was the car tilting to the left. It was as if an asthmatic jack were lifting the car's right rear wheel. What the hell was going on?

In a flash he realised that he had to get out of the car in case it tipped over and trapped him inside. That thing was worryingly strong, and it was now bouncing the car, using the suspension to gain greater lift.

He quickly struggled to put on his rucksack, having first removed a Swiss army knife from an outer pocket. He decided to get out on the opposite side to the creature, despite the risk. Disengaging the lock, he flung the door open on a downward bounce and ran in front of the car, staying in the beam of the headlights.

He unfolded the longest blade of the knife, which he noticed was not nearly fucking long enough for his liking.

As he tried to cautiously move to his left to see the creature, it jumped onto the roof and sprang down onto the bonnet. It crouched there, baring its fangs and hissing at him.

An uncomfortable stalemate continued for a minute or so while both creatures silently regarded each other.

The silence was only broken when the thing clearly thought it had the better of Bob and attacked him. It leapt onto the ground and bounded towards him. As it made its final jump towards his throat, Bob thrust the knife with all his strength into whatever part of the thing happened to be nearest at the time.

It emitted a terrible noise, and slumped to the floor like a sack of dough.

Without waiting to see if it was dead, or to retrieve his suitcase, Bob turned and ran for his life.

After what he estimated to be a five minute mile, he slowed to a halt and listened intently. There was no sound and his torch revealed no sign of the thing, or anything else out of the ordinary.

He stuttered to a halt and tried to catch his breath. Now that the fear had dissipated, he realised how exhausted he was and slumped to the ground.

Collecting his thoughts he remembered the taxi. He'd left his lights on and that was what the driver would be looking for. Should he go back or try to find the hotel? He may never find it in the dark with only a small torch. Bollocks.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a light appeared in the distance. As it drew closer it resolved itself into two headlights. Bob almost cried with relief as the taxi stopped beside him.

"You the one who phoned?" asked the driver.

"Yes, I left my car because..." Bob couldn't even begin to explain. "Could we go back and get my suitcase?"

"Of course, sir, no problem."

Bob hoped that the creature, whatever it was, was either dead or had crawled away from the road. He was almost asleep when the taxi braked suddenly and he was jolted into action.

"Don't go out there!" he shrieked as the driver went towards the thing that was lying, howling in the middle of the road.

"Don't worry, sir, he's just hungry."

As Bob was trying to once again work out what the fuck was going on, he almost jumped out of the car as he saw the driver bend down and pat the thing on the head.

"Come on son, your tea's ready."

Bob's mind spun in disbelief as the canine-lupine-child combo shambled into the back seat of the taxi and curled up in a ball.

“Don't worry, sir, he always has a little sleep in the car.”

Half an hour later, the taxi pulled up and the driver and the creature got out.

“You can put that away, Mary,” said the driver as he entered the house, “he's had his tea.”

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ART BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE

Sandra had never had much interest in art until she met Damien. He had thrown every ounce of his award winning charm at her, and she'd fallen for it. The glamour of being in the media spotlight, even vicariously, was too much to resist. At first she had enjoyed watching him building up a canvas, admiring his flair and skill, but all that was long gone now.

As the taxi pulled up to the gallery, she gathered her thoughts and her dress. Damien was preoccupied with a mirror, as usual, arranging and rearranging his hair wax to give the impression that he'd just got out of bed and not done anything with it. Sandra shuddered at the facade she was about to inflict on the world and hoped she'd be able to go through with it long enough to get to the punchline.

Getting out of the cab, she forced herself to hold his hand and smile politely for the flock of paparazzi who descended on them like vultures at a will reading. She smiled and blinked, wondering idly which of the many photos of her they would use tomorrow.

Cautiously fingering the knife in her jacket pocket she smiled to herself. This was going to be fun; naughty, illegal fun, possibly ending up in prison, but nothing more than the prick deserved. To commit this violent act in such a public manner was also engendering it with a surprising amount of added anticipation. Sandra had never thought of herself as a violent person, but then she'd never been so badly betrayed by such an annoying, pretentious dick head as Damien.

She thought about the last time they had engaged in a frenetic public display. That time only three weeks ago when he'd slobbered all over her for the cameras, the perfect portrayal of the glamorous couple, the perfect piece of performance art, the perfect lie. The cameras never saw the aftermath – Damien snorting coke off the breasts of a nineteen year old art student while he thought Sandra was asleep in the next room.

Nobody knew about that yet. Nobody knew anything. The poor student had been so out of her tiny mind and now even tinier nose that she didn't even remember the disgusting things he did to her, in her, on her.

Nobody knew about all the other things Sandra had discovered from the private detective she'd paid to follow him for a week.

Nobody knew.

Except of course the two people at the News of the World she'd sold the exclusive story and photos to three days ago. They were holding back, more than Damien had ever managed, until the day after the exhibition on Sandra's insistence. A hideously delicious scandal published the day

after the public humiliation of Britain's leading young artist at his very own exhibition was too much to resist. The fact that they had been given two dozen highly graphic photos of a completely naked, nubile, pretty young art student was just the sort of trouser-bulging prospect tabloid journalists simply had to learn to live with.

Anyone less self-absorbed and coke-addled than Damien would have noticed her distance over the last three weeks, but Sandra was confident that he didn't have a clue as to the fate that was about to befall him. She felt the knife again and half opened the zip on her jacket pocket for easy, quick access to the weapon of her revenge.

The time was drawing near, and so was the end for Damien and his sham of a career, his sham of a putrid, repulsive life. This poor girl hadn't been the first, Sandra knew that; the same inexplicable powerlessness that befalls so many women had landed on Sandra and, for reasons she still couldn't understand, she'd stuck with Damien through all his coke hazes and drink binges, his not-so-secret affairs, the orgies, the prostitutes, anything he could get his hands or his dick on. However, Sandra knew, with a finality that sadly gave her little pleasure, that she would be the last. The final act in a career and a life that would doubtless continue to fascinate the prurient and the simple minded for decades to come.

Sandra briefly wondered who would play her in the film that some unfeeling bastard would one day doubtless make of today's events.

She was woken from her melancholic reverie by a limp-wristed clapping of hands. That meant the gallery owner was about to make his speech.

Sandra switched off for most of it, as she'd been switched off from reality for most of the last three weeks.

