

CALLIE

TUESDAY 5TH JANUARY

Callie would, no doubt, turn out to be just another of those hopeless waifs who drifted in on the tide during term-time. Often a mother had moved away from home to escape an abusive husband or - as was much more usual in those days - partner; or the family had been evicted; or the child had been abandoned to the distant care of the father by a harassed mother, or vice-versa, and then maybe back again; or to a grandmother who coped for a while until the onset of adolescence, or the onset of her own senility, made the arrangement impossible. One of our families had fled from London because of a death-threat to the criminally inclined father. We had grown accustomed to these occasional visitors to our shores. The children exhibited the demoralised air of war- evacuees, sewn into the quiet contemplation of their misery and confusion. They typically sat and doodled, often on their arms, rarely looking or listening. After a while almost all began to be absent, destroying any glimmer of hope or illusion that they might learn anything. Then one fine day the Head would come into staff-briefing and announce, with feigned regret, that so-and-so was now officially off-role, having fetched up somewhere else.

It was noticeable that many of those girls went by invented double-barreled first names, such as Kiri-Leigh, Tyler-Louise, Ellie-Anne, Lisa-Jade - some of them, no doubt, copied from the soaps, the tabloids or magazines. How would some of them sound, I wondered, in the mouths of their final carers when their owners (unless obesity, fags, alcohol or some substance or other got them prematurely first) were in their nursing homes. ("Come on Tyler, time for your medicine; come on Kiri, let's take you to the toilet!") I imagined their mothers, some barely more than children themselves, choosing something original (rather than boring old Emma, Emily or Alice) perhaps in a subconscious effort to acquire a uniqueness which eluded them in their humdrum, deprived lives, and I felt sorry for them. These people were at the bottom of the social heap; poor, uneducated, unskilled and hopeless. How long would it be, I wondered, before - say - a Clitoris-Kasey might turn up?

Margaret Thatcher had created this new vast underclass in communities ravaged by unemployment. They had not put down proper roots in the thin soil of the Eighties, nor in the bullshit of Blair's New Britain, and the small fruit they bore was destined to fall and roll and rarely prosper; at least not legally.

Callie's mother came originally (as I did) from Birmingham. The family history was, to say the least, involved and confusing, so much so that our recently installed Head, Mrs Pike, read from notes to the staff that crisp, early January morning. We had all shivered, put Christmas behind us and reluctantly struggled in for our preparation day, one day in advance of the return of our scholars. Snow had threatened to fall but in the end came down as sleet and rain, and the "snow-flake line" to pass on news of a school closure was put back in the telephone drawer. First of all, Mrs Pike was anxious to point out, as we sat inert in our chairs, that Callie was a very clever girl who looked much older than her thirteen years. She was the unlikely fruit of a liaison between an airline pilot and prostitute. She had turned out to be so strikingly pretty that the mother had decided to keep her. She had given up the game and begun a relationship with a drug-dealer with whom she had two sons. After the birth of the second he had simply disappeared - possibly under the M42. A new partner had taken a shine to the boys but found the behaviour of the girl, by then five, baffling and unacceptable. She would make up derogatory songs and poems about him. Faced with an ultimatum to choose between him and Callie, she had decided to give her up for adoption. Social Services had by then got her on their at-risk register. Suspicious burn-like marks had alerted her infant school teacher and finally

little Callie was taken into care. There had been a string of foster placements (with an option to adopt) but these had always stormily broken down. The girl spoke in malicious rhyming couplets when she wanted to be difficult, which was often. She would barricade herself into her bedroom and wreck everything. Meanwhile, partner number two had left the scene. Partner number three added to the brood and, hearing of Callie, suggested taking her back. Tentatively Social Services agreed and kept the family under supervision, but not closely enough to prevent her new “dad”, a convicted paedophile, trading under a false name, from sexually abusing her. The mother by this time was a hopeless alcoholic and drug-addict. Unable to cope, she saw all four children removed. Callie had eventually been farmed out to a reluctant grandmother in Edgbaston on a temporary basis until her daughter had dried out.

At this point the airline pilot returned to the scene. He had somehow got to know of his daughter and had offered to take her (she was now nine). He had married and had a two-year old toddler of his own. Callie subjected him to such a campaign of abuse and bullying that the mother had finally issued the father with an ultimatum of her own, and she had to go. But her grandmother had died. Callie’s mother was unfit. The only option was Callie’s aunt, herself an unmarried mother of twins. Tempted by an offer of money which she could not refuse she had taken Callie, a girl she had only seen once, at her christening. This set-up soon began to break down. Callie was neglected and her behaviour was impossible. She was permanently excluded for the second time from school and had run away from home (wherever that was) many times. She had harmed herself and threatened to take her own life.

At the age of twelve - having spent a few months in a children’s home - she had opted to return to her partly rehabilitated mother. They had worked their way east by way of friends and distant relatives and here in Earlstone they had finally settled.

At first many of the staff - particularly the older hands more cynical than the rest - had scoffed and chortled, shaking their heads in wonder at the self-inflicted misfortunes of yet another incompetent family. Mrs Pike had paused and glared. Now, with her tale finished, she took off her spectacles and brought her joined hands down to her lap and there was a stunned silence. I glanced at Phil Warden the portly head of geography. He sat with a twinkle in his eye trying to catch the attention of others who also despaired, as he did, of what the world was coming to. Mrs Pike had been there two terms and the staff was divided into those who supported and those who opposed her drive to eliminate the atmosphere of fear in the school, the legacy of her academic-cloaked predecessor, a strange man called Drake, whom the pupils had unsurprisingly nicknamed Drake-ula.

I could tell that Warden would be the first to comment.

“You couldn’t make it up could you? Who on Earth would believe it?”

He paused to chuckle. “So what can we expect? A monster?”

Mrs Pike looked at him with scarcely concealed disapproval.

“The question is, Mr Warden, what should Callie-Louise expect? This is a girl who has never had a chance, a girl who needs our sympathy and tolerance. She will be a big test of the ethos of listening and calm professionalism which you all know it is my aim to establish at Forest View. She needs for once stability and security. I am determined that we go out of our way to provide them.”

“That’s all very well, Mrs Pike,” he retorted “But please do not forget that we have a duty to all other pupils and their parents. This is a school not a mission. I went “out of my way” to equip that lad - who was he? - in 7/7 last term....”

“Jamie Warrilow” said someone.

“Yes, Warrilow...I provided him with basic equipment, book and folder and even lent him a text book to help him catch up....and what happens? Gone in two weeks; carved his bloody

name on a desk and never seen more! No sign of stuff being returned, of course. Waste of space some people..."

Others sighed and nodded agreement. Mrs Pike looked dismayed.

"I think what many of us would like to know, Diane," said Mrs Hewins, head of English and a staunch Pike ally "Is what exactly caused her expulsions?"

Mrs Pike corrected her gently. "Her exclusions were due to bullying and theft of equipment. I shall make it clear to her that she has a chance here of a fresh start. We will all need to approach her in the same calm manner. If she is in one of her moods it is essential that we give her a time-out, and say "time-out Callie" to avoid a confrontation. This will give her a chance to take control of her behaviour" (someone groaned)

"to take control of her own behaviour away from other pupils outside the classroom until she is ready to come back in - in exactly the same way we dealt with Justin last term."

Peterson, the music teacher, threw back his head and laughed.

"Justin just went on walkabout whenever I said "time-out"!"

Others called out in agreement.

"Well, colleagues," interposed Mrs Pike "We did our level best with Justin. He was a shirker."

For her to call a pupil a "shirker" almost shocked us, accustomed as we were to her predilection for euphemism.

"Callie is quite a different proposition," she continued. "If she disappears or throws a tantrum then you must phone or get a message to me immediately. I will collect her. But at all costs we must avoid a showdown. She will be provocative and she will challenge our authority but I have confidence in colleagues' professionalism and I know we can handle her with a minimal disruption to learning. Who knows? We might even be the turning-point in her unhappy life. Someone from Learning Support will sit with her three days a week and take her out to counsel her as and when..." Now I caught her eye. "Yes Mr Brightmore?"

"After what we have heard it sounds almost trivial to ask which foreign language she started in Year 7."

She consulted her notes and shook her head.

"She spent most of her seventh year excluded or absent. I think therefore we must assume no FL."

"Shouldn't she repeat her Year 7?" asked someone.

"It wouldn't be appropriate" (Appropriate. Her favourite word.) "She is, shall we say - and as you will see tomorrow - rather advanced for her age....I intend to put her into class 8/5."

Warden wiped his brow in exaggerated relief. Others sighed.

"But 8/5 is a lovely class!" exclaimed an ally of Warden. "Why mess them around?" Others agreed.

"A lovely class - precisely. It is important to put her where there will be few bad influences. So 8/5 it is."

After a few more announcements we were free to go to our rooms and get everything ready for the morrow. So Callie would be with me for French.

My colleagues, Anne and Denise were relieved. Denise was a nervous woman, not a good copier with difficult children. I often had to deal with her naughty classes and individuals. Anne was in her mid-fifties and winding down towards retirement. She just about got by.

Tomorrow I would be beginning a topic with 8/5 about buying fruit and vegetables at a market. I put the OHT ready, studied my lesson plan and then wondered where to seat her. Near the door? Near the projector? It depended. If she was an attention-seeker she might be for ever turning round, fidgeting and distracting everybody. So maybe by the door, behind the class. Yet by the door might prove too remote, even though it would be a handy position if she needed a "time-out". But I was determined to make her feel welcome and include her. If she was a clever

girl then tomorrow's topic would be an ideal starting point. It required no prior knowledge of French, apart from the numbers. It would be an ideal test of her goodwill. I would have a quick word to reassure and encourage her. I decided, after much debate, to sit her down the window side to my left next to Nicola, the brightest girl in the class who was however none too popular. Or should it be Maxine, who was rather precocious as Callie apparently was? Maxine had a crush on me I could tell. She was keen. Perhaps she would act as some kind of brake on Callie because she liked me. Yes, Maxine it would be. Not Nicola, at least not at first. I juggled with my seating plan until I was satisfied and then set about organising materials for my other four classes. But my thoughts kept returning to 8/5, lesson two.

7/2, first in the morning, would be a cinch to teach, telling the time in German. I made sure I had enough worksheets. I went over my lesson plan for 8/5 again until I had it off by heart, every detail.

When I looked up the light was fading. I gathered my things together, left and walked the short distance to my flat.

That night I could not drop off to sleep as I rehearsed the lesson again and again, considering every possibility, all the ins and outs and potential pitfalls of the morning.

WEDNESDAY 6TH JANUARY

I had a restless night. I woke unrefreshed. I knew I had had a bad dream but the details eluded me. I left my flat early and the brisk walk through the frosty dawn restored me a little. I looked at my lesson plans again and put on Radio 3. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly to the measured rhythms of a Beethoven string quartet.

My first lesson with 7/2 went surprisingly badly. They seemed half-asleep and many could not focus, as if they were staring into some scene which troubled them from home. (Many of our family break-ups occurred around Christmas and New Year). They were unwilling or unable to make much headway with the exercise I set - matching times to clocks - and I began to feel quite annoyed that a well prepared lesson had failed. In the end the anger in my voice made it tremble as I asked yet another with their pathetic hand up how they expected to learn and do tasks if they had not paid attention. The bell rang suddenly and caught me unprepared. The failure of my lesson and my annoyance had thrown all my mental preparations for the next lesson into turmoil. I curtly dismissed the class. Outside there was calm for a short while but as classes pushed up and down and past each other on the staircase the noise grew. I looked at my lesson plan but could barely concentrate because of the hubbub and screaming outside my classroom door. Finally a piercing shriek made me bound out to them.

"WILL YOU BE QUIET" I yelled at 8/5. "How DARE you make such a filthy row!" I stared at the class which was half-queueing and half-pushing past the line in an effort to reach the back at the top of the stairs. As I got to "filthy row" the noise subsided. I had worked myself into a temper. Some of my colleague's class, partly massing on the landing and partly queueing on the next staircase down were still pushing and shoving.

"BE SENSIBLE" I yelled again. Someone unseen at the top of the staircase echoed back "be sensible" in a fair imitation of my Birmingham accent. Further down by me others could not help giggling at this. The fury in me now erupted. I approached the nearest giggler, a empty-headed girl I did not care for, and barked in her face. To my astonishment she barked back. For some seconds there was a trial of eyes until she finally lowered her gaze. "Be sensible," came the voice again.

"WHO IS THAT RUDE CHILD?" I yelled. Silence. I suddenly thought of Callie. My heart went cold. What a disaster. I took a deep breath and nodded to the first child in the queue to go into the room.

“Not you” I said as the silly girl came past me. “You wait over there.”

I checked every head for a new face and as the last few descended I held up my hand to stop them. Not one was a stranger. The boy at the back, Curtis, a gangly youth with glasses, a child whom I could not abide, was smirking.

“Do you find bad manners amusing, Curtis? Was it you taking the mickey out of me, and shouting?”

“No,....Sir,” he replied sarcastically stressing “sir” and still smirking.

“Really? Well, you had better take that smirk off your face.”

“What’s a smirk?”

“If I could wipe it off your face, I’d show you. Don’t play disingenuous with me, Sonny Jim!”

“Dis-in-whah?” he retorted.

“Stand over there!”

“Where?”

I took his arm and escorted him to a space by the lockers, a few feet away from the girl, who was called Chelsea.

“You can’t touch me!” he protested.

“You stand there, shut up and think over how you should speak to a teacher, Curtis!”

“My name is Jamie” he said.

“Be polite to me and you’ll be Jamie again.” I went in to quieten the class then went back out to tackle him more. A good old-fashioned glare made him back down and eventually I got an apology. So I sent him in. Next I turned to Chelsea. On her own she seemed very pathetic. I took a pace back and began.

“Don’t you ever, ever, ever, ever, EVER speak to me in that manner again, Chelsea Dyer; never, ever! Do you understand?” She had hung her head and was staring at the floor. She said nothing.