All too soon it was time for her and Damien, arm in lying, cheating arm, to approach the, she could hardly bring herself to even think the word, masterpiece.

Being the egotist he was, Damien of course unveiled the painting himself. It had already been bought by a Japanese collector for nearly two million pounds and he had promised Sandra a luxury cruise on the proceeds but she now knew that his promises were emptier than his prodigious testicles.

She waited for what she adjudged to be the right amount of time – fifteen seconds – before producing the knife and slashing the painting to pieces. Strangely enough everyone present was so surprised at her actions that nobody thought to try and stop her. Some undoubtedly thought it was a piece of performance art.

Even when she then calmly unzipped her other jacket pocket and pulled out the gun, nobody tried to stop her, so she had no problems at all in shooting Damien in the head, his brains and blood spraying themselves over the slashed canvas. It would undoubtedly sell for twenty million now.

Sandra put the gun down on the floor and waited for somebody to say something.

MICHAEL AND THE BOSS

The lift seemed to take an age – an ice age. In some ways this was a welcome illusion: curious as I was to ascertain the reason behind this unexpected summons, I was equally as fearful and keen to delay it as long as possible. In the eighteen months I'd worked for the company nothing like this had ever happened to me. To be honest, I was beginning to wonder if any of the supervisors had even noticed my existence.

Nothing about the manner in which I'd been summoned gave any indication as to the reason my presence was required this morning.

I straightened by tie, checked my flies, adjusted my cuffs, took a deep breath and knocked on the door. I'd never been summoned to the seventeenth floor before and it could only mean very good or very bad news. It wasn't my boss I was meeting, it was the boss, the head of international operations. He had a mysterious reputation: most employees never met him and he was considered a recluse. Even his first name was a mystery.

I had no idea what the offices were like up here but it's safe to say I wasn't expecting the site that greeted me when I was eventually ushered in.

The room was in darkness, lit only by the muted daylight forcing its way in through the windows that occupied the whole of the far wall.

Standing at the window with his back to me, looking out over the city landscape, was a man bathed in shadow. He appeared to have his arms folded but I couldn't be sure – the room was enormous and I was at least 60 feet away from him.

“Take a seat,” said the boss. He spoke so softly I would have missed it completely had I not been concentrating so keenly.

I looked helplessly around. The room took up about half of this floor so it was at at least 300 feet wide. There were no tables or desks, no filing cabinets or computers, no office equipment of any kind, no kettle, nothing on the walls, not even any carpet. The only non human object in the room was a small plastic chair of the sort we had in infants school. It had been placed, rather too deliberately for my liking, in the very epicentre of the room. As I as gingerly and noiselessly as possible sat down I couldn't help looking up at the ceiling to see if there was a Monty Python style 15 tonne weight suspended from it. I felt like a cow in an abattoir who's just worked out what the big cross bow thing is for.

I nervously crossed my legs, causing the impracticably lightweight chair to scrape about two feet across the floor. In the ominous silence it sounded like a combine harvester scraping down a blackboard.

“Sorry,” I muttered, so quietly I'm not sure he even heard me. I was about to repeat myself more loudly but then it occurred to me that that would seem weak and I really didn't need to give of that impression any more than I already was.

After a while I realised that it was now about two minutes since he had told me to take a seat and that, thunderous chair scraping aside, nothing further had happened. My throat felt dry and I wanted to cough but that would have sounded like a jet engine coughing in this place.

“Do you like snooker?” he suddenly asked.

“What the fuck?” I said, thankfully to myself. Was this some sort of corporate mind game? Or

worse still, was 'liking snooker' some sort of public school euphemism? I tried very hard not to think about all the possible ramifications of a pink nudging into a brown.

I became grotesquely aware of myself not replying. On balance I considered it far more likely that the boss had a liking for snooker rather than a disliking as he had introduced the subject so I went for it.

“Yes, I quite like it.”

Name a player, I thought, and not an obvious one. Come on, I thought, I've seen it on the telly often enough, name any player outside the top six.

“I like Stephen Lee,” I blurted out. Okay, he may have been a top six player a few years ago but that should get me some sort of kudos if the boss likes snooker. Of course, if he hates it then I've fallen into his trap, whatever a trap that was baited with pretending-to-like-snooker could possible involve.

He swung around suddenly to face me.

“He should have won a world title ten years ago,” he said.

“Yes, he should,” I agreed.

More uncomfortable silence followed.

“Michael,” he said, almost imperceptibly.

I waited for the rest of the sentence for twenty seconds, but nothing materialised.

“Yes?” I squeaked pathetically. This was the corporate equivalent of water-boarding – I noticed with horror that I was wearing an orange shirt. I began to tremble uncontrollably. This wasn't why I went into insurance. My mother was right, I should have become an estate agent.

“Michael, I have some bad news...”

WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

"Travelling overland to Morocco... would be infinitely preferable to this," thought Peter as he squatted over the public urinal in Newport town centre. Others thought his personal standards had dropped alarmingly, but this was one task he just couldn't give up.

"What I wouldn't give for a pair of rubber gloves," he muttered, extracting another cigarette butt from the urinal. His knees ached from sustaining the crouch and he felt an overwhelming urge to run through a field of wheat with Bamber Gasgoine. He gritted his teeth, before putting them back in his mouth and refocusing his attention on the task before him.

It was a hot, sticky afternoon, like elbows congealing in a frying pan, and the job was made more arduous by the stench which assailed his nostrils like an Australian with a cricket bat. A carefully arranged copy of 'Caravanning Bi-Annually For Bi-Sexuals' now contained three sodden dog-ends - one more would be enough. He applied himself anew with a vigour normally found only among thirty year old Polish virgins.

"I hope I never see another toilet as long as I live," he thought, before realising that this would make life rather difficult, not to say...

Eventually he had the toilet requisittttt. With more care than a nun drowning gerbils, he let them fall into a polythene bag and sealed it against further contamination, tampering or communist subterfuge.

Emerging blinkingly and sarcastically into the vibrant sunshine, Peter Talbot took in a lungful of air - his other lung was busy with the crossword.

"All done, sir?" inquired Sergeant Johnson.

Inspector Talbot nodded.

They headed off in search of their unmarked car as a junior officer pulled up his trousers and removed the barrier of police tape that had prevented members of the public from entering the convenience and interrupting Talbot's work by pissing on his head.

They crossed the road, which was futile as the road wasn't catholic, and got into the car. Inspector Talbot held up the polythene bag for inspection. Turning on the heater full blast he dried out the contents. In the unrelenting heat, Johnson fanned himself with a small orphan.

Talbot reached into his inside pocket and produced a packet of rizzlas. Johnson watched with his usual level of distaste as his superior dug the tobacco from the dog-ends with a match and began to roll up. Opening the sunroof, he lit the urine flavoured cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"Right, now we'll go and investigate that murder."

Johnson sighed with relief and replaced the orphan in the glove compartment. As he accelerated away the car was filled with the smell of burning urine. Talbot coughed, spraying the windscreen with phlegm. Johnson turned on the wipers but they made no difference.

"Stop at the station on the way," said Talbot, "there's something I have to do first."

Talbot sat at his desk picking his teeth. He reached for the phone and dialled.

"Hello, can you deliver today? Good." he looked down at the brochure on his desk. "Yes, I'll have one molar and three incisors."

He hung up and smiled. Tomorrow he would pick his nose, providing the new brochure from

California had arrived. He opened a desk drawer and stroked his beard - it purred gently. He dropped in some food and a fresh batch of straw and closed the drawer.

Glancing up at the ceiling, he wondered why flies always went around light bulbs in a triangular flight path.

"Can't you see it's round, you've got enough eyes," he shouted at the geometrically challenged insect. "What can they be teaching them in borstal these days?"

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts as surely as Sian Lloyd always tells us it's going to rain.

"Come in."

"I'm sorry, sir, it's this murder," said Johnson.

"Another!" exclaimed Talbot. "How many's that now?"

"One."

"One! And it's only November - damn this hell-hole of a town!"

"It's July, sir."

"Never mind that, what about this murder?"

"It's a man. He's been blinded, decapitated, set on fire, harpooned and eviscerated. Probably a domestic."

"Well done, Sergeant, we'll make a Constable of you yet. Come and help me tie my shoelaces."

"I can't, the door won't open."

"Use the handle."

Johnson opened the door.

"That was fun, I'll do that next time. Are you ready?"

"In a minute, I've got to hear the results."

He switched on the radio.

And as they approach the finish line it's Nicholas Parson's Indigestion Remedy in the lead having just overtaken a horse. Not far behind in this congested smorgasbord of horses are Where Have All The Flowers Gone, Cartesian Dualism, Newton's Gay Laboratory Assistant, Frozen Caravan Gas Bottle, Peter Mandelson's Lucky Moustache Comb and Portuguese Arse paper. Labour Election Promise was, of course, a non-starter.

Talbot switched off the radio.

"Any luck, sir?"

"No," he sighed, "my money was on Ronnie O'Sullivan."

"So, what was the cause of death?"

Johnson looked down at the man lying on the living room carpet, the samurai swords still in embedded in his legs and the pneumatic drill in his back.

"Hard to say, he could have tripped over a rug."

"Right, I'm going upstairs."

"Why, sir, forensic have already done the whole house?"

"I know, I just want to get away from this fucking corpse."

He left the room and ascended the stairs fourteen at a time.

"This sort of case chills me to the core of my apple," he muttered.

After a difficult few minutes wedged in the airing cupboard, Talbot finally found the toilet. "That's a relief," he sighed, taking out his tobacco.

Ten minutes later, Johnson handcuffed the dead man's wife and lead her out of the front door.

"But how did you know it was me?" she asked.

"Well," said Johnson, "if I go into the whole exposition routine then this will cease to be a short story, won't it?"

He lead her down the path, nodding to Talbot who was leaning on the gate post smoking a cigarette.

"Jesus," said the woman, "what's that smell?"

LIKE FATHER

"Piss off mum, I'm thirteen not three." I slammed the door in her face and returned to my laptop. School's for gypos and mental cases.

Lighting another spliff, I logged onto Facebook. The best thing about finding out last year that I had a half-brother was that he can get proper strong dope really cheap - and he got me this Mac book for forty quid. Gettin' phones and money and shit off people is piss easy but you gotta be clever to get someone's laptop without them seein' you. Unless you get a gun and that's too much hassle. Look at all the trouble dad got for shootin' those people; I ain't doin' time, no way.

"Tea's ready, come and eat your greens."

"I'm not eating no veg, mum. I've had fruit pastels, some of them's green."

"Wait till Trevor gets home."

"Fuck him, he ain't my real dad. He touches me I'll call the pigs."

Ha, Smithy's goin' to see Take That tonight - what a twat!

What's Phil up to? New tattoo, cool.

And what about Jenny? Lying bitch, I never done that.

New message.

What the fuck? Who's that from? I don't know them. An anonymous tip off? Surely it can't be true.

Then I seen it. The post from a few hours ago. The photo of my dad standing outside the prison gates giving the thumbs up. That parole board must have been more gullible than Tracey Watkins. I wonder if mum knows, she hasn't said? I 'spose he'll come here eventually. I wonder if he'll bring me a decent present?

'Course he doesn't know me at all now. I didn't have dreads and a wicked diamond studded earring when I was two. He never got me nothing.

What do you want Trev? And don't ever come in without knocking again you dirty perv.

"Turn that racket down, please."

"It's not a racket, it's Public Enemy - I'm doin' you a favour and bringin' you the noize."

"We've just had a call from the police. Your father has been released."

“Yeah, I know, so what?”

“So we'd better leave in case he shows up here.”

“Don't be such a wimp.” I reached into my school bag and took out my best knife. “If he kicks off I'll just cut him a bit, no worries.”

“Margaret, what's all that commotion?”

Oh good, cardigan man has fucked off.

“Oi, who the... oh, hello, dad.”

INTO THE CAVE

I was the first to pass the test and go through the cave entrance, the rest of our party were held up. The interior of the cave was dimly lit and there appeared to be a few indigenous occupants. In the corner was a rectangular structure covered in thin grass with 6 holes around the edge and some small, multicoloured spherical objects roaming around on the surface. Some natives were gathered around it and pointing at a small pile of flat, shiny, silver objects on the edge of the rectangle. This appeared to be part of some primitive ritual.