“Eye-contact please, Chelsea!” But she steadfastly refused to look up. Taking this for stubbornness and further insubordination I raised my voice and again asked for eye-contact. Then to my horror I noticed great tears dripping off her chin and splashing on the floor. Oh God, what a bloody catastrophe! I looked up at the door and a number of faces ducked down from the window. I opened the door and roared SIT DOWN.

Chelsea could hardly get her breath she was sobbing so hard.

“I - I th-thought you li-liked me!”

“I do like you,” I lied “ It’s just your behaviour I don’t much appreciate sometimes. You laughed at me.”

Now she showed me her vacant little red face and hotly declared that she had not been laughing at me; it was just over something her neighbour had just said, about a row between Mr Budge and Callie, the new girl.

Callie! Where was she? At that point my phone rang. I told Chelsea to go down to the toilets and wash her face. I went back into the hushed room and picked up the phone. It was the Head. “I’m sorry, Mr Brightmore, I would have phoned you earlier but I’ve had my hands rather full. It’s about Callie-Louise. She ought to be in your lesson.”

“Yes. I know. She hasn’t turned up though.”

“Precisely. She’s with me.”

In the background I could hear a voice - rich and dark in timbre, hardly the voice of a girl - arguing angrily with someone. Mrs Pike must have put her hand over the receiver because everything went silent. Then she came back.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said with deliberate brightness and a short laugh. “Callie won’t be coming to you today. There has been a bit of an incident in Maths. I’ll tell the staff at briefing tomorrow. Carry on!”

I looked at the clock. Nearly fifteen minutes had gone of the lesson.

I realised the class were staring at me. With resentment. Curtis and Chelsea were popular kids. The door opened and in she came, still very crestfallen. She sat down sniffing and a neighbour put a consoling arm around her. I let out a very long sigh.

“Well! What a wonderful beginning to term! This all comes about....” and I paused as I strolled to the front of the room “ because of bad behaviour on the stairs. Stand up.” Dutifully they stood.

“I had a lesson planned for today which I cannot now give.” I paused and looked in turn at every face. Lovely Maxine, by whom Callie was to have sat, was hanging on every word. Her eyes were round and large. I passed from her to the few on my right at the front, one of whom, Curtis, was now staring at me darkly. Should I get out my mirror and show him his face, a little trick I had learnt from predecessor? No. I dwelt on him until finally he looked down at his shoes. Still directing my gaze at him I continued my sermon. “You know that I enjoy teaching the most of you. Most of you understand my two main rules: one - hard work at all times; two - good manners at all times. Today some of us forgot Number 2 completely.....I can only imagine that two whole weeks of self-indulgence and, as the French say, laissez-faire, which means do-as-you-please....” (and here I paused to choose my next words carefully, having been most affably and informally, but unambiguously, warned by Mrs Pike in the autumn not to comment on bad manners and upbringing issues in front of children) “.. two weeks away from school rules have perhaps had, shall we say, not the best influence on good self-discipline. If you EVER arrive at my room AGAIN - Asseyez-vous - like a pack of hyenas you will lose your break - Vous comprenez?”

“Oui, Monsieur.”

There was just over half-an-hour left. Chelsea was still snivelling. Her friend put her hand up. “Yes Charli?” She came up and whispered that Chelsea was upset because her dad had left home. I closed my eyes and slowly shook my head. Damn. The last thing I fancied doing now was trying to teach them something new. I looked at my lesson plan and put it into my record book. I grabbed a pile of elementary readers and told them to get on with them. I quietly asked Chelsea to see me outside but she remained slumped with her head in her arms on the desk. I decided to adopt laissez-faire myself.

As I sat and reflected miserably upon the proceedings the silence gradually turned to whispers. I shushed them once but towards the end there were conversations again. I looked at my watch. It would soon be break. As I walked around I began to hear snatches of the story which had so excited them at lesson change and which those who had been in Callie’s maths set were so keen to tell to classmates who had not. I began to piece the tale together as I stood pretending to tidy up at the back. “Old Budgie” had, it seemed, finally gone “ape” at Callie after a number of provocations had culminated in her pointing out an error in his board calculations. The kids did not much like Norman Budge. He was much older than their grandparents and had developed all those misanthropic tendencies which many old teachers acquire. What kept him trundling in on his moped to the intense hilarity of the school, in his faded sports jacket always tightly buttoned up in the middle, must have been supremely important, I concluded. If ever I went to the staffroom at lunch - which was seldom, as I preferred to keep to my own room, marking, preparing and listening to my radio - he would always be sitting with his vacuum flask and a neat pile of geometrically quartered sandwiches on his lap. Few engaged him in conversation because he moaned too much - about the management, about the pay, about the litter on the field, about the government, but most of all about the kids. I had once studied his grey,owlish face, framed by his tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, when I was unfortunate enough to be his reluctant audience and swore I’d never get into that miserable state. Why did he not just retire? I had been in post eight years and although the original thrill of teaching had somewhat faded I

still, on balance, enjoyed the job. He did not. Someone had once said that he was 61. How long ago had that been?

“Why doesn’t he just retire?” I had murmured to no-one in particular when he had sauntered out of the staffroom.

“He loves the kids too much” said Warren. “He’s like me - just a big, old softy.”

It became an open secret that Diane Pike had quickly developed a strong aversion to him and his depressing aura. I had spoken to him one November morning when I had swapped a break-duty as a favour to P.E. Pete. I found him lurking in a doorway out of the drizzle. What sort of a job did he think the new Head was doing? I had asked this because nothing else occurred to me. He had screwed up his face at the wet and just come out with it.

“I hate the fuckin’ woman...always gunnin’ for me she is....Have I sorted my schemes of work out yet?.....When could she see our assessment policy? ...Do I think I set enough homework? Bloody woman. My wife always says women make the worst bosses. Bring back Drake, that’s what I say. Better the devil you know.”

Old Drake, I meant to mention, had resigned in mysterious circumstances which no-one had, at least as far as I was aware, ever got to the bottom of.

Some said that his secretary, Mrs Pardew had complained officially about his many intrusions into her personal space (or worse). I had amused myself with visions of him approaching her stealthily in his cloak from behind, fangs bared and set to sink into her thick, red, wrinkly neck. She exuded that strong, fusty odour that many fat women of a certain age have. I always knew instantly whenever she had been batting along the main corridor, leaving that pungent trail in her wake. I think it must have something to do with hormones. Or the dwindling of them. Or possibly an unwashed head. That smell was possibly the fatal attraction to Drake.

But I digress. Poor old Budgie had told me that he walked a tightrope every day. Well, that first day back saw him fall off. In a crimson fury he had grabbed hold of Callie by the scruff of the neck as she had stormed out swearing, had wheeled her round and screamed at her. Wrenching herself free, she had torn her jacket collar. All was witnessed by Callie’s behaviour support person. Game, set and match.

THURSDAY 7TH JANUARY

“Old Budgie’s been suspended,” whispered Pete as we cleared our pigeon-holes.

“No! Why?”

“Over that cow, Callie. Verbal abuse and assault.”

(How did people find these confidential things out? I never knew what was going on.)

“Well, his face didn’t fit, did it, in her brave new world” he continued. “Her Nibs has been looking for any excuse to get rid of him. Surely you knew that? You ought to turn that bloody radio off and come up here more.”

Nearby, Phil Warden was smouldering with anger.

“Well, he wasn’t exactly Mr Chips but the poor old bugger will as likely lose his bloody pension now, for all she bloody cares. After all his years! It’s a bloody disgrace that we have to teach such bloody, disgusting people. I’ve never come across ONE that hasn’t got a bloody chip on their shoulder a mile wide. NOT ONE!” He threw his junk-mail in the bin and rushed out past the entering Mrs Pike as if he had to vomit.

Chip? What did he mean? I sat down as the briefing began and realised, with much misgiving, that how I had dealt with Curtis and Chelsea Dyer was uncomfortably close to the way Budgie had reacted.

All Wednesday and Thursday I watched my Ps and Qs and held my tongue even when I was inwardly seething. Whenever the phone rang I expected it to be a summons to see Pike. I kept going over and over the incident. Perhaps I had gone a little over the top. Chelsea liked me - fancied me even, silly girl. Would she go and complain? Curtis might. He hated me. Might

Chelsea reason sensibly that her own dismay at the departure of her parent had been the cause of the bother? Was she capable of such a rationalisation? I didn't see the class again until Friday. Perhaps that would help to draw any sting.

There was no summons. No brown envelope with a tell-tale cello-taped flap in my pigeon-hole, as I had had from her once, following an incautious remark about a girl's poor manners. I began to relax and enjoyed my three lessons after Thursday break. All was going well again as we resumed the well-tried routines of the classroom.

FRIDAY 8TH JANUARY

I remember I sat jotting something down at my desk as one of the children at my open door asked if they could come in. Without looking up I held up my hand and beckoned them in. They were reasonably quiet and I smiled to myself to think how well I had impressed upon the class the need for good order.

I looked up and was relieved to see a smiling Chelsea standing in front of me. So, she had forgiven me.

"Can Callie sit with me and Charli please, Sir?"

I was still sitting down. I could see that a squat woman was hovering uncomfortably at the back of the room. And it finally struck me. Callie. I felt my heart leap in trepidation. Chelsea now stood to one side and there she was, looking down abjectly at the floor. Her eyes rose slowly and met mine. Callie-Louise.

Had I ever seen a more striking, more unusual beauty? No-one had mentioned that she was half-caste, and at once I understood Warden's mildly racist remark. She was strangely and breathtakingly pretty. Her eyes - as dark as roasted coffee beans - were perceptive and intelligent. They pounced on mine and seized on everything I wanted to conceal from them. She smiled slowly in triumph, to see herself so admired, and only then released them from capture. I noticed then a lightly tanned skin and long hair ranging in colour from a brown as dark as her eyes to fair on the fringes, framing two cheeks of the most delicate structure and texture; and she had a long, intriguing nose which came to a fine defiant point. In profile she was even more striking. The music I had been listening to in my free period was a Bach oboe concerto. In the silence it became the centre of attention.

"What's this?" she said simply in that rich, husky voice I had heard over the phone.

"Bach's oboe concerto in A major."

"Bach."

She savoured the word, obviously for the first time, and gave to it a special musical quality. I sensed danger. This was a girl, I instantly realised, who knew her power but did not grasp the full impact she might have. I would have to take special care; about where I looked and how I looked at her; about what I said; and how I said it. Here at my table, in authority I was on safe ground and was able to regain the initiative.

"Oui, Bach. Je m'appelle Paul Brightmore. Je suis prof de français."

"Je m'appelle Callie-Louise Sykes" she came straight back.

I looked at her for quite a while, puzzled. "Tu parles français, Callie?"

She shrugged and shook her locks.

I could not help but say "J'adore la musique."

"J'adore la musique...as well" she said in a perfect imitation of me.

"Aussi" I automatically rejoined. "Tu aimes la musique aussi."

She looked at me steadily and I saw that she approved. The oboe began to play a phrase of exquisite beauty and ingenuity. Her eyes widened and then closed as the phrase was repeated. It was a second of great joy and enlightenment. I felt moved and bemused. The movement came

to an end and I reached down to shut the machine off. There was now complete silence. She opened her eyes and said "Well, here I am."

"Te voici" I replied. "So, here you are."

"Te voici" said she.

"Non, me voici" I explained, tapping my breast and then pointing at her "Te voici....Me voici."

"Me voici!" she came back, instantly understanding what I meant and touching her own breast.

Chelsea broke the spell. "Can she sit by me, Sir? PLEASE!"

I finally withdrew my attention from Callie. Every pair of eyes in the room was staring at me in wonder. I felt puzzled. I looked again at Chelsea. She repeated her request with even more urgency and the words finally registered. I affected to study my room-plan and come to a difficult decision. Her partner would have to be Maxine, not Chelsea, who was really poor at French and rather shallow. I hummed and ha-ed and finally sat back in my chair.

"Eh bien...j'ai décidé...Ton partenaire, Callie, sera Maxine."

Pupils began to whisper urgently. It then occurred to me how mean this must appear. Wasn't this just exacting further revenge on Chelsea for Tuesday? Chelsea's neighbours were looking daggers. Others, enemies of Chelsea, were cockahoop. Callie's eyes had lit up, as had Maxine's. But Chelsea petulantly threw back her head, turned tail and stomped off to her normal seat. Inadvertantly, foolishly, I had humiliated her and she managed to sulk the whole way through the lesson. She was an expert sulker. I decided it would be politic to ignore her. Then I remembered the woman at the back of the room. She too was staring at me oddly, in exasperation and irritation almost. She stood there like a bad, uneasy actor who had no idea what to do with his hands. I took an instant dislike to her, and recalling also Budgie's experience and her part as a witness for the prosecution, I went over and asked her - sotto voce - to leave.

"But I'm supposed to support Callie," she hissed back in a defiant Geordie drawl. I asked her to come outside for a quick word. I heard Callie breathe "Thank God" but pretended I hadn't.

"Please go down to the library," I said as pleasantly as I could. "If I need you I'll phone down....er.....Mrs....?"

"Ms Southgate" she replied with a sniff of pique. I noticed she was in dungarees. Now I placed her. A municipal dyke.

Before she could protest further I shut the door and returned to the front. Callie silently mouthed a thank you and gave me a shy smile.

I consulted my notes and began.

The lesson went brilliantly.

I taught the names of the fruits and had them repeated. When I said that we would play bingo with the names the class suddenly forgot its reservations and warmed to me again. Callie won a lollipop and the child in her was delighted. Then in the role-play section, after I had taught *avez-vous, je voudrais, un kilo, un demi-kilo* her hand was rarely down.

"Monsieur! Avez-vous des bananes?" she asked with a beautiful burr.

« Oui, Mademoiselle. C'est trois Euros le kilo. » I held up three fingers.

"Je voudrais un kilo de bananes..." and then to mine and the class's absolute astonishment, without prompting, she added "Je voudrais un demi-kilo de pommes....as well..."