I threaded my way through, careful not to disturb the ritual or brush against any of the plumage emanating from some of the natives; some form of local head dress no doubt.

I handed over three gold coins to a highway robber in exchange for a beaker of black liquid and found a space on the ledge next to the cave wall. Subterranean as it was, I still wasn't expecting quite so much liquid to be running down the walls of the cave; it made the distinct lack of oxygen even more pronounced.

After several days waiting for my companions, I was forced to remove myself to small, even damper, sub-cave for three quarters of a minute to perform a necessary biological function. Upon my return to the ledge I found my section now mysteriously occupied by an unknown party of orange-faced creatures who really didn't belong in this type of cave. One of them was sitting on my jacket, the ignorant bitch.

I retrieved my jacket and tied it around my waist, for to wear it around my torso would mean instant death from heat exhaustion. Eventually, after parting with a distressingly large number of further gold coins for very little psycho pharmacological benefit, my companions arrived. Three of them were suitably short for such an environment, but one was far too tall and in danger of decapitation from the roof of the cave. I had to force a path through the natives to allow the short ones access to the rear of the cave.

By this time conversation among the increasingly restless natives was becoming almost impossible, so we retreated to the far end of the cave near a small passageway that provided the only clear air in the place, along with a mysterious door that promised so much freedom yet failed to deliver. It's function appeared to be for the extinguishing of miniature fire sticks which some of the locals had brought with them to the cave, even though using them in the cave was strictly forbidden.

One of my companions was clearly also restless and spent much of her time bouncing off the

walls and running around in circles like a caged animal. Bearing in mind the aquatic nature of our surroundings, she was clearly the wisest of us she had arrived equipped with a fishing net.

The air in the main cave was quickly becoming unbreathable so we all moved into the small corridor which seemed to function as an airlock in conjunction with the magic door that, although underground, appeared to nevertheless lead into the outside world and its precious fresh air.

Some of my companions succumbed to heat exhaustion and left the cave to forage for food, leaving only three of us. My two companions vanished near the magic door so I was alone. Luckily I found myself in the company of two non-indigenous cave dwellers who also remembered a much better, drier cave I used to frequent in a previous century, where a single gold coin was enough to quench a thirst and there were no orange creatures to crush your jacket. Both of these new people had pleasant frontal protuberances on the upper halves of their bodies. I had encountered these before in a previous decade but could not fully remember their purpose.

One of these new people was very animated in conversation and constantly moved her frontal protuberances in my direction, squashing them against the upper half of my body in a manner which ignited distant memories of long ago nights spent in a series of much smaller caves. Although I was sure I had interpreted the meaning of this exchange correctly, nonetheless my courage failed me and I did not reciprocate towards the creature by squashing any of my protuberances against her body as I think was her intention.

Thus it was that I left the cave shortly afterwards with my 2 original companions but not with any new acquaintance. On the way home, after parting with my companions and therefore being defenceless, I was attacked by a ferocious little pig but the fucker will live to regret that when my complaint to the I.P.C.C. lands on his desk.

GOING HOME

The constant droning of Radio Two continued to burrow into his brain like cancer. In a way radio Two was cancer, for Norman at least. Not that there is anything harmful about Radio Two per se; most of its listeners can stomach the output and not be reduced to housebound hypochondriacs but Norman was the exception. Norman Braithwaite had given up on life and retreated into a world populated entirely by the comforting blandness of his chosen radio station.

The radio continued to blather its output into his ears. The single speaker seemed to almost take pleasure in inflicting the sound upon him - a sadistic pleasure, built on the knowledge that Norman Braithwaite had nothing else in his life. Of course, the speaker did no such thing - it was an inanimate piece of machinery, incapable of objective reasoning. To suggest that it had thoughts, ideas, feelings would be to commit an absurd act of anthropomorphism - almost as absurd as suggesting that the forces of nature are the result of a cosmic deity with human characteristics.

Norman Braithwaite believed in God. Not even a very well defined God, merely the watered-down, innocuous version of God that people accept when they lack the intellectual stamina to make even a cursory examination of a specific religion or philosophy, but feel nonetheless that they ought to believe in something. His pseudo-beliefs enabled him to abdicate his personal

responsibility for his own life - but that's the function of all beliefs.

His soul-destroying peace was broken by the sound of the ancient telephone ringing in the hallway. Eleven rings later, the arthritic old man had managed to ease himself into the hard-backed chair that sat beside the hard-backed book that sat beside the phone.

"Hello, Burnley four... seven...?"

Clare interrupted before he tried to read the entire number from the card in the centre of the plastic dial via his 1968 spectacles.

"Hello, Dad," she said, clenching her hand tightly around the receiver, and her teeth tightly around each other, "how are you?"

"Oh, you know, can't complain - well, no-one to listen last three years. I 'ad to take my legs t' doctor yesterday."

"Again!" Clare desperately tried and failed to subdue the incredulity and impatience in her voice. "What's the matter this time?" She sighed heavily in anticipation of an answer.

"Oh, they didn't find 'owt, but they're all stiff and it's not right is that."

Clare hurriedly got a word in edge ways, before he started listing all his other symptoms. A train slid noisily into the platform behind her, and she felt a momentary yet strong urge to curl up in ' front of it and go to sleep.

"Anyway, I'm on Euston station now, I should be home about tea time." She was trying so hard to end the conversation but Norman, in his usual fashion, carried on regardless:

"I don't suppose I'll get to meet this boyfriend of yours?"

"No, you won't!" she replied, unable to prevent herself from mimicking his sarcastic inflexions.

"And why not?" he continued, attacking her like a five year old full of sugar and E-numbers.

"You now why, because you'll only make snide comments about his hair or something."

"Why, what's wrong with his hair, got a poofers perm has he?"

"No," she said, seething audibly, "it just happens to be quite long."

"I see." he paused, just long enough for Clare to think he'd let the matter rest, before adding, "Don't they have barbers in London?"

"Yes!!"

"I blame the Dutch, they started this long hair business. They've even got his type round 'ere now. Mind you, you can't get a decent bloody 'aircut in Burnley for love nor money these days - go in t'barbers and ask for a razor cut, they look at yer stupid like."

"Jesus!" muttered Clare.

"So," Norman thundered on, oblivious, "this bloke of yours, I suppose he's from somewhere fancy in London?"

"No, dad - actually he's from Rottenstawl."

"Pah!" exploded Norman. "Bloody southerners!"

Clare bit her lip and drew blood.

"I mean," her father continued remorselessly, "I don't see why you had to leave Burnley..."

"... in t' first place!" she chimed in synchronously, using the opportunity to ruthlessly mimic his anachronistic pronunciation.

"And you've started talkin' posh."

"No I haven't!" Clare was by now so exasperated, her teeth were in danger of filing each other

down to the gums.

"I've never felt the need to abandon my roots."

"Yes, dad, I'm painfully aware that you've never ventured out of North Lancashire in your whole life."

Norman sniffed sarcastically. "And what can you 'ave in London you can't 'ave in Burnley?"

Clare's soul was screaming in pain and frustration. She closed her eyes momentarily but was disturbed by the image of an Italian man beckoning her towards a door which bore a sign saying "Second Circle this way'.

"A decent degree, a life." she finally replied.

"I've got a life!" he retorted, rather too quickly and indignantly, leaving Clare with an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She glanced hopefully at the telephone's small LCD panel, inviting it to rescue her. Shit! -sixty three pence left.

"Oh, got to go, my money's running out. I'll see you later."

"Ay, alright, I'll put kettle on."

"Bye, dad."

"Ay, 'appen you're right."

Clare waited for her father to replace his receiver before she slammed hers against the wall of the kiosk four times in a vain effort to vent her tension and anger. It didn't make her feel better, but it did succeed in reducing the receiver to a tangled mess of wires and splintered plastic.

"I don't know," Norman said to himself, pottering back into the living room, "three years in London. I bet you can't get a penneth 'o peas down there. Mind you, even round 'ere it's fifty pence worth 'o peas in chippy nowadays. Ay, it were a grim day when we went decimal. I blame Ted Heath."

His slippers padded over to the adjoining kitchen. Norman had had a doorway knocked through to save him the gargantuan effort of walking the extra fifteen feet through the hallway ("Well, it's not easy getting about at my age" he had told the unsympathetic builders, endlessly).

"Haven't got a life?" he said, filling the kettle. "Bloody cheek! A decent brew and Radio Two, what more could you ask for? Okay, I might not get out much, but I'm getting on now, Right, let's look in Radio Times."

His slippers conducted the same arthritic shuffling motion back into the living room, and deadened fingers fumbled with the magazine, apparently finding page-turning an unutterably difficult task.

"Ay, much as I suspected, nowt decent on in t'afternoon. Thank 'eavans for Radio Two. Even that blasted video recording machine she left when she bugged off to join southerners tuned out to be a blessin' in disguise. At least I don't 'ave to watch all modern garbage on t'television - soap operas, wouldn't give 'em house room! I blame Lord Reith."

His reverie was interrupted by the whistle of his Cro-Magnon kettle.

"Ay, appen I'll 'ave a nice pot o tea and a couple 'o jam scones and settle in front of a decent film, no modern tripe."

As the gas was turned off and the china clinked and clattered, Norman continued his interior monologue of abject, unacknowledged loneliness.

He'd always had a habit of talking to himself, but Clare's departure had brought on many physiological symptoms, one of which was his almost perpetual interior monologues. It wasn't so much that he was lonely, which he was (but then he was always lonely, even in company) but rather that he couldn't stand the silence of an empty house. That was why he always had Radio Two on (he even left his bedside radio on quietly all night, so he would wake up with some company), because silence reminded him. It reminded him that he'd lost his wife ten years previously - now it also reminded him that he'd lost his daughter; she wasn't dead, of course, but she might as well be, he often told himself.

Three years and not one visit, not even Christmas. She told him it was the cost of the train fair, but he knew: although Norman Braithwaite was not a great thinker, and as socially inept as they come, he could read his daughter well enough to know, deep down, that she just didn't want to spend any time at all in his company. What he was intellectually and emotionally incapable of understanding were the reasons why. He just thought she was like "the younger generation", "no respect for elders", and all the other vapid, archaic cliches that had long ago lodged themselves un-movingly into his skull.

His ideas hadn't developed since childhood, and thus he had the attitudes and prejudices of a long gone, post-war generation. There are very few people for whom forty years of monumental social progress and upheaval can simply pass them by. The suffocation that Clare had felt, growing up without brothers or sisters - after eleven years of age, without a mother - the mind numbing, hair tearing, catatonia inducing boredom of having to survive with only her father for company; the arse-clenching frustration of sharing a house with such a dull reactionary bigot, someone completely useless as a figure of either guidance or authority; it choked her soul almost out of existence.

His life had been over even before his wife died and his daughter escaped - he had never had a life to begin with. Hobbies and fun were anathema to him - he did nothing except avoid life. With all the gifted and potentially gifted people who die young, Norman's continued existence was a fly in the face and a kick in the bollocks of Natural Selection; he had done his life's work by propagating his genes (and that certainly wouldn't be happening again!), he should just curl up and die. Despite his imaginary arthritis, and all his other self-induced ailments, the bent up, brown slippered, psychosomatically defeated figure of Norman Braithwaite would continue to be a drain on the world's resources, and on the mental health of his daughter, for several years to come - he was fifty three years old.

The train chugged on, dragging Clare inexorably closer to hell. Home is where the hell is. She'd tried to sleep but was troubled by images of a three headed dog and an underground river. She therefore started a conversation with the nearest available person, and was currently venting her spleen in no uncertain terms, as the recipient of her tirade shifted uncomfortably.

"He goes to the doctor so often he's got his own chair in the waiting room."

"Really?" asked the man rhetorically, but with little hope.

"Oh yes! In huge letters on the back like he's Steven Spielberg! It's a very unsubtle hint that they want him to piss off, but he's just so... no stupid, he just doesn't get it. He doesn't get a lot of things. It's so annoying - he doesn't mean to be such a pig head, and he doesn't realise the effect he has on

people. He just can't see anyone else's point of view, they're all in some parallel dimension; he never understood, and still doesn't understand why I wanted to go to London. 'What's wrong with the Bolton Institute of Technology? Why do you have to go to London, everyone smoking ecstasy and drinking acid'. It's impossible to have a conversation with him, he just never listens. I still haven't worked out how I'm going to tell him by big news - that I've got a job in London and I'm leaving for good in six weeks time. I just had to go back and tell him in person, he'd have probably feigned a heart attack if I'd told him over the phone; he'd do anything to get me back up there. And he acts so old all the time, you'd swear he was ninety not fifty three! He's just given up on life. Well, I'm buggered if I'm giving up!"