"Aussi"

"Oui, aussi.."

Ordinarily, pupils did not think to take the initiative like this. I organised some pair-work with cue-cards and began to wander around the room. But I felt myself drawn again and again to Callie's and Maxine's part of the class. Together they made short work of the cards. I had the inspired idea of getting Maxine to teach Callie the numbers. At the end of the lesson they came

to me. Maxine was a pretty teenager with a mass of blonde curls but Callie, tall and shapely, quite eclipsed her. I realised that Maxine was saying something in French. She was asking me to listen. With barely a stumble Callie counted in lovely French up to fifty. I gave her another lolly -une sucette - which she repeated to herself. "J'adore une sucette" she said after a second's pause. I remembered Maxine as well and gave her a lolly. Something drew my eyes over to the other side of the room. Chelsea was staring at me. With absolute hatred.

At the end of the lesson I called her to my table. I owed her an explanation. She came reluctantly with her friend in tow.

"You can stay too, Charli. If you want. Please sit down"

They sat and eyed me suspiciously.

"You're not in any trouble, Chelsea, (even though you did have a mega-sulk today)... I just wanted to explain. Charli told me on Tuesday that you are ...unhappy at home at the moment because well... I'm really sorry." She was still all silent frostiness. How could I melt her?

"We got off on the wrong foot rather this week, didn't we?"

She gave the slightest nod.

"I thought you were laughing at me. I accept now that you weren't. I was in a bit of a mood, mainly because of the noise, and you got the worst of the telling-off. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, I mean, make you more upset than you already were...."

I thought I saw a hint of a smile come into her eyes.

"And this morning was....unfortunate...I had already decided on Tuesday to seat Callie by Max. I didn't do it to spite you, honestly. Please believe me. I'm not like that. Can you think why I had chosen Maxine?"

Chelsea shrugged and looked miserable.

"Come on, think! Why?"

But now Charli spoke. "Is it because Max is so good at French?"

"Exactly! Chelsea, you know French isn't your...best subject. Callie knows no French at all. I chose Max because I knew that she would be able to help her. That's all. It wasn't you. If anyone else in the group had asked, the answer would have been the same. Please understand. I don't like her better than you. I don't have favourites."

She thought this over for a while but did not look very convinced.

"Don't be in a mood any more, Chelsea. Let's make a fresh start on Monday and put this week behind us. Go and have your break now."

I smiled. I gave them both a lolly. They smiled back weakly and off they went.

During break I savoured the events of the lesson in my mind. What an extraordinary girl Callie was! I felt exhilarated. I had encountered a pupil with a huge linguistic and intellectual potential entirely untapped. For the rest of the day I could hardly get her out of my mind. Mrs Pike was right. We had here an opportunity - no, a duty - to arrest her fall into darkness, moral and spiritual.

In the afternoon I had a cover-lesson. A colleague had taken ill in the lunch hour. The class turned out to be 8 5. I had them sent over with their work to my room. Callie-Louise made sure she sat down opposite me. I made sure I concealed my pleasure at this. I carefully explained the work the class had been set, settled them and began to work on the task I had left myself to do in my free period, namely to cut up café cue-cards on my precision cutter. I had my radio on low and was going about the job in the same measured way as the string quartet I was listening to. I first cut the A4 card lengthways down the middle, sliding the blade smoothly from top to bottom; then I cut the strips into quarters, then eighths; occasionally I spotted a picture I had not coloured in - a tomato, a glass of red wine or some chips - and picking up the correct pen I

popped off its colour-coded top and meticulously inked in the drawing, popping the lid back on after each time. As soon as I had a set of 32 I squared the cards into a deck, slipped them into a plastic wallet and finally wrote in brown indelible ink CAFÉ on the outside, before starting the process all over again. I knew she was watching me. I knew and she knew that I was going through this mindless routine in a deliberate, almost stylised fashion as an hypnotic entertainment for her.

I had gone through this series of steps about four times when I became aware of a tension in the air but could not decide from where it was emanating. I could not bring myself to look up at her or tell her to get on. There was total silence apart from the music. The tension was becoming unbearable. Finally I gave way to the urge to look up, over the top of my glasses. I saw that many faces were silently looking - but not directly at me; they were watching her watching me, as if wondering how long it would be before I would notice the rapt attention she was paying me and how I would react to it. Now I had no choice.

“Could you all get your heads down PLEASE, and get on with your Maths work.” The spell was broken. But a while later she whispered, “Are they for our class, Sir?”

I had to look directly at her now. I smiled and shook my head and said “Year 7.” I got up and stood at her shoulder. I sensed her stiffen. She had written not a word. Not a single one. I asked her as quietly as I could if she had a problem with the task. I read the instructions on the worksheet more closely and realised just how mind-numbingly unchallenging it was, even for a half-wit. I sighed. She smiled up at me and tapped the paper with the end of her pen, as if to agree with what I had thought. I went to my back-shelf and collected a few basic and intermediate French readers for her. Whenever I glanced up at her after that she was totally absorbed in them.

The bell went. She put the readers on my desk and skipped over to Maxine. Before I left for home I happened to go into the staffroom. I wish that I hadn't. It ruined my whole weekend. There it sat in my pigeon-hole, the dreaded brown envelope, cellotaped along the flap. I sat down and ripped it open and the following fell into my hand.

Dear Mr Brightmore,

The father of Jamie Curtis, 8/5, has made the following serious allegations about your conduct; that

on Wednesday 6th January at the beginning of lesson two you used threatening behaviour and language towards his son

you physically assaulted him by dragging him by the arm and did thereby cause bruising.

When I have your version of events I intend to interview Jamie Curtis and two other witnesses. In view of the seriousness of these allegations I can only advise you to contact your Teacher Association.

I also need to point out that this could well become a police matter.

Yours sincerely,

D.A. Pike

Pete came in. He saw me sitting paralysed, the letter dangling from my hand. I showed it to him.

“That's nice, just in time to ruin your bloody weekend. Bloody woman's the monster from the black lagoon.”

“I did not grab him or drag him.” I whimpered. “I escorted him!”
“Makes no difference, old son. If you touch one, that’s enough, little bastards.”

All weekend I could do nothing. Neither music nor reading helped. I barely ate, barely slept; every object I touched seemed to be running through, like an electric current, with the anxiety I felt. In the end I bought a couple of bottles of wine and tried to rationalise my fears. If I lost my job it would not be the end; I had no dependents; I had my little place in France; I could turn my hand to private tuition or translating; or even painting. If this was the way that teaching was going, did I want to be any part of it?

MONDAY 11TH JANUARY

Today I somehow dragged myself in. I found that it was all over the staffroom that Budgie had been given an ultimatum: either resign or face a lengthy disciplinary which might result in his dismissal and loss of pension. I felt utterly desolate. Warden was furious.

“That BLOODY woman! She’ll have everybody who’s agin her on a charge before long. She’s brought that bloody girl here as her secret weapon! Now at last she shows us all her true colours!” While he fulminated he had taken the sudden hush as the respectful response of his audience to his diatribe, whereas in fact the object of his attack had just at that instant entered the room. She affected to have heard nothing. Phil Warden sat throughout the briefing with a red face; whether chiefly through anger or embarrassment it was hard to tell.

I had written my version of events and put it already into Pike’s tray. Monday was my lightest teaching day. I sat in my room and waited. Eventually in the second period my phone rang. It was her.

“Mr Brightmore, would you please come down to my office now.”

I was not used to this cold, officious tone.

I went in and found her and her glum-looking deputy, Mr Baldwin, at her side, leant over a writing pad and rolling a pencil in his fingers.

“Mr Baldwin is here to take minutes” she said in the most remote fashion. With her padded shoulders she reminded me of a forties film diva; or Cruella Deville. So, this was power-dressing.

“You are entitled to have a friend present,” said Baldwin, a man renowned for his moroseness. His comment did not appear to go down too well with Her Nibs.

“I thought I did” I replied cryptically. “Perhaps I was wrong.”

Baldwin caught my meaning and grinned - or rather winced - as if with pain. She did not notice however, preoccupied as she was with arranging her paper treasures like some bird of paradise around her table. She cleared her throat and passed me over photocopies of three pupil statements for my perusal. They were appallingly written and spelt.

Somebody laffed at the top of the stairs and Mr Britmore shouted be quite. he grabbed me and stod me by the lockers. it realy hurt my arm.
he kept souting untill I said sorry. then he tolled me to go in.

Jamie Curtis

Mr Brightmore got Jamie by the arm and pulled him too the lockers. He got very angry and intimidated him. I was fritened.

Jade Paulley

Mr brightmoor just grabed Jamie and shouted at him for making a noise.

Ross White

Intimidated? Had someone been putting big words into Jade's stupid little mouth?

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Did you choose these two children or did they come forward? I have no recollection of them being on the landing when I dealt with Curtis. As far as I am aware they had already gone into my room."

"Both came forward as soon as Jamie complained."

"Complained to you?"

"Yes."

"So you advised him to tell his father?"

She would not answer.

"Wouldn't it have made more sense to deal with this at an informal level?"

Still she resolutely refused to comment.

"I want you to interview others who were definitely there. This makes me sound like some madman! And I would like a request put into the record that Jade and Ross be asked where they were at the time of this so-called incident. These statements are worthless as they stand."

I watched Baldwin scribble this down.

"And would you add please that I find it highly irregular that no other children were interviewed."

"What is also irregular and discourteous of you, Mr Brightmore is that you did not have the goodness to hand in your statement until today even though you had my letter on Friday."

I felt my skin prickle with anger but swallowed the temptation to give it air.

"I only found it at 3:15 on Friday; just in time to spend my whole weekend turning it over in my mind. I would like to thank you for that."

Ignoring this she snapped "It is your right to nominate any child or children you wish."

"Well, it's a week almost after the event, and children have had a chance to forget or exaggerate or discuss it with each other - and that hardly seems fair to me."

For the first time ever I noticed a red glow spread up her chest and into her throat. Her true colours? I saw Baldwin noticing too. Her eyes were bulging. Would she split her skin and emerge as the Green Monster?

"I repeat, as you clearly did not hear me, that had you cleared your pigeon-hole and acceded to my request, I could have interviewed others on Friday."

"Who would you like to nominate, Paul?" asked Baldwin quietly, ignoring her.

I thought long and hard. In the end I remembered that Harry, a studious, old-fashioned boy - an ever rarer visitor to the shores of the local comp. - had been there or thereabouts. I named him, and, taking a big risk, Chelsea Dyer as well.

"You admit in your statement, Mr Brightmore, that you took hold of Jamie Curtis -"

"I escorted him, guided him, ushered him by hand to a position away from someone else I was reprimanding. I deny yelling, I deny intimidation, I deny assault -"

"Nevertheless you do actually admit placing your hand on his arm, which is technically an assault -"

"Oh for goodness sake, Diane!"

She recoiled at my use of her first name and folded her arms crossly. I was lost for words. Was she in this mood because of something else? Monday morning blues? I had heard a whisper that she and her husband did not get on. Had she had a bad weekend too?

"Would it interest you to know Mr Brightmore that Jamie Curtis has a bruise on his arm?"

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes"

"Below or above the elbow?"

“Below.”

“That’s sheer nonsense!”

She flinched.

“Which arm, Mrs Pike ?”

She paused and sifted through her precious notes.

“The right.”

“The right. Well, would it interest you to know, Mrs Pike, that I took him very gently by his left upper arm with my right hand? Curtis was on the right-hand side of the staircase, facing down. I could not possibly have made contact with the boy in any other way but with my right hand on his left arm. Have you got all that, Mr Baldwin?”

He nodded. Before she could jump back in I said “Are you sure that there was only one bruise?”

“Yes!”

“Well, if I press my hand - fingers and thumb - on either side of an arm, above or below the elbow, how on Earth could I do so and make only one bruise? Logic and science demand that there will be two sets of marks - one - a thumb - on one side and two or three - the fingers - on the other!” Triumphant I watched Baldwin getting this down. I glanced at her and saw that her neck was almost scarlet. Game, set and match! I had not only refuted the allegation but also exposed how abysmally and stupidly she had handled the matter. I almost felt embarrassed and sorry for her!

“ If that is all, Mrs Pike, I would like to return to my room to get my next lesson ready. I wish only to request that a witness be present when Harry and Chelsea write their statements to ensure that no words like “intimidate” are suggested by anyone. By the way, how many i’s are there in “intimidate”, Mrs Pike? Good morning.”

I got up and left the room, ignoring her order to return. My triumph, sweet as it was, would prove short-lived. I had, as Pete might have said, put a big bug deep up her backside.

That lunchtime I sat in my room. I ate my sandwiches and my pear, marked a few books and reflected on the morning’s events, with a mixture of outrage and pleasure; pleasure, to have so easily bested that bloody woman. Why had I not seen through her? Then I realised, with a start, that I was in danger of joining the Old Farts’ Brigade.

Perhaps when tempers had cooled and she had gotten over her drubbing, I should request a quiet tête-à-tête with her, off the record, and mend a fence or two? Perhaps she had overreacted due to some other pressure, as I said (perhaps very unkindly) above. Perhaps owing to her lack of experience she had not thought the matter through. She had only been in post since Easter. I put myself in her place. An allegation of assault on a child was very serious and she was bound to involve the parent. The reputation of the school was not exactly brilliant and such an allegation, particularly if not taken seriously, could be very damaging. I felt sorry for old Budgie. He had a notoriously bad temper. But the feeling that she was gunning for me personally - like for Budgie - refused to go away. The loud spattering of rain on the widows made me look up. What a dreary day it was.

Now there came a knock at the door. “Come!” I shouted. Nothing. Another knock. I raised my voice but there was still no reaction. Louder knocking made me bound from my chair in irritation and fling the door wide open. There stood Callie. And Maxine. Callie smiled and my annoyance dissolved. It had slipped my mind that I was teaching 8/5 that afternoon.