The man cleared his throat to interrupt her diatribe: "Anyway, can I see your ticket, please?"

"Yes, here you are."

"Thank you." he clipped the ticket hastily, almost shoving it back in her hand. "Change at Preston."

"And he always blames anyone but himself; even on the rare occasions that it gets through his thick skin that he is wrong!"

"Really," said the guard, advancing rapidly down the carriage and ignoring other passengers waving their tickets at thin air, "that's terrible. Jesus!!!"

He locked himself in the toilet until the train was the other side of Preston.

Norman hummed tunelessly along with the last few bars of the song, before giving way politely to an announcer's voice. Outside his house, where he only ventured for food, medical advice or lottery tickets, the rain pelted his windows like a vindictive D.I.Y. enthusiast.

"That was the Everley brother's bringing us to the end of another edition of Mindless Rocking Chair Classics on Radio Two - it's five o'clock."

Norman turned off the transistor radio, as if he thought that his daughter would want to talk to him when she arrived, and began an uncharacteristically brisk pacing of the room. He often paced the floor of his living room ("Only exercise I can manage these days"), but this was different.

"Five o'clock, she'll be here soon. What she's doing taking up with a bloke at 'er age I can't imagine, I've told her I don't know how many times she's better off staying at home with me. Kids today think they're an adult at twenty one - they should never have lowered the voting age, I blame Harold Wilson! Still, at least she's back for good now... it has been a bit lonely without her, going to doctors is only conversation I get these days. I don't know how much longer I'd have been able to live on my own, I might have a bad fall or something - be lying dead on floor for weeks. Wouldn't like anyone to find me like that, I'd be so embarrassed. Ay, I wonder what her this lad'll do up 'ere with their fancy degrees - he should have done an apprenticeship, and, well, I don't know why they bother educating girls, there's plenty of shop work about. I don't suppose her bloody English degree taught her how to work a cash register - still, I've cut a few job adverts from paper for 'er. When I were a lad we didn't ponce about being students, you left school at fourteen and went down 'pit - when there were pits, before bloody communists closed em all; I blame Scargill. Ay, in them days we never..."

The doorbell rang.

Not in itself a monumental event, but its consequences for Norman... well, who knew?

He shuffled faster than usual to the front door. The chain was pulled back, rusty, statesman-like bolts moved, and the door was finally opened.

There was complete silence for four seconds.

"Hello, dad, have you lost your voice?"

"Bloody 'el."

"...what?" Of all the contingency plans she's spent months formulating, this wasn't in any of them.

"Bloody 'el, is that you Clare?"

"Of course it's me, who do you think I am, one of the Spice Girls?"

"The who girls? Clare, I hardly recognise you. What have you done to yourself?"

"Well, three years is a long time at my age." She cursed herself instantly, that was one of his expressions. Heredity was a four letter word for Clare.

"Your hair's a different colour! What happened to it, is it the pollution?"

"No, dad, it's called Henna."

"What's that?"

"It's something you put in your hair."

"Oh... you did it deliberately!?"

Clare heaved a sigh as you would heave a corpse into the boot of a Volvo. "Are you going to invite me in, I'm getting soaked out here?"

"Ay, I suppose you'd better come in."

She muttered under her breath: "Thanks a bunch - well, that's really made me feel good. Welcome fucking home!"

Twenty minutes later, Clare had dumped her bags in her old room. While her father flapped around in the kitchen, she was, despite her pathological loathing of his ways and mannerisms, pacing furiously up and down the living room and conducting an interior monologue.

"God, he hasn't changed - not one iota of progress in three years. I'm a different person now, and he hasn't even so much as moved any furniture round. Or the photographs."

She paused by the nauseatingly old-fashioned fireplace.

"A signed, framed photo of Lonnie Donnegan. Pride of place above the fire. Has he changed the family photos - no, what a surprise; still the horrible ten year old one of me. All pigtails and braces, dad's ideal image of me, before I grew up and started having a mind of my own. Yet another example of being stuck in the bloody past - being eleven seems, I don't know, unreal. I can't believe I ever was that person." She paused pregnantly. "Hello, mum. He hasn't changed your photo of course -we should have buried that one with you and cremated the negatives. It was four months before you died I think, the last time you could go out - he even took away your last chance to really enjoy yourself. Fancy taking your dying wife to a stupid fifties nostalgia I've got no life' evening - remember what he said to you: 'You can wear one of those wigs'; I've never forgiven him for that. 'Well, Clare, they might think she's one of those AIDS people, I don't want folk thinking we're that sort.' I'm glad I was mature enough not to run and tell you what he said, and you never found out. That's his favourite image of you, you know, so I had to see it every day for eight years. It's partly the reason I went to Uni, it was sort of symbolic of everything I'd lost... and a reminder of what I was left with. I just couldn't stand the atmosphere of this room any more I didn't want to

do a degree - I mean, what use is my English Degree going to be, I can teach English or do another course. Shit, mum! - I've spent the last ten years trying not to be like him. I think now I've finally succeeded. He still keeps that damn school photo of me, it's from when you were alive and we were all a happy family... hmph! - you were as bored by him as I was. He's in for a bit of a shock - as of next month, photos is all he'll have left of any of us. It never was... shit, here he comes. Bye, mum." She sniffed and took a deep breath. "Right; let battle commence."

Norman opened the door, and shuffled arthritically over to the coffee table. Curiously, his legs seemed to have developed new degrees of pain and immobility in the twenty five minutes since her arrival.

"Here we are." he said, stating the mindfuckinglyobvious for the billionth time in his life. "Aha, looking at the photographs."

Oh shit! "Yes, dad." she said quickly. "Is that a chocolate..."

To be fair, she never had a chance in hell. She never had a chance of diverting her father from this, and hell is absolutely where she was.

"Isn't that a nice photograph of you, Clare?"

"Yes very nice." She clenched her teeth; she even clenched her mind.

"It's a pity you had to grow up."

Alert!!! Interior monologue imminent!!!