“It’s raining. The library’s full, Sir,” said Max. “Can we come in and do some work? We promise we won’t disturb you!”

My radio was playing a Mendelssohn string quartet, his masterpiece in F Minor. Callie was staring past me and straining to hear.

“What’s this?” she asked like a most innocent child.

“Mendelssohn.”

“It’s beautiful.”

I told her it had been written after the death of his beloved sister, Fanny. That was why it was so very sad.

“And angry too,” she whispered.

“Yes, angry.”

Her eyes looked into mine for a clue about what I was thinking. She was tall enough to be almost eye-to-eye with me. “You know all about sad and angry” I thought.

“Yes, I am too,” she said matter-of-factly, as if she had read my mind. “I’m sad and angry too.” She lowered her gaze as the music grew to a crescendo and, as it fell away in nonchalant resignation at the cruelty of the world, she shook her head as if she fully understood.

“Can we come in?” pleaded Maxine. “It’s horrible out there and the library’s full of idiots. We want to practise.”

“Well, as long as you don’t disturb me. I’ve got my brilliant lesson to prepare for you this afternoon!”

They had lines to learn from Romeo and Juliet. In fact I had my lesson part but I pretended to be busy while I listened in secret rapture to their soft whispering of the poetry to one another. Was it the balcony scene? Maxine played Juliet, her voice sweet and tiny like a bell; Callie played Romeo with a voice like a light bassoon. I was fascinated. Occasionally I stole a glance at her lovely profile and I knew she noticed. By what injustice had such a beautiful and clever girl been thrust into such a dreadful childhood? I almost felt a tear start in my eye.

I must have drifted off into some reverie because I had not noticed them standing side by side in front of me. I turned the music off and looked at them. I gave both an equal measure of my gaze. I did not want to arouse the jealousy of one against the other. They were both adorable.

“Can you test us, Sir?” asked Max. “If you’ve finished your work.”

I obviously had. I nodded and Callie stepped forward and gave me the book, brushing me slightly with her hand. I felt a sensation like an electric shock run up my shoulder and down my spine. She came closer and pointed to where the speech began. It was the balcony scene. I looked up at her as she removed her slender finger, and seemingly delighted by something I was not aware of, she almost danced back to stand beside Maxine.

Juliet began tentatively and shyly. When Romeo came in, her deep understanding and feeling for the verse took me aback.

Juliet: O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name!
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn by love
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.

Romeo: Shall I hear more or shall I speak at this?

Juliet: T’is but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is not hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name:
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,

Retain that dear perfection which he owns
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

Romeo: I take thee at thy word.
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Juliet: What man art thou, that thus bescreened in night
So stumblest on my counsel?

Romeo: By a name
I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,
Because it is an enemy to thee:
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

As she said the final speech the poignancy and irony of the sentiments moved me so intensely that I was forced to cover my face.

Then there was silence.

“Weren’t we any good?” asked Maxine finally.

I breathed deeply and composed myself. “You were both....brilliant.”

The registration bell rang and they were off. Callie looked back at me and smiled. I had an uncanny feeling that she knew exactly what had affected me.

TUESDAY 12TH JANUARY

I remember it was about six thirty. I had had my tea - a bowl of delicious mussels with cream, garlic, shallots, tumeric and crusty bread, and had found those wonderful speeches in my collected works. I was reciting the bard to Mrs Stubbs’ smiling cat when my doorbell rang. I put my glass of white wine down and hurried down the stairs. Who on Earth might it be? I never had visitors. Mrs Stubbs, my landlady, glanced out of her lounge door and then closed it again. At the door in the freezing gloom stood a man and a woman.

“Mr Brightmore?” enquired she. I realised that she was almost exactly half the size of the man. I nodded and looked at them.

“I’m DS Louise Staples and this is DC David Butterworth. May we come in to speak with you for a few minutes?” They held their IDs under the light.

You can imagine my alarm.

“What ever for?” I asked.

Now he spoke. “In connection with an allegation of threatening behaviour and assault.” I heard Mrs Stubbs’ door click to again.

I let them in and they followed me upstairs. They sat down together on my settee and she took out papers from a briefcase. He studied me.

“Can Iget you anything?” I asked.

I saw him look at the more or less empty bottle of wine. Then he stared at his watch and looked pointedly back at me.

“Cup of tea?”

“Please sit down, Mr Brightmore” she said firmly - and might have added that this was not a social call. They sifted through the papers and made some inaudible remarks before making her opening move.

“I don’t suppose you are unaware of what matter we are enquiring into?”

I hardly dare speak in case my rapid breathing robbed me of my voice. I nodded. I filled my glass with the remaining wine and with a tremor in my hand I drank.

“We have interviewed the boy and spoken to the father, Mr Curtis. He has requested that we visit you to give you what we term an informal caution. In other words, although there are grounds for assuming a crime may have been committed, he does not wish to press charges.”

I let out a long breath and took another. The woman seemed pleased with the effect which this had produced. What an awesome power she had at her disposal!

“I hardly need to impress upon you that you have come very close to a prosecution and tell you how vital it is that you behave in an entirely professional manner with your charges in future.”

Now she was rubbing it in. I felt myself bridle. I took another gulp of wine and waited for her to continue. But now her colleague was on. He could scarcely hide the contempt in his voice. I did not much care for her, but to him I had taken an instant loathing. He rambled on, saying

more or less the same thing when I decided I had heard enough and held my hand up as a signal for him to shut up.

“Can I say something, if you don’t mind?” He stopped in mid-sentence and stared at me in surprise at my insolence.

“First, I would like to know who reported the matter to the police, the father or my headmistress?”

He shuffled through some papers but she already knew and gave me the answer. Mrs Pike. Any illusions I had about her now completely evaporated.

“So, she was the agent provocateur?”

They looked puzzled.

“She was the one doing the stirring,” I explained.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” said she. “Headteachers are under an obligation to report any serious allegation to the child protection authorities. That is who we are.”

Perhaps I should have just sat and taken it but the wine was making me run.

“I think what I might be trying to say is that some people go by the book and others go by their brain. This is a chickenfeed affair! I’ve read their illiterate statements! You know perfectly well that even a below-average solicitor would tear them and their lies to pieces in court! Curtis was lying about the bruise! And you know it!”

She tried to interrupt me but I was in full flow.

“You know, and the CPS know, that this would be a farce in court. The Daily Mail would have you lot on toast! Here’s me, a teacher giving a rude lad a dressing down, because his parents have consistently neglected to, and I, not he, gets the flak! The world’s gone mad!”

Now there was sheer hatred in their faces. As I suppose there was in mine.

“We came here to give you a caution and some sound advice, Mr Brightmore,” she said grimly. “In your own interests.”

“Well, you’ve given it. Now I would like you to leave if you have nothing else to add.”

They did not however budge.

“Mr Brightmore,” said he. “Do you mind if I ask you a rather personal question? Am I right to think you live here alone?”

Now he was getting his own back! We all looked round at the disorder, the piles of books and scattered papers. Should I say something sarcastic?

“Yes, I’m a bachelor. What do you deduce from that? That I’m gay, or worse, a paedophile?”

They did not smile. I needlessly (tipsily?) explained that I had been crossed in love as a young man - by a young lady - and had never gotten over it.

They thought this over too, wondering probably if I was taking the mickey. (But it was true, reader. All miserably true!)

“Don’t you think it’s rather early to drink a whole bottle of wine?” he added.

I laughed and laughed! "I've just had the most marvellous moules marinières - that's mussels with garlic, wine and cream, celery -"

"I know what moules marinières is" she retorted. "We're not as culturally deprived in the police force as some of you teachers might think!" She almost spat out the word "teachers" as if it was a sour berry. I smiled. I had drawn her out like a razor worm sprinkled with salt.

"I think it's time you left now. I have important work to do."

I saw them down the stairs. Mrs Stubbs' door was slightly ajar. As I passed it I bade her goodnight, told her not to let a draught in and pulled it to. They turned to me in unison on the step and both began to speak at once, a babble of the same homilies as before. I slowly closed the door and with a smile I wished them a good night.

I went back upstairs and opened another bottle of wine. The elation of knowing I was out of the woods soon began to fade. I looked around me at my empty flat and even emptier existence. Why did I stay in this benighted little town? Who cared here about learning a language? How many of the hundreds and hundreds of those I had taught had progressed beyond the intermediate? I drank steadily and by eight I had begun a third bottle. I thought of Melissa again. I realised that her face had begun to fade.

I had last seen at her four maybe five years ago at a conference in Leicester. I was signing in when I saw her unmistakable signature on the list of participants, but with a different surname. So, she had finally done the two things she said she never would do. Become a teacher and married. I nearly came away there and then, the pang in my heart was so intense. I was looking around the room for her slender figure and bob of dark brown hair when she tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hello, Paul."

She was a little fuller in the face but her blue eyes had not lost that impudent sparkle.

"I can't believe it. You here. Just look at you! I never thought I would see you again. Oh Melissa - I've missed you!"

We went straight out to a hotel and made love over and over again till we could hardly move.

Afterwards I asked her if she felt guilty. She blew out a whirl of smoke and shook her head.

"I know Stephen has women on his travels. It bothered me at first. But I have my moments too. He reps for a porcelain firm in Stoke. We live in a little village near Burton. I have a six year old son and I'm as happy as I probably deserve.What about you?"

I told her a lie; that I was in a long term relationship with a geography teacher; that we had a big house on the edge of Earlstone; and that I did feel guilty.

"How far did you get around the world with your French sailor?" I asked. She laughed and laughed until I thought she would choke.

"Bordeaux! He fell overboard drunk and nearly drowned!"

She wrote me down her phone number before we parted. Two weeks went by. I could not get her lovely face and body out of my mind. Finally I called her. No matter how often I tried or carefully I dialled I got nothing but that plummy voice, telling me that the number had not been recognised. The operator told me that there was no such number. I tried to remember her married name but could not. I had wanted to call all the schools in Staffordshire to see if she worked there. I actually drove to Burton twice and wandered around the town centre all day. I found the newspaper office and put in an a notice in the personal column, but there was no reply. I even contacted her parents by letter at their last known address but again there was nothing. Had I dreamt our meeting up? In the end I had to let her go. Again.

I stared at the third empty bottle. The next morning I would not go in to school, I decided. Two of my youngest classes would be taking part in a Medieval Day and my Year Nines could tick

along with those past tense exercises or flick through the readers. I would phone in the work to Denise before ten o'clock, until which time we were all free.

THURSDAY 14TH JANUARY

I got in really early. The school was deserted. Wonderful! But in my pigeon-hole I discovered to my bemusement a bulky A4 brown envelope. Sealed up with cello tape. I took it to my room and just stared at it. Whatever now? It was a quarter to eight. Finally I watched my fingers open it up and, at first, three type-written stapled sheets slid out. They were a set of charges for me to answer at a meeting set for the following Thursday.

Number one referred to Curtis. The second - to my horror but not to my surprise - related to Chelsea Dyer; "intimidation" (sic) again, "verbal abuse". I felt nauseated. The third sheet referred to a boy whose name I was not familiar with. I racked my brains. I read the charge over and over but could not make sense of it.

"On Thursday break, 7th January whilst on duty in the school hall you were seen and heard shouting at Sam Stevens (7/1) for kicking litter around. Staff were informed at the beginning of the autumn term that he has a disturbed background and you should have taken this on board. At the end of break he ran home, let himself in and wrecked the lounge."

I began to chuckle and then threw back my head and laughed in utter disbelief. The woman was mad! This wasn't going by the book - this was throwing a set of encyclopaedias at me! Why? I vaguely recalled the hall incident and then remembered that Pete had walked in to get equipment set up and had just stood and looked in furious amazement at the heaps of greasy hamburger papers, plastic bottles and crisp papers strewn everywhere. I would use him as a witness.

The rest of the contents of the envelope were more copies of pupils' illiterate statements, about nine in all. (She should be spending her time bollocking the English department, I thought, not persecuting me!) To my dismay, Harry - the posh lad I had nominated - had, if anything, because he had spelt his statement and punctuated it properly, come up with, by far and away, the most damaging critique of my behaviour. He could spell "intimidate"!

Five to eight. Right! I strode across the deserted yard to her office and slammed the envelope on her desk.

"What are you trying to do to me, Diane?" I yelled.

She got up and shut her door and picked up her pen and block.

"No! Off the record! What were you before you became a head - a bloody shorthand typist?"

Baldwin stuck his wrinkly tortoise head around the door.

"I want to speak to Mrs Pike in confidence," I said.

His ugly head shot back and he was gone.

"I think that you would be wiser to leave, Mr Brightmore."

I began to regain my composure. "When you explain to me what your game is, I will."

"Game? Game? I am investigating serious allegations of unprofessional conduct, that is my game. I have stated many times that I will not tolerate the browbeating of students in my school."

"It's much more than that, it seems to me - and many other colleagues. Don't you realise that you are in effect demoralising the staff? Are you trying to make Warden and the others of his stripe hate you? Do you want them to recruit me into their clique? You know what they're saying about Callie, don't you, that you're using her as a tool to lever out the dead wood?"

"That is ABSURD!"

“ Absurd? It took her less than an hour for her - and you - and with the help of that horrible, fat dyke from Learning Support - to get rid of Norman Budge!”

“That is such a monstrous farago of unprofessional comments that I really can’t think where to begin....I think you had better, for your own sake stop there. You have said enough.”

“I haven’t even started yet.”

“ The Mr Budge affair is a confidential matter.”

“Confidential?? Everbody in the school knows he’s got to go - even the dinner ladies! Thanks to a certain fat blabbermouth in the office who, doubtless, made sure that your predecessor got the bum’s rush..”

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Her flush had spread to her face.

“Diane, do you know what you are creating here?”

She did not reply.

“STRESS with a capital S. I suppose you know that I had a visit from the police on Tuesday, me, a law-abiding citizen, doing his job as well as he can under some extreme provocation, made to feel like a dirty, common criminal! I feel like a character in a Kafka novel, falsely accused and found guilty without ever knowing what he’s done wrong!”

She replied that she had not been aware of the police visit but she delivered her speech much too vehemently for it to have the convincing ring of truth.

“Do you know why I was away yesterday? No? I drank three bottles of wine on Tuesday night, that’s why. I just couldn’t bloody face Wednesday.”

I paused and watched this have its effect. Was there now a hint of remorse in her downcast eyes?

“Why, if the police are satisfied, are you determined to make such a mountain of it? For goodness sake, Diane, drop this or you are going to lose me. Use your commonsense.”

“This now has nothing to do with the police. I had to report these issues to County Hall. I could no more stop this now than fly through the air.”

Like the bloody witch you are, I thought.

“This is now an internal disciplinary matter. There is strong evidence that you are guilty of gross professional misconduct. You will appear before a sub-committee of governors next Thursday with the most senior officer from Personnel at County Hall.”

“Good God! You mean to give me the bloody sack! Like Budgie.”

“Any outcome” (her second most favourite word) “ Will be for the governors to decide. I urge you to contact your Association. Mr Baldwin will take you off timetable for two or three hours for you to consult with him....or her.”

How big of you!

“You know what a good teacher I am. Do you really want to lose me? Do you?”

“No, Paul. You are a very good teacher. But I can ignore no longer your...your....overreactions. These are children. I have told you informally a few times that I find your dealings with students... inappropriate. You have chosen to ignore me.”

Students! I shook my head in disgust. I instantly saw a young wife turning to her husband and saying - Darling I have some wonderful news. I’m expecting a STUDENT!

Then I remembered the third charge.

“This third matter in the hall. You can’t be seriously saying that I caused that disturbed boy to run home and wreck the house?!”

“A member of the P.E. department has made a statement which accuses you of shouting at the boy in such a manner as to cause him distress. You should have known about this boy.”

“But I don’t teach him and have never clapped eyes on him. How the hell am I supposed to know one naughty boy from another if -“

“EXACTLY..You can’t possibly and THEREFORE you should assume that any child you shout at may react badly and therefore DESIST from shouting!”

For once I had no answer. I could see her point. Then it dawned on me what she had said about a member of the P.E. department. She must mean Pete. Pete had made a statement? Against me? I sifted through the photocopies and there it was. I had missed it.

"I can't believe it." I said. "Pete. Of all people." I read it through.

"I entered the hall at 11am on Thursday 7th January and witnessed Mr Brightmore shouting at Sam Stevens to pick up his litter, not kick it around. The floor was in a terrible state. I had to organise a gang to pick it all up before we could start gym. When I took the class register five minutes later Stevens had gone. Somebody said he had run home"

Peter Reynolds

08 / 01

"You shouldn't take all the tittle-tattle against me in the staffroom so seriously," she said.

I was dumbfounded. I knew there was something else I wanted to raise. Then it came to me.

Callie-Louise. I looked at the clock. There were only five minutes before staff- briefing.

"I wanted to talk to you as well about Callie-Louise Sykes."

"In what regard?" she said, immediately on her defensive.

"To tell you what an extraordinary genius she is. How I'm reaching her through French...and music..."

"Music?" She had at last managed a smile, albeit a faint and quizzical one.

"Yes, but Chelsea Dyer is jealous of her. This is what is behind her allegations against me. Did she or anyone else mention to you that the real reason she was upset that morning had NOTHING to do with me.

I only told her off for laughing out loud when I had called for silence - inappropriate as you might deem that - but the real reason for her distress was the fact that her father had left home. Charli told me. The rest is jealousy."

"Why is she jealous?" Unable to resist, she had reached for her notepad. Oh no you don't, I thought. You're not getting any extra ammo to fire at me! I got up and left.

Somehow, I don't know how, I was getting through the day. I was subdued and, taking their cue from me somehow, so were my classes, all of them. I had no free in which to sit and ponder, perhaps a blessing in disguise.

At lunchtime Maxine came to my door upset.

I calmed her down and she eventually told me what was wrong. Callie had been sent home after lesson three.

"Whatever for?" I asked.

"She threw a chisel at Mr Bennett. She missed him by an inch. It broke the window."

"Why did she do it?"

"Well, Callie was whispering to somebody - and you know how her voice carries - you couldn't help but hear she was taking the mickey out of his...hair...Well, he stops and asks her what she is whispering about, and she tells him it's none of his ...effing business. He gets really narked and orders her out, so she picks the chisel up and slings it at him."

FRIDAY 15TH JANUARY

"Callie-Louise Sykes will be suspended three days, beginning today," announced Pike at morning briefing.

"What a crying shame," muttered Warden. A few in his corner of the room, but not me, tittered. She pretended not to hear and went straight onto the list of other miscreants which staff had written up for discussion on the board.

“Liam Denny.”

We groaned. He was an obnoxious boy, a true nose-picking urchin. Many, including me, had their hands raised. It did not help to allay my fears that I was swift becoming a non-person when Pike seemed to ignore me, and I had to be pointed out to her by a whispering Baldwin, as she prepared to go to the next name on the naughty list.

“Mr Brightmore?” she said with an air of impatience.

“Well, I get rather tired of him breaking wind in my lessons,” I offered, much to the merriment of Warden corner and many other staff, but not, of course, Pike. It was Friday and many felt less constrained than usual as the weekend light gleamed at the end of our tunnel.

“It’s OK, Paul,” said Pete, leaning round Warden to engage me, “It’s acceptable to say “fart” nowadays! Everyone does! You should listen to Radio 3 less and switch to Radio 1!”

There was a general chorus of laughter at this. The solemnity of my taste, so serious for one only in his early thirties, was a standing joke.

But Pike did not appear to see it.

“Thank you for that interesting observation, Mr Reynolds, but I personally prefer Mr Brightmore’s choice of language. Breaking wind sounds fine to me!”

At first there was a silence until Warden saw the funny side of what she had said. He guffawed and then Pete joined in, then the rest of us, until we were all rocking with laughter. But she had not realised what a ludicrous comment she had made, and she - and a few of her cronies - did not laugh (although I was sure I saw Mrs Hewins convert a guffaw into a fit of coughing.) She looked around at us all, perplexed, and tried to restore order with a cry of “Colleagues, please, we have other students to discuss...next...MICHAEL CARTER!”

But in jumped Pete, a rigger man, straightway with -

By God, he was a farter!
When the wind wouldn’t blow
And the ship woudn’t go
We used Carter, the farter to start her!

This effectively brought the briefing to an end. The laughter was hysterical, as if we were all seeking release from the tensions of the week. Finally she gave up, and with a furious glare at our corner she turned and left, which made us laugh even louder.

“No sense of humour, some folk!” gasped Warden.

Sanders, the snooty history man, deadly enemy of his geography colleague, retorted that he had no time for such “puerile toilet humour.”

“What?” rejoined Warden. “A brown-noser like you? I would have thought it would be right up your street!”

“YOU WATCH YOUR BIG WELSH MOUTH!”

Pete rushed forward to separate them but Warden had the last word.

“You want to buggar off, Sanders, quick, in case the other creeps get in first! They’re all down there with her in her office now, no doubt, fighting each other to kiss it better, while she BENDS OVER!”

This spat emptied the staffroom in a jiffy. The bell went. I decided there and then that I had had enough of that bloody school and would leave it at the earliest opportunity.

That evening I slowly wore down another bottle of wine or two. At half-past-eight my bell rang. Oh no! Not another call from the local constabulary! Warily and none too steadily I made my way down. Mrs Stubbs’ door was closed.

There in the snow stood Callie - and Maxine. I was shocked.

“Well, can we come in?” asked Callie.

“We were just passing and we wanted to ask you something.”

“It can’t wait until Monday?”

They shook their heads. I stood back and they entered.

As we mounted the stairs I heard the door click open.

“It’s OK. Mrs Stubbs” I shouted back “ Just two students who need help with their homework.”

The door slammed shut. This made Callie giggle. With a start of surprise I realised that I was not the only one who had been drinking.

I quickly put the wine away and made us all a cup of coffee. They had meanwhile taken off their coats, Maxine’s a proper winter coat, Callie’s a flimsy, scruffy thing. It was then I noticed just how almost non-existent Callie’s skirt was. They saw me look and laughed behind their hands. I resolved not to let my eyes wander anywhere into the vicinity of her beautiful legs. She sat down opposite and I looked around. She spotted my long Klimt portrait on the wall of a two lovers embracing. For some reason I felt hot and embarrassed as she stood and examined it more closely. She turned to Maxine and pretended to be shocked. They held their hands to their mouths again and giggled.

“It’s by Gustav Klimt. It’s called The Kiss. He was Austrian,” I said rather pointlessly.

They had nothing to say for themselves. They just kept watching me, then, periodically glancing at each other, they had another fit of the giggles. It was obvious what was on their minds. I searched for a distraction.

“So, Miss Sykes. You have been suspended?”

“Yeah. I kind of lost my temper.”

“Tu étais en colère... »

« ... en colère ...oui.. » She found this so hilarious that she began to shriek with laughter. I asked her what was so funny.

“ Sir...How do you say “arsehole” in French?” she asked. Now they were both helpless. What should I do? They were pissed.

“ Trou de cul” I replied without thinking.

“Monsieur Bennet - trou de cul! » she came straight back.

“Look!” I said, annoyed, “If you’ve come here to slag off Frank Bennett, a good colleague of mine, then you had better go!”

She looked mortified.

Maxine broke the stunned silence. “Callie, Benny’s alright. He’s a good laugh. You just made him nervous.”

“She’s absolutely right, Callie. You make people nervous. They think that you’re going to explode at any minute. Like some nasty volcano.”

She seemed to be thinking this over. It seemed to hit home.

She looked around the room. It was a mess.

“Haven’t you got a girlfriend to tidy up?” she asked.

Oh dear.

“Yes, but she’s away at the moment.” For the first time I saw suspicion cloud her face. Had she spotted that I was lying?

“Where’s your stereo?” she asked quickly.

“It’s behind the clothes horse.” I shifted it out of the way and pressed the CD play-button.

“What’s this music?” she asked.

“It’s Schubert’s Unfinished symphony.”

“Unfinished? Did he forget it?” she said and laughed again.

“No.”

“Well why didn’t he finish it?”

“Nobody knows for sure. But I have a theory. Listen and see what you think.”

After a few bars Maxine suddenly stood up, clasped her hand to her mouth and rushed out. I went to follow her but Callie stopped me. "She'll be OK in a minute. I think she's got to puke." She began to listen more intently. The first movement of the symphony begins so lyrically and nonchalantly with a stroll by a stream in warm summer pastures. It suddenly darkens and the optimism vanishes - as if a great monster of a cloud has swallowed the sun. Now it did so. Callie shivered.

I wished later that I had called a halt to matters there and then, for as I sat with my eyes shut, head spinning, Callie came over and sat down heavily beside me. I glanced over, about to tell her to go and catch Maxine up when I noticed that she was sobbing. I could not help but take her hand.

"What's the matter?"

"This music. It terrifies me. It sounds like...like a ...monster."

I struggled to my feet to go and switch it off but she grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

"No leave it! I want to hear it!"

It registered then that she had actually used the word "monster". Had she realised - somehow - what, I'm sure, Schubert intended to depict in the dark brooding notes of the cellos - the slow uncoiling of the demon, death?

In the second movement, where the cold, lonely seconds of the small hours of the night tick away in the strings, she let go off my arm, suddenly stood up and began to wander in a dream almost around the room. In her cheap tutu she looked like a lost ballerina. Whenever the crescendos of the demon roared out, she stopped and held herself tight. In a stupor almost, I watched her dance and swirl around to the music. At the final bar, as the turmoil faded into a peaceful end, she sat back down next to me, seemingly utterly unselfconscious. Then it occurred to me that Maxine had not and would not return. I felt intense alarm. I could hardly move. We sat and stared into the silence until she finally said "That was the most amazing thing I've ever heard. I know why he didn't finish it."

"Go on."

I looked at her. She was absolutely exquisite.

"Because he'd gone and died. How could he finish it? If he was dead?"

I could not believe she had said this. This was much more convincing than my theory, that he had simply had nowhere else to take the symphony after two such terrifying movements. Of course! It was now so obvious. At the end of the second movement he had died! I looked at her in astonishment.

"He wrote it when he knew he had syphilis," I murmured. "He knew his days were numbered, that death was on its way. I think he was ashamed - and frightened."

"Syphilis? I've heard of that....What is it?"

"It's a disease..."

"What sort of disease? How do you catch it?"

Oh, God! I went to the window, wondering how to explain it. I pushed my face into the dark blue pane until my troubled reflection disappeared and I could see down into the street below. Snow was falling down in great flakes. Cars were slowing and slithering in fresh snow and old slush. Of Maxine there was no sign.

There was a loud rap on the door. I opened it a fraction to find an irate Mrs Stubbs. She had a face with a very taut, thin skin which, unfortunately for the bearer - and I'm sorry to say - also the onlooker, revealed the imminent skull beneath it. Years of unsmiling had permanently left their mark in two downcast lines at each corner of her mouth. Her eyes were prominent and angry.

"I hope you realise that one of your "students" has vomited on the hall carpet, Mr Brightmore!"

This sobered me. I offered my profuse apologies and promised to clear it up the moment I had dealt with a rather urgent matter.

She seemed to recoil a little as I spoke and I realised much later that it must have been my winey breath which had repelled her. Her eyes darted around my head trying to get a look into my room. I apologised more profusely than before and promised to clear up the mess at the earliest opportunity and slowly closed the door.

Callie stood at my bookcase in the corner of the room. I knew I needed to ease her out of my flat and on her way. But how? I went over to her and slowly lifted up the book she had chosen. It was *Sense and Sensibility*. I retreated and sat down beguiled, watched her eyes devouring its pages. I studied her and saw, with a pang of pity, how worn and collapsed her booties were. Finally she looked up.

“What does “count - en - ance” mean, Sir?”

“Countenance. It’s an old fashioned word for “face”. “

“Then why can’t he just say “face” then?”