"Jesus Christ! He's still trotting out the same old shit. The way he potters around and his bloody clothes you'd swear he was my grandfather. Hang on, I'm talking to myself again. Mind you, talking to yourself is the least frustrating conversation you get round here - no wonder I'm so introspective, he makes me want to crawl into the corner in a foetal position and I haven't been back half an hour. Oh now, he's talking to me. Is it worth listening? I've heard everything he has to say a thousand times. Oh God!!! Roll on bed time!"

As he poured the tea, Clare mimicked in her own head his next sentence, in micro-second perfect synchronicity: "Ay, you can't go wrong with a nice cup of tea."

The effort of restraining herself from jumping out of the window was so intense that her hands were starting to shake so she put them under her thighs and pressed down with all her weight. Her thighs began to shake.

"Am I really going to have to listen to this liturgy of patheticness all over again. Oh no, he's gone to draw the curtains - no, please! The single most annoying thing he can ever say..."

"The nights are drawing in."

In Clare's mouth, a scream was stifled just in time, and a small chip of enamel fell away from a tooth. "Every year he says the same thing, every day for six weeks - of course the nights are drawing in it's October, that's what nights do when it's winter! Can't you remember saying it to me every year since I was born! Where's your memory, are you a goldfish! Shit, I'm letting him get to me - calm down."

Alert!!! Conversation approaching!!!

"Why did you leave, Clare?"

"That was a non sequ... do we have to go through..."

"Don't you have a sense of loyalty to Burnley?"

She gazed incredulously up at the ceiling. Anywhere but at him. "No, why the hell should I?"

"You were born and brought up ere."

"So what? Doesn't mean I owe it anything, what's Burnley ever done for me?"

"It's made you what you are today."

"It certainly hasn't! Three years in London made me what I am today, Burnley made me a miserable, self-deprecating eighteen year old with no future!"

"Then why did you bother coming back?"

Clare floundered momentarily.

"I couldn't tell you..." she faltered.

"What?"

"...I couldn't tell you, offhand."

"No, you younguns don't know much do you, despite your fancy degrees?"

"Will you stop referring to anything you don't understand as fancy! You've no idea what a degree involves, have you? It's about broadening your intellectual horizons, your social experience, your thought processes, igniting your ambitions, enriching your life.."

"And what use is all that for a girl?"

"Clare's mind almost achieved Nuclear fusion.

"What!?" she screamed quietly, a stilted scream through grinding teeth.

"What use is intellectual development to you, it's no good for raising a family, is it?"

"Do you honestly believe all that shit?!"

"I'll thank you not to use obscene language in my house, and what do you mean?"

"I mean all these opinions from fifty years ago that you constantly spout as if they're not offensive."

Norman was genuinely puzzled, the poor old bastard: "What do you mean offensive?"

"You really don't get it, do you, you actually believe all this rubbish." She got up and stormed her way to the door.

"I'm going for a walk!"

"But it's still raining, you'll catch your death!" Going outside in the rain without an all-in one thermonuclear garment was an inconceivable folly to him.

For the first time in twenty one years, she looked her father in the eye and held his gaze for a few seconds, before launching a piercing scream at him: "That would be a blessing!!!"

She walked along kicking at the puddles and looked up to the sky, inviting the rain to wash away the first eighteen years of her life.

Trudging onwards relentlessly Clare Braithwaite contemplated the next six weeks.

"No way," she grimaced to herself, "no fucking way am I putting up with this any longer."

She accelerated up to a high speed trudge and resolved, in a glorious moment of will and with an existential shiver, to tell her father the very instant she got back that was leaving in the morning. She would ring her boyfriend and stay with him; she'd visited his parents often enough, they'd love to have her there for a few weeks. As ever, no danger of bumping into her father - he'd never venture as far as Rottenstawl, even with a team of huskies and an oxygen mask.

"It's no good." she muttered, "It just has to be done like this. He'll never change, and I have. I've tried my hardest and put up with him for years longer than I can stand, the only thing to do is just cut him out of my life completely. There: simple! No guilt, no problem - no going back."

She paused at the door of the pub. She'd have to get wrecked before telling him though, obviously, as he was bound to kick up such a fuss.

And into the pub she went, taking the biggest step towards her new life; an adult life.

She'd lost one parent, now all she had to do was lose the other one.

BUDGET

The House of Commons, June 7th 2093

The Chancellor waited patiently for the booing to subside.

“In view of these latest pollution statistics from the National Institute for Pollution Statistics, or N.I.P.S. for short, it has been decided by the European Agency for Common Medical Assessment and Implementation of Fiscal and Clinical Practise Regulations and Associated Teaching, or E.A.C.M.A.I.F.C.P.R.A.T. for short, that all residents of mainland Britain living more than five miles from the coast now have one hundred percent risk of respiratory failure should they spend more than ten minutes a day out of doors.

“As a result the government is making available, from tomorrow, one portable oxygen unit, or P.O. for short, per registered UK tax payer, which can extend time outdoors to a maximum of four hours per day. These portable units will be refilled at Centralised Unit Nitration Tanks, or Centres for short, which will be located in convenient high street locations.

“The cost of maintaining and staffing these centres will of course have to be met by the taxpayer.”

The Chancellor waited patiently for the booing to subside.

“The weekly cost to the end user of refilling their unit will be a very reasonable two hundred and twenty five pounds per week, a mere third of the current minimum wage.”

The Chancellor waited patiently for the booing to subside.

“I give way to my opposite number.”

The shadow chancellor rose and fixed the opposition front bench with a crimson glare.

“Could the right-honourable...” The Shadow Chancellor waited patiently for the booing to subside. “...could he confirm that the treasury is charging V.A.T. on this refilling operation?”

“I can confirm that, in line with V.A.T. on all other utilities, the refilling process will be charged V.A.T. at the standard forty three percent.”

The Shadow Chancellor leapt from his seat.

“So this government is introducing an air tax of £96.75 per person per week?!”

The Chancellor waited patiently for the booing to subside.

TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE GRAVY

Jo sighed inwardly. One grandmother interfering in the Sunday lunch was annoying, but two were unbearable.

"I'm nearly thirty, I shouldn't still be treated like a child," she thought as she tried once again to prevent one of them from opening the oven.

"That'll never be cooked in time," said Jean, "these newfangled electric ovens are no good for cooking a joint."