“She. It’s Jane Austen.”

“Jane Who? Is she still alive?”

“No, she died many years ago - in 1817, I think..... You can borrow it if you want, Callie.

Callie, It’s time to go.”

“Is it any good?”

“Any good?.....I think you might like it.....It’s about two sisters - one romantic and a head full of poetry, ready to fall in love with the first handsome young man she meets, and the other, the elder one...much more sensible, who really does fall in love; deeply and privately in love. I think it’s one of the best things she - or anyone else - ever wrote. I love it.”

She put the book on the table and looked down at me strangely for a minute. I stared back and then smiled. Her eyes lit up and she rushed over to throw her arms around my neck, pressing her cheek against mine. I was horrified. I shouted out. No, No No! I unpicked her fingers and resolutely shoved her away. She would not retreat.

“I’ve got so much to learn, Sir. Please, please, Sir, will you teach me everything you know?

You’re the only really intelligent person, the only good teacher I’ve ever met!”

“ No. No.You’ll have to go. Go and find Max.” I went past her and picked up her shabby coat.

It reeked of smoke. Disconsolate, she took it, went to put it on and then let it fall from her grip. She stood immobile in front of me. Her lovely eyes filled again with tears and suddenly she threw herself sobbing onto my sofa. She sobbed, she howled, she beat her head, stamped her feet and writhed around as if she was expelling all the demons that had ever haunted and inhabited her. Shocked, I stood and watched, unable to move and intervene. Finally, exhausted and all tears cried out, she stopped and seemed to fall asleep.

I realised it was well gone nine o’clock. I looked outside again. There was little traffic now. The snow had taken the night over. I wondered what to do. I picked up the rug and covered her gently. I looked through my CDs until I found the *Enigma Variations*. I poured myself a glass of wine. I played the music low in order not to wake her. But when the bars of *Nimrod* struck up and the orchestra began to swell towards the glory of the climax, her eyes flickered open.

“What’s this?” she murmured.

“Nimrod.”

“Nimrod?”

“Nimrod. By Edward Elgar.”

She sighed and whispered.

“ Elgar! What a...lovely name...Edward...Edward Elgar...El - gar!”

She stared past me, and beyond me, as if she was alone with her thoughts, and I knew she was mine to behold for a while, without any fear of my admiring gaze being discovered. She was now innocent and unaware, and she put me in mind of an achingly beautiful young cellist,

whose open, animated limbs had so complemented the Schubert quintet, Death and the Maiden, I had seen last year at the Symphony Hall in Birmingham.

It seemed to me that the influence of alcohol in her had worn off. Her eyes had lost that tell-tale glitter. I sat down by her. As the orchestra moved towards the second, more poignant climax she writhed about again, as if in the grip of some private ecstasy or pain. I could no longer stay silent.

“Oh Callie, Callie....There are so many wonderful things which I could show you which you have never dreamt of!”

I held my head and wept uncontrollably. The music had made the desire, the yearning to reach out and help her well nigh unbearable. I sat and shook with my head buried in my hands.

I felt her hand on mine and, when I looked up, to my horror she had taken off her top and was about to undo her bra.

“NO!” I yelled and I stood up on the sofa, tipping it backwards and trapping my rear-end between it and the wall. She stopped and looked at me and began to scream and then hiccup with laughter. What could I do? I could not escape. I struggled, flapping my arms and legs like some monstrous insect, but to no avail. I just exhausted myself more and she reeled around helplessly with laughter. Now the music finished and there was nothing to conceal all the noise from my landlady.

“I’m glad I’m entertaining you! Hush! Come and pull me up. Look, grab my hands!”

She did as I said and I lurched forward on the settee, toppling and landing on top of her. Instead of helping me up she pinned me with her hands around my back, howling with delight. I could not help but sense her soft breasts pressed tight to me and I tried to wrench myself free.

“Cally! Please!”

She laughed even louder. I could not believe I was in this crazy situation.

“Look, you’re going to get me into trouble!”

“It doesn’t matter Paul. I’m not a virgin. I won’t tell anyone.”

“PLEASE, Cally-Louise. You MUST not talk to me like this. LET ME UP NOW!!!”

“Paul” she whispered “Just being like this is wonderful. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Forget I mentioned sex. Sex is RUBBISH! I just need to ...feel somebody REAL, somebody WARM...just hold me tight...just for a moment...Please.”

I stopped struggling and just lay there, helpless. She was stronger than me. Then there came another sharp rat-a-tat on my door and the spell was broken.

“Mr Brightmore, what on Earth is going on? It sounds like thunder and lightning downstairs!”

I put my finger to my mouth and Callie fell silent. I opened the door just a crack.

“Mrs Stubbs, I’m really sorry. I was dancing around and fell over.”

“But what was that awful laughter?”

“Oh, the music? It was the Laughing Policeman by Charles what’s-his-face - you know!”

“That wasn’t the Laughing Policeman! I know the Laughing Policeman!”

“No. Not on his own. I was laughing with him. It was both of us together.”

“It sounded like a laughing girl to me!”

“I have a high-pitched laugh, Mrs Stubbs.”

I closed the door. Callie held herself and laughed noiselessly, grabbed a cushion and smothered her giggles with it. She rolled around on the floor and then lay there, her breasts shaking with mirth. I sat and watched her. Not with any crude desire. I just took simple pleasure in watching the sheer delight and hilarity of a child in a beautiful body, which was much too advanced for her age.

She stopped and all at once realised she was virtually naked. She sprang up and with her lovely long back to me she pulled her top back on.

“Callie, don’t feel embarrassed. I don’t fancy you one bit!”

She turned with her eyes ablaze, picked up my Collected Works of Shakespeare and hurled it at me. I caught it and several other precious volumes, and as she reached for others I sprang forward and grabbed her hands. She hissed

“ If you don’t fancy me one bit
Then I don’t fancy you, you SHIT.”

Her rhyming! I thought and countered quickly with

“You silly girl, I’m your teacher
We’re like a choirgirl.....and a preacher!”

She came straight back “You think that you can out-rhyme me?
You paedophile non-entity!”

Admitting defeat, and shocked, I sank down on the sofa like a blown-out balloon. For a few seconds she wallowed in her triumph and then, realising how much she had stung me, she sat down beside me.

“Paul?”

I shook my head and would not look at her.

“ Paul? I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I know you’re not a peedy....Nor a non-entity”

She lay her hand on mine and I squeezed it.

“Forget it. Let’s get you home.”

We crept down the stairs. We could hear Mrs Stubbs’ television. We went stealthily past her door, taking care not to tread in the mini-nova of Maxine’s sick. The door remained closed. It was such a relief to get outside. The snow was falling thickly again and the air was intensely cold and refreshing. She made a snowball and hurled it at me and then blew into her hands. The roads were bad and I had drunk a lot of wine, so I couldn’t risk taking her in my car.

“It’s OK,” she said. “I’ll walk. It’s only a few streets away.”

Then in the distance came the wolfish cry of the Friday night yobs.

“Callie, I’m taking you home. J’insiste!”

She gave me a glowing smile and tucked her arm through mine.

She soon became so cold in her flimsy jacket that she began to shiver.

I flung my arm around her and drew her in close. On the corner, through the whirling spirals of snow I could see a knot of youths snowballing each other. I crossed us over and had gone a few paces past them when a snowball thudded against my back.

“ Y’ alright, Mr Brightmore?” someone yelled.

“I BET he is - randy bugger!” yelled another. We hastened on. These were ex-pupils and would not recognise who or what Callie was, I hoped.

We were soon out of my respectable quarter of Edwardian villas and passing a series of streets of terraced houses. Callie turned us down a side-street away from the lights of the main road and I was into unknown territory. The houses opened straight onto the pavement and I expected every next one to be her abode. But no; at the end of the street was a jitty which opened out into a large dark yard. On our right was a gloomy factory with padlocked gates guarded by overflowing skips, and beyond, dimly in front of us was a row of five or six houses.

Callie led me past them to the end house and onto to a flight of wooden steps, akin to a fire-escape, which led to a first floor landing by a shabby front door. Beyond the tatty door-curtain an orange light glimmered. I could hear the muffled beat of pop music.

“This is our flat,” she said quietly. I turned to her and whispered good night but she took my arm again.

“No, I want you to come in and see how I live,” she said, so insistently that I could hardly refuse. Then I came to my senses.

“No, Callie. This is as far as I go. You must promise me never to speak of tonight to anyone. Tell Maxine that you left a couple of minutes after her. Nothing else happened, understand? Otherwise I’m in big trouble.”

“I promise, as long as you come in for a few minutes now. I want to show you something.”

“No “as long as-es” Callie, I’ve seen enough!”

“No, you don’t understand.”

She took out a key and let us both in. On our right was a small kitchen and on the right a dark bedroom. Next to it was a bathroom. The smell was oppressive, as if something was turning mouldy under a thick layer of smoke. The noise had hardened into a slow, weary piece of rap. At the end of the red-tiled passage sat a woman at a table with her back to us. The bare orange light bulb above her head hovered in a drift of tobacco smoke, as slow and as weary as the music, and put me in mind of a winter sun in a fog.

“Callie? That you?” a voice said thickly. Now I noticed a bottle of sherry at her elbow and another in the middle of the table. Callie hurried past me and turned down the music.

“Mum. I want you to meet the man I told you about. My French teacher.”

She slowly turned to me. The bob of blonde hair had suggested a young, attractive face. The reality was thereby made all the more shocking; her skin was drawn and haggard, with the texture of drying cement - an impression which the orange light could only exaggerate. I hoped that my expression had not conveyed the shock I had felt - to see such an incongruity. But I need not have worried.

“Bloody FRENCH teacher?” she blurted out. “Bon - jour!”

I laughed politely and took her proffered hand. She waved me to the chair opposite her. I took a swift survey of my surroundings as the mother urged Callie to fetch a couple more glasses. The room was bare apart from our table and chairs, an old TV, the stereo and, beneath the curtainless window, an old patent leather settee. Somebody once had begun to strip the wallpaper but had for some reason lost the will after half a wall.

“This is home,” said Cally simply, watching my face carefully for a reaction.

“What do you want to bother wi’ French for?” announced the mother to neither of us in particular and then sucked on the last centimetre of her fag, causing herself to cough. She stubbed the end out into an overfull ashtray and took a large gulp of sherry.

“You’re niver going to France!” She coughed again and cleared her throat only after many attempts. “Bloody horrible habit, our Callie! Don’t you dare start!”

“Which one?” she replied. But her mother did not wait for a reply.

“Will you have a cig-ar-ette?” she asked politely, graciously offering me one.

“No thank you, Mrs Sykes...I -“

“Miss Sykes”

“Oh I’m sorry. No, I packed up a long time ago...”

I wanted to try and explain how special and talented a child Callie was and make her - and Callie - understand how vital it was for her to control her temper but as I opened my mouth she began again.

“I can tell you’re a Brummie!”

“Well, I can’t tell you’re one” I replied feebly.

“Can’t you?” She looked at me puzzled.

“Mother, he’s joking!” explained Callie.

“Oh! Roight!”

She thought this over and pushed the vile ashtray away from herself.

“Whereabouts are you from?”

“Hay Mills.”

“Niver! Me too!”

She had named a street and a school. I could not believe my ears.

I told her that I had attended that school and had lived in Victoria Rd, only a few minutes away from her street.

“Well, how old are you then?”

“I’m 32.”

”You’re only a year older than me! “ she exclaimed. This put me straight on the spot. Any flattering comment - or a silence - would only make the ruin of her looks more obvious. Callie sort of came to my rescue.

“Well Mum, you look twenty years older than him!”

“Callie!” I hissed. But the mother only threw back her head and laughed, saying what a hard life she had had. Then she leant forward to get a better look at me and I pushed my face forward directly under the light to meet her.

“Good God! I remember yer! I do! I remember him, Callie. You’re Paul somebody, Paul....DON’T DARE TELL ME! Began with D - no B.....Brightwell!”

“No.....Brightmore,” I said, astonished.

“ Bloody hell!” said Callie, “I can’t believe you know each other.”

I was as astonished as I was embarrassed, for had my life depended upon it and had there been all the time left available in the Universe to sit there and ponder, I could never have remembered her name.

“You went out for ages with a girl I couldn’t stick - no don’t tell me -Celia?...Yvonne?...Melanie?...yes.....M-something.....Ma...Ma..”

“Melissa”

“ MEL-ISSA!”

“You remember that? You remember Melissa?”

“ I might be a piss-head, but I’ve got my marbles still!”

“I wasn’t implying that,” I said quickly. “ I just can’t believe in this whopping coincidence!”

“ Well it gets even better! I’ve just remembered something that you never knew! You’ll never guess what?”

“Go on...”

“ She was only my half-cousin, wasn’t she! I found out years later when I bumped into her again at a reception when my half-sister got married. I had always hated Melissa at school. You know why?”

I could only shake my head I was so taken aback.

“ Because I always fancied you when you were in the fifth form.”

I was left again speechless.

She lit another fag and finished her sherry. I tried to think of something to say. She rubbed her eyebrow and then stopped and cackled.

“Oh God! I’ve just remembered something else. I hadn’t better tell you though...Did you and her ever amount to anything?”

“No. We packed in a long time ago. I’m a bachelor - confirmed.”

“Drink?”

I nodded and she poured me a glass of ghastly orange sherry. She seemed to subside into her own thoughts.

“Perhaps you’re mixing her up with someone else,” I offered.

“No, it was Melissa alright. Gorgeous she was, lovely figure, lovely dark hair and lovely brown eyes..”

“No. Blue eyes..”

“ That’s right - lovely blue Irish eyes. I bumped into her after we had left school. She was in my best friend’s class!”

“And what was it you hadn’t better tell me? Who else was she related to? Noddy Holder?”

“NO! He was from Wolverhampton!”

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you?” I had grown very uneasy but I tried to hide it. I drank the noxious liquid. Now she took another sip herself and winked slyly at me.

“Well, if you packed her in, it won’t matter. I bumped into her in town after I’d started work. We got talking and she told me she was skint. She was at college, I think...”

“She went to Aston.”

“Oh. Well, she needed money. She hadn’t got a grant and I helped her out. “

“How?”

“She could make a packet on Saturday nights, being so drop-dead gorgeous. £200 easy.”

I flinched.

“How?”

“At the airport hotel. I had a room there. I had a deal with the receptionist. He got ten percent of my takings. The pilots and co-pilots would come off duty and they’d ask for a special room number - or my bloke on reception would ask them if they wanted any...special entertainment...you know! That’s how I did business. That’s how I met Callie’s dad. He used to fly for Swissair I think. He was a man and a half he was! You would never believe the SIZE of him!” She broke off with a cackle and confided, as if I were some girlfriend confidante, “He even bloody well made me come!”

Callie sighed and put her head into her hands. I must have shaken my head, which she mistook for another order of disbelief.

“No! It’s god’s honest truth! He couldn’t get the thingy on and so for an extra twenty I let him do it without. Big mistake! A few weeks later I realised I was up the spout - with bugger-lugs here.” She shrieked with laughter and shook her daughter by the elbow.

“And how did Melissa come into this?” I asked with a thumping heart.

“Saturday nights. My busiest time. I couldn’t keep up with them all. She came and gave it a try one Saturday and that’s how she got involved. She was really in demand and gave me 10% on every pound she earned.”

I had completely frozen up inside. I was paralysed with misery. Surely this could not be true. And yet - it explained those weekends when she could not come to Nottingham (where I was based) because she needed to get an essay finished. Oh my God. Oh my good God. Miss Sykes waffled on but I could no longer pay her any heed. I drained my glass. Callie filled it again. She had described Melissa and she knew all about us. Now I noticed Callie looking at me out of one eye. I showed her my despair and she covered her face with her hands again. The mother babbled on and on until Callie finally shouted at her mother to shut up. Couldn’t she see I was upset? But I intervened.

“How long did Melissa help you out?”

She stopped and looked at the ceiling, shaking her head. She couldn’t remember for sure. Maybe a few months. Then she might have gone abroad, she thought.

“To France.”

“That’s right.”

I pictured again the final letter I had received from her one bright morning when I was in Austria, at Vienna university. She had met an Antoine in La Rochelle, she had announced breezily, and was going to sail around the world with him and never come back. Goodbye. Good luck.

“And did she ever take care of your king-size pilot?”

“Dunno. She like the Swedes the best, I remember - always polite and considerate..... mind you, they were all very nice, clean chaps - not like the smelly riff-raff around here - and it was easy money. When wotsit here was born that put the kybosh on it. I couldn’t get her looked after regular and my receptionist found somebody else.”

There came an insistent rapping at the door. Callie sprang up, wiping tears away, and went into the hall. I saw a large shape enter through the door. She returned seconds later and whispered something into her mother's ear.

"You'll have to excuse me, Paul. Business matter." She got to her feet and staggered out, closing the door behind her. I heard a brief muttered exchange in the hall and then an internal door open and close. Callie went quickly over to the settee and opened it out into a bed.

"You sleep here?"

"Yes. My mother has the bedroom, or the office, as I think of it.

Well, now you've seen how I live - and what I live with. I'm going to bed now. I'm tired. I shan't tell anybody a word of what happened tonight or of what she said. She's an old witch. She probably read your mind and made it all up to hurt you."

I kissed her on the cheek and whispered goodnight. I thought about shouting a farewell through the closed bedroom door to Mr Sykes but stopped myself. I let myself out and trudged disconsolately home, almost tempted to throw myself down and freeze to death. It was past midnight. I had outrageous indigestion due to that rotten sherry. And when I eventually struggled down the path to the front door, to top it all, I realised I hadn't got my key. Shit. I knocked and knocked and knocked and thought that I might freeze to death after all. Finally the light went on and the wraith of Mrs Stubbs came up close to peer through the frosted glass.

"It's Paul. I'm very, very sorry, but I've left my key inside. I'm ever so sorry!"

She opened the door and without as much as a word or glance she turned and went back to her room. The hall smelt of disinfectant. Maxine's sick had been scrubbed clean.

Upstairs in my room I went through the drawers until I found Melissa's treasured school photo, taken when she was about 14, and her last letter to me, which I had inexplicably not torn into a thousand shreds. I tortured myself again with its contents. I went into the toilet and was sick. I sat down on the seat and stared at the picture of a small Breton fishing village into which I wished myself almost every morning. I realised that not only did I not have a proper, certain future (but who has anyway?) but I also had no certain past. And a very nasty present. I sat and closed my eyes for ages but when I opened them again I was still sitting in a cold toilet in Earlstone. I forced myself up and went back to my precious souvenirs. I tried to tear them up but my hands refused. I hid them safely away and went to bed.

SATURDAY 16TH JANUARY

When I woke I really could not decide at first whether I had dreamed up my encounter with Miss Sykes. It just seemed so utterly improbable. I ran over it all again. Who had mentioned Hay Mills first? Had I mentioned the school to her or had she to me? Had I mentioned that Melissa was my girlfriend or had she? Had she really remembered my name or had Callie already told it to her? I had not exactly been sober. I tried to persuade myself that she had tricked me cleverly - but tricked me all the same, like some fraudulent psychic. Just to be spiteful. But why? Because she was Callie's evil spirit! Hadn't she called her a witch? Should I go back with a tape-recorder, or a pen and pad, like Pike, and make her repeat it, every word? Had I even exaggerated - or even invented the whole tale - to inflict more Melissa-torment on myself? Ridiculous!

I could no more visit the den of Miss Sykes again than interrogate Callie - a pupil, for goodness sake! - about that unwise encounter, or cast doubt on her mother's veracity, or on the reliability of her alcohol-steeped memory-matter. All day I batted all the possibilities all around my head, from absolute doubt to absolute certainty and back, one minute feeling sanguine, the next distraught until I could bat no more, and collapsed exhausted on the sofa, to soothe my head with a CD of Mozart piano concertos.

When I awoke I decided that I could not decide about Melissa and then decided - and this made me feel curiously guilty - that I could not care less about her any more. I sprang up, took out the photo and letter, from inside my copy of Emma Bovary, ripped them up and flushed the bits down the toilet.

I desperately needed a new future - without Melissa's ghost - and a new past. Melissa's double-life would do, *faute de mieux*. To make a final break with her would help me to break with my old life.

SUNDAY 17TH JANUARY

All my brave resolutions for a brave new world seemed absurd the next morning. I looked out on the freezing, silent morning and felt how futile it all was, with occasional cars trundling past, to church or to some lousy shopping mall. With horror I remembered what I had done to the letter and photo. I looked in the novel to make sure - but they had gone - to some sewage works - and were floating away on a ripple of urine somewhere.

It was ten o'clock. I just could not face another day of silent introspection. On an impulse I phoned my mother in Birmingham and invited myself to lunch.

The minor roads were still snowy and slushy, but the M6 was clear.

My "stepfather", Brian, was in the lounge reading the News Of The World by an open, coal-effect gasfire. A tall wooden stork sat his elbow in the fender, as if stealing a glance at the open page he wasn't reading. I would go out of my way to get on with him today. At Christmas he had called me a bloody snob. His know-all brother, his silent wife and her particularly ridiculous sister, a clinically obese woman with a penchant for celebrity gossip, soap opera news and little else, had made up our party of six. At table I had not spoken much, finding hardly an angle at which I could seek re-entry into their world of small-talk.

I had valiantly sat through the Queen, patiently endured Eastenders but had had to draw the line at Emmerdale, stalking off into the dining room with a bottle of red. At that point I had heard him mutter "bloody snob"

"I thought it might be a woil afore we seen yo agin, Paul!" he said, lowering his paper to look me up and down. "But you're allays welcome. He-yah, hev a pew!" He went back to his paper and I watched the gas licking around the reddened but inexhaustable coals.

Brian had married my (divorced) mother when I was at university. I had come home one weekend and there he had sat; similar in fact, but only now a little redder and balder, to now. He put the wiring into Rover cars.

My real father had gone off when I was ten. A strange man, he had spent most of his youth organising trainspotting trips for railway enthusiasts to various engine sheds in the Midlands. Then, after the demise of the steam locomotive he had taken up angling, which ideally suited such a solitary, silent man. I did not know where he was. I did not particularly care. Numbers mattered more to him than words. Of those I can recall precious few falling from his lips. I had clearly not derived my facility for languages from him.

Birmingham, unlike Earlstone some thirty miles distant, had only had a light scattering of snow and once I had exhausted the oddity of such a phenomenon with Brian I decided I would go out for a walk before lunch.

You already know where I went. I could not help it. First I located Miss Sykes purported street. Like ours it bulged with large post-war semis, respectable, and self-righteous even, with their prominent bay-windows like well-earnt, well-fed paunches.

Then I strolled the mile or so to where Melissa had lived when we were teenagers, before her family had moved on to the Elysian fields of Solihull. Here was their large detached house, now much improved and gentrified with its stain glass windows and athenian portico. Melissa's father had been a solicitor. He had asked me once what mine did and, stupidly, I had said I wasn't sure. I felt too embarrassed to say that my parents were divorced and that he used to work at an undertaker's. (His invariably solemn face and aura of sustained wordlessness had seen him rise to some prominence there.)

I stood and looked again at the façade. Up there on the right had been her bedroom. I experienced again with a mixture of pain, pleasure and regret the memories of those exciting early days of first love; those slow strolls homeward in the dark, with frequent stops for cuddles; those long breathless farewells in the porch; and the snatched, delicious moments of intimacy on the lounge carpet when her parents had occasionally left the house in darkness for an early night. And I thought of our first proper naked intimacy, up there in her bedroom when they had gone out one Saturday night.

In misery and anger I turned away and suddenly saw the bits and pieces of my souvenirs stuck irretrievably on a grille at some sewage farm. I turned for home. Home? I had no bloody home!

Mother (I forgot to describe her) - a handsome silver-haired lady in her mid-fifties - was pouring off juices from the roasting tin when I came back into the kitchen. I made us all some coffee.

"How's school?" she asked with indifference. I did not answer at first. The fan of the open oven was roaring. She said " Oh good" as if I had answered "Fine."

" I hope I've got enough peas," she said, half to the pea bag and half to me. I took this as a subtle reproach for giving her so little notice of my self-invitation.

"I'm thinking of leaving Earlstone, maybe coming back home to Birmingham to teach."

"Well, you could always stay here for a while - until you find your own place. It's time you bought a house - keep paying rent - it's like throwing your money away."

"I'm not bothered."

"Just like your dad! Head in the clouds - or up his backside." She had her usual moan about him and I did not interrupt. Finally she changed the subject. "I suppose there's still no sign of a girlfriend on the horizon?"

"Too busy."

She tasted her coffee, grimaced and put more milk into it. Without ever planning to, I began to tell her about Callie; about her provenance and background; her potential; her doomed prospects; her certain demise. I thought she had stopped listening - she was pricking the brussels - so I repeated that her mother had been and was still a prostitute.

"She's reckons she lived in King Edward Rd, would you believe. Name of Sykes."

She dropped her coffee cup. She raised her hands to her cheeks and looked at the shattered pieces. She stood motionless. Then she looked up at me. Perhaps she was red because she was hot.

"Sykes?"

"Sykes."

She got up, went crossly to the cupboard and hauled out a dustpan and brush. Brian shuffled in. "Been heving a smeshin' toim, oi see!" He picked up a shard of cup by the door, dropped it into the pan and then went back into the lounge.

I got some kitchen paper and soaked up the coffee. Our eyes met. She looked at me with an anxious expression I had rarely seen before. She was normally all self-assurance, my mother.

Lunch was delicious. The potatoes were crispy, the pork succulent - with apple sauce - and there were more than enough peas. Afterwards I watched some nonsense on the telly with them until the light beyond the lace curtains began to turn navy blue and then rose to bid them farewell. As I took my leave they looked up in surprise from the screen, stayed seated, waved and told me to look after myself and come again soon. I kissed my mother on the cheek and left.

On the way home the snow began to fall heavily again. I got back to Earlstone to find a total white-out. The roads were slithery and many less intrepid motorists had abandoned their cars at crazy angles in the gutters.

I felt better to have been somewhere and to have done something different. I realised I was depressed and in a rut. My spirits rose even further when it occurred to me that the chances of school being open tomorrow, with so many children bussed in from nearby villages, was nil. As I pulled up and looked up that ugly house where I lodged, my spirits fell again as I envisaged yet another lonely day of deep apprehension. I would get out and go onto the common with my binoculars!

The threat of the disciplinary only concerned me now inasmuch as it might poison my references and jeopardise my future prospects. Future prospects!! I let out a bitter laugh.

I was going to leave that school. If I offered to resign at Easter, that woman might put the disciplinary on hold. I decided, as I poured myself a final glass of Shiraz, that I would phone my union rep in Leicester tomorrow and arrange a meeting in advance of Thursday in order to discuss my options.

I went to bed early and read about the Munich resistance to Hitler.

Some time later the phone rang. It was mother making sure that I had got home alright. She had seen the snow on the news.

"There's hardly a flake fallen here. It's weird!"

"Well, I'm fine, so - thanks again for a great lunch - I'll come over -"

"Paul. About this lunchtime...."

"What about it?"

"That name - Sykes. It took me completely by surprise. It's a name I haven't heard for years. Years! And to hear you say it...."

"What about it? Did you know the Sykeses?"

"I knew A Sykes family - in King Edward Rd. When I was a teenager I worked with a girl called Carol Blewitt - that was her name before she got wed...to a man called Sykes"

"Blewitt? She was probably in a hurry to change it."

"I eventually lost touch with her."

"Well if it's the same Sykes woman as I was telling you about, she's dead now. The child I told you about stayed with her for a while when her mother -"

"DEAD? When?"

"It must have been, two, three years ago."