"It'll be fine," said Jo, "I've had this oven for years."

"Nonsense," said Jean, "I have tea towels older than you. Speaking of which, when did you last wash these?"

"They're clean, Gran."

"Did you boil them overnight?"

"No, Gran, because it's not nineteen forty."

Jean tutted audibly, and disdainfully replaced the tea towel on its hook.

Meanwhile, Cynthia was hovering over the gravy.

"This needs stirring, Jean, you're good at that."

"I do make excellent gravy," said Jean, ignoring the obvious slight.

"The gravy is fine, leave it," said Jo irritably.

"Not even thirty and she thinks she can make gravy," said Cynthia. "I'll give you a hand."

Jo's husband popped his head round the door to find all three of them fighting over the wooden spoon that lay in the saucepan of gravy.

"Blimey, it's like Macbeth in here," he muttered, making a hasty retreat.

"These carrots are too big for my dentures," said Cynthia, "you'll have to chop them finer than that or I'll choke on them."

"That would at least give us some peace to enjoy our meal," observed Jean sourly.

"And where's your mangle?" asked Cynthia. "You can't have a kitchen without a mangle."

"I can," seethed Jo, "because it's not nineteen for... never mind."

"Are these new potatoes?" said Jean, prodding them tentatively with a fork. "You should always use new potatoes for boiled or they just don't taste right."

"Yes, they're new," said Jo, making a mental note to be in another country the next time both Grans invited themselves round on a Sunday.

"I see you have one of those newfangled microwaves," said Jean, peering at the device over her glasses. "At least you haven't tried cooking the joint in there."

"Well, I wouldn't, would I?" said Jo.

"I wouldn't put anything past you youngsters these days. I saw a young man the other day with his trousers practically dangling around his ankles – what is the world coming to?"

"You've never been up with the latest fashions, though, have you Jean," said Cynthia, "you stopped at the puffball skirt didn't you dear?"

"A man's trousers should never be buttoned below the ribcage," asserted Jean confidently.

Jo decided that this was definitely an emergency.

"Who fancies a sherry?"

Both women reacted as if they had been injected with a mixture of vitamins and speed.

"Ooo, sherry!" they coed in unison.

"It's in the living room, help yourselves."

Like photons competing in the double slit experiment, they both tried to get through the door at the same time.

Jo visibly relaxed. This should give her ten minutes at least, by the time they had finished haranguing the men and 'educating' the children.

She went to the cupboard and took out her emergency first aid box - a box on Australian Merlot. Pouring herself a glass she went out into the back garden. Everything would be ready in twenty minutes and with a bit of luck she could dish it out without further interference.

After a few minutes she had forgotten all about the mornings stresses when a loud crash alerted her to the presence of the grans in the kitchen. Reluctantly she went back inside to find Joan, Celia and her husband shouting at each other and the saucepan of gravy upside down on the floor.

"It needed stirring," pleaded Joan.

Jo drained the rest of her glass and threw it onto the floor.

"You can clear that up as well," she shouted, barging past the two startled women. "Right, come on kids!" she screamed. "We're going to McDonalds."

SPYING THREE YEARS ON

I looked out of the window at the recalcitrant blizzard. With trepidation, I turned back towards Julia and forced my face into a pleasant expression.

"There are worse places to be stranded than a pub," I offered.

"The Dog and Trouserleg' is a stupid name and I have a husband and baby to get back to," said Julia, very much minus a pleasant expression. "They'll be worried."

"A one year old baby isn't going to be worried, is it? It'll be happy if its had the shit scrapped off it fairly recently."

Thankfully, she ignored that one.

"Anyway, Phoebe will..." I couldn't believe it. "You flinched."

"What?" snapped Julia, her grip on the wine glass threatening to shatter it, almost certainly in the general direction of my face.

"After two years, you still flinch at the mention of my wife. Once and for all, you dumped me, you're not allowed to be angry that I found someone... else." Phew, that was a close one.

"I'm not angry, your wife doesn't bother me." She unconsciously tried to make herself look taller and I bit my lip. "I just want to get home," she added.

"So do I, but you might as well chill out and have another drink."

"Are you saying I'm frigid?"

I groaned audibly.

"Stop being so bloody defensive, I'm saying you're uptight generally, not in the specific sense of your..."

I turned away and took an enormous gulp of my pint.

We'd broken up not long after the incident which forced me to reveal my real job and double identity to her. To say that she'd taken it badly would be a gross understatement. She obviously wanted a more boring, predictable life but she now had that, with a drippy husband, beige house, scatter cushions and a baby, and looked about as happy as a Tory Cabinet Minister in a chip shop.

This was only the fourth time we'd met since the split and for her it was clearly four too many. She was in a bad mood, at least partly, because her friend had phoned and cancelled their lunch date at the last minute and now she was stuck here because a light snow fall had transformed within an hour into something only a maniac would consider driving in. I was in a bad mood because my leg was hurting and I wanted to go home and crash on my sofa with a DVD box set. Normally I would walk home in any weather but my leg made that impossible and all buses in the area were slowed to a crawl for the time being. To start with I'd also been bothered about the three bags of shopping now defrosting by my feet but I didn't care any more.

"Anyway," I said, struggling for any subject, "how is Carl?" Bollocks! Anything but that.

"You've never liked my husband," she almost spat.

"It's him that doesn't like me, I feel nothing towards him. Drink?"

"No."

I limped over to the bar. Bloody leg, I hope Julia hasn't noticed. Why did I mention Carl? Obviously he's the elephant in the room so I blurted it out.

"Another pint and a large scotch, please."

"Anything in the scotch?"

"Yes, another scotch."

I lingered at the bar as long as possible without being rude. Then I stayed for another five minutes, finishing the scotch.

Eventually I hauled myself back to the table, hoping in vain that I was disguising my limp.

"Not that I care, but what have you done to your leg?"

"I had a fight with Carl. Oh, that bloody elephant!"

"Are you saying my husband's fat?"

"No, he's a tiny little squirt of a man who just happens to have a fucking heavy golf club."

"Why would he hit you?"

"He said you... I can't tell you. Pork scratchings?"

marcusfreestone.com

[goodreads profile](#)

[smashwords profile](#)

[facebook page](#)

[reverbNation page](#)

[my Myspace space](#)