To my amazement she began to weep. It was a shock to me to hear her cry, reviving vague, unsettling memories of childhood. The line went dead. I tried several times to call her back but each time the number was engaged. I returned to my bedroom but could neither concentrate on my book nor close my eyes and sleep.

An hour later I tried her number again. It rang.

"Hello mother! Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm better now. I've had quite a shock."

"Were you that close to Carol What-'s-her-name?"

"Blewitt. Yes I was. I've been trying to trace her for years. She was closer to me than I ever imagined."

"How do you mean?"

“Well, if we ever went dancing together people wondered if we were sisters, we looked quite alike.....Well it turns out we were.”

I was dumbfounded.

“It’s a bit difficult for me to say this - I don’t want old Misery Guts to overhear - but when your gran was on her last legs she said she wanted to confess something to me. She told me that my dad wasn’t really my dad at all. Your grandad had married her after he was demobbed - he was out in the Far East till 1947. What he didn’t know - and nobody would ever have known - was that she was already a few weeks pregnant when he proposed. Of course, in her predicament, she accepted and they were married straight away. They had been sort of promised to each other, without being engaged, since the beginning of the war....but there was no sign of him coming home. She told me she just got fed up waiting. She was into her thirties by then. She went out with a man called Blewitt on a blind date one night and just got carried away.....and that led on to.....me. Blewitt went on to marry somebody else and didn’t even know he already had a child. They had a child in 1950 - Carol - who grew up to marry a Richard Sykes. When he wasn’t bloody trainspotting or fishing, your dad and me made a foursome up with them at the pictures or the dance hall. I got on really well with her - he was rather.....well....crude for my taste. He made a pass at me one time and we didn’t go out with them again. They eventually moved.....out Edgebaston way, I think. When your gran told me we were half-sisters I was knocked for six. Carol Blewitt, Carol Sykes was your aunt, Paul. If gran hadn’t spoken up, not a soul, only the good Lord, would ever have known”

“But WHY did she tell you? Why not just keep it quiet? It must have upset you to know you weren’t who you thought you were! That grandad wasn’t your real dad!”

“It didn’t bother me one bit. I was just delighted to know my old best friend was my sister. As for my dad....he was, to put it simply, a bastard....”

This took me aback as this wasn’t a word I had ever heard her say before.

“When he died in 1968 I was pleased.”

“Why?”

“I- I can’t talk about it. Maybe when it’s my turn to go I’ll tell you then. Never ask me again!”
In tears once more she put the phone down.

MONDAY 18TH JANUARY

I had been up, walking about irresolutely, for a half hour when the phone rang. I had listened at 7 am to local radio for a list of school closures but Forest View was not amongst them. Now here was Kevin Sanders telling me on the snow-line that we were definitely closed. I found my crumpled copy and phoned my contact, Denise, who was not quite heartbroken to receive the news.

I went back to bed and lay there. So my half (?) cousin was a boozy prostitute - a boozy floozy - and Callie a peculiar sort of cousin of mine too. I felt bemused. This was too much to take in! Eventually I reached for a piece of paper and tried to sketch out our part of the family tree. Callie was my half-second cousin, if such a thing existed. Good God! I might have come within a whisker of committing an unspeakable act of gross professional misconduct, paedophilia and incest at the same time, had I been of that particular bent! Then as I was hovering between dozing and waking Miss Sykes floated back to me again and told me about Melissa. A half-cousin.....

I woke with a start. Good God! Was Melissa a relative of mine too? Surely not! On which side of the tree? I thought long and hard. If she was a half-cousin of Miss Sykes it would have to be on the right hand side. Otherwise Melissa would have to be my sister! Or my half-sister. I took the paper and sketched out, after much deliberation and crossing out, six possibilities (well there were seven if I entertained the possibility that Callie’s mother had either made up the

story about Melissa or had simply got hopelessly confused about names or events after years on the sauce - and God knows what else!)

On the back of my sketch I wrote down the six other theories.

1 My mother had had a love-child, Melissa, (conceived while dad was out fishing) around the time she had given birth to me. Or perhaps she was my twin and she had decided not to keep her, offering her up callously for adoption.

Likelihood: nil

2 Mr Blewitt, the local stallion, had secretly impregnated my gran's sister as well and she had subsequently given her, another half-aunt of mine, up for adoption (my great-aunt never married) and that child had become Melissa's mother or father. Melissa would be a sort of cousin to me and Miss Sykes, but not her half-cousin.

Likelihood: almost nil

(If Miss Sykes had bumped into her at a large family wedding, who had known to invite Melissa, or her? Maybe great-aunt Ethel had confessed all to to someone who had, for some reason, kept it all secret from our branch, because we had not been invited. (Or had we been? Perhaps mother had turned the invitation down and had kept it all secret to herself.))

3 Mr Blewitt's brother or sister (or his wife's brother or sister) had been Miss Sykes' great-aunt or - uncle and Melissa's grandma or grandad. But if so, why had they not known of each other as children? Perhaps the two branches had had nothing to do with each other. Perhaps a death or a divorce on that side of the tree had led to a new partner bringing in his or her progeny into the family fold, one of whom was a grandparent of Melissa.

Likelihood: high, (but Miss Sykes must have made an error in saying that Melissa was her half-cousin)

4 Mr Sykes' brother had been the father of Melissa. But, unless at some point he had changed his name by deed-poll to Martin (for that was her surname) then that would be impossible. Besides, instead of being a half-cousin (as Miss Sykes, I was sure, had described her) she would have been a full cousin and they would have almost certainly known each other.

Likelihood: almost nil

5 Mr Sykes' sister had been the mother of Melissa. But yet again the full cousin aspect made this very doubtful.

Likelihood: almost nil

6 A remarriage had taken place in the Martin family. Melissa had been the offspring of someone totally unrelated to the Sykeses (or who thought they were!) and had become Miss Sykes' "cousin-in-law" (perhaps she thought of that as a half-cousin) without either being aware of it, perhaps when the death or divorce of the aunt (it must have been the aunt, otherwise Melissa would be called Sykes) caused her blood relatives to lose total interest in the fate of that in-law side .

Likelihood: quite high

How could they then possibly be half-cousins? Wait a minute! Yes they could! There was a seventh possibility which would leave them half-cousins and me totally free of the (slight) taint of incest with Melissa. (The genes of Sykes père had nothing to do with me!)

What if he had had a liaison with Mrs Martin which had been admitted like my gran's and had later become common knowledge on that side of the divide?

Likelihood: low-ish but it appealed to me.

Anyway I amused myself for the rest of the morning sketching in the possibilities. Somebody had once told me that most of us alive were related to Henry the Eighth. If that was true, then being distantly related to Callie-Louise Sykes was no mystery. Birmingham was one great seething cauldron of inbreeding. Perhaps I was also related to Mrs Pike? To Jamie Curtis??

I got up around lunchtime and remembered I needed to phone my union in Leicester. I found the scrap of paper I had been given and dialled. I had a lengthy chat with a really sympathetic-sounding fellow and arranged to meet him on Wednesday.

I picked up my post which Mrs Stubbs had left outside my door. One of the envelopes did not have a stamp on it. I opened it first.

Dear Mr Brightmore,

After due consideration I have decided to give you notice until the end of February to find another flat. This is not particularly to do with recent unwelcome incidents, but they have hastened on rather a decision which I had already decided to take, for personal reasons.

Jean Stubbs

So in addition to all my other woes I would soon be homeless.

TUESDAY 19TH JANUARY

School again.

Maxine was missing from my second lesson - as, of course was the suspended Callie-Louise. And yet I was sure I had seen Maxine in the corridor earlier on. I was about to begin my fourth lesson with my rumbustious Year 9 class when a very miserable-looking Baldwin entered the room and whispered to me that she wanted to see me. There and then. He advised me to take a friend. I told the class to get on and he sat down disconsolately as my replacement at my desk as I went off. I phoned down to my union rep, another Paul, Paul Phillips, who taught ADT. As luck would have it he was free. I met him outside her door. There was an unmistakable, tell-tale smell of middle-aged woman.

"What's it to do with?" he asked.

"No idea," I said. I knocked and we were invited in. At her one side sat Robson, her moon-faced chairman of governors, looking as grim and expectant as an executioner. On her other side sat Mrs Pardew, the thick-necked secretary steadily releasing that musty odour. We were invited to take a seat.

"Mr Phillips, would you like to take the minutes for Mr Brightmore's benefit, as Mrs Pardew will for the school's?"

She then ceremoniously passed me a copy of the following letter.

Dear Mrs Pike,

On Friday night our daughter Maxine returned home with an extraordinary story. We were shocked to realise that she had been drinking alcohol. She refused to say how or where she had obtained it but did mention that she had visited her French teacher, Mr Brightmore, with another pupil called Callie.

When I asked her if she had obtained the alcohol there, she adamantly denied it. Yet the suspicion will not leave us that this may well be the case.

We are amazed at Mr Brightmore's want of good sense in allowing two pubescent girls over his threshold, late at night, especially when it must have been clear that one or both of them was under the influence of drink. My daughter admits leaving after a short while, as she felt sick. Although she waited quite a time for her friend to rejoin her outside, she did not in fact emerge.

In view of these circumstances we request that Maxine be withdrawn from Mr Brightmore's French class and away from the new girl, Callie (by whom Brightmore saw fit, without consulting her or us) to seat her), as she is clearly a bad influence on her. We can no longer be confident in this teacher's professional judgement. We know that he is a first-rate practitioner of his skills but wonder if he is a fit and proper person to be in loco parentis,
etc,etc

I showed it to my rep.

"In addition to this letter I have received the following message on the ansaphone." The Head pressed the key and I heard my landlady say

"Kindly tell your Mr Brightmore not to bring his pupils here again. One vomited on my hall carpet, the other screamed the place down. All of which he seemed to find highly amusing...."

I looked up. All but Pardew were staring at me; Pike with an expression of self-righteous triumph; Robson with contempt and Paul, my rep, with utter astonishment. Robson spoke first. "If these allegations are true Mr Brightmore - and if there are worse ones to follow - I shall ask you for your resignation!"

"Whoa!" shouted Paul. "Let him have his say - (or do you want a chat with me first, Paul?)"

"No, thank you, Paul. Firstly, Mr Robson, it disappoints me hugely that you can think that I would corrupt two thirteen year-old girls - especially one as vulnerable as Callie-Louise Sykes. I did not "invite" these girls in. They asked to see me on an urgent matter - on a very cold evening - and, reluctantly, I let them in for a brief time. It soon became obvious to me that they had been drinking. Rather than turn them out onto the streets of Earlstone - on a Friday night with its posesses of drunken yobs - I decided to make them a hot drink and keep them in a place of safety until they were sober enough for me to escort them home. Upon reflection, it might have been wiser and less risky for me - with so many dirty minds at large - to have called the police and handed them over to them. (I wonder if the parents would have been grateful to me had their daughter been brought home in a patrol car, with all their neighbours peeking through the curtains?) As it happened I could not prevent her running out to be sick. Perhaps the parents should reflect on their want of wisdom in allowing such a young teenage girl out on a dark Friday night? When Maxine did not return as I had expected, I was left with a dilemma. Should I go and look for her, leaving Callie alone, unsupervised, or should I take a drunken girl back out with me onto the treacherous pavements and go looking for Maxine in a snowstorm? Callie was very drunk and had what I can only describe as a screaming fit. I realise now, on mature reflection I should have called the police out to look for Maxine. However I took Callie home myself when she had finally calmed down, at about ten o'clock."

Robson looked a little mollified.

"I'm sorry if I seemed to jump to the wrong conclusions, Mr Brightmore, but after our contretemps with Mr Cornelius two years ago - "

"Mr Cornelius had sex with a ninth year girl in his music room. Surely you did not suspect me of such an outrage?"

"Well," he continued, "Everyone has to be very careful in this day and age in any dealings with pupils - in public and particularly in private - it's only commonsense. I want you to give me your assurance that you will admit no more pupils to your home again, under any circumstances."

"You have it Mr Robson."

Mrs Pardew's head had been bent over and preoccupied with her notepad. Now she looked up and threw me a glance of utter disdain, which I was pleased to return with a handsome grin, throwing her into a fluster. Did nobody else detect her odour but me? In that rather overheated study it had replaced the very oxygen! Did she not notice? Why did she not spring up and excuse herself, saying "I'm ever so sorry, I really do stink." ?

I was thinking that Pike would be as content with my explanation as Robson was, but, no, she was not.

Maxine and Callie would be interviewed with their parents present - (Miss Sykes! She could bring some sherry with her!) - and any issues arising from that might need to be referred to the Child Protection Unit.

"I wish my union rep. to be present at such interviews, Mrs Pike."

She agreed. He agreed. Pending the outcome of those interviews, Callie, on her return after suspension, would be withdrawn, like Maxine, from my lessons.

"That is outrageous!" I protested. "Callie has been making such wonderful progress - she is by far the most linguistically gifted pupil in the group!" But she was not to be budged. It went without saying, she emphasized, that there was to be no further contact with the girls, in or outside school. Did I not understand what professional dangers I was exposing myself to - in view of other disciplinary matters pending - and what damage the school might incur to a reputation by no means untarnished?

When she had climbed down from her high horse I said that I wanted to stay and speak with her on a confidential matter. She looked at her watch. She could spare fifteen minutes. The others got up and left.

"Well?"

"Firstly, I intend to leave this establishment at the earliest opportunity - at Easter if possible."

This seemed to discomfort her.

"Why?"

"You."

She flinched.

"Secondly, I wish to report that I visited the Sykes home on Friday night - it's OK - you can take notes if you like - It is my statutory duty to report that Callie-Louise Sykes is in moral - possibly physical danger - as the mother is drinking large quantities of alcohol again, and also because the home - (and I took a deep breath) - is a...brothel."

She froze and stared at me. "'Can you prove that?'"

"I was taking my leave when a man was let in - by Callie-Louise - and he went with the mother into a bedroom, on - as she herself phrased it - a matter of business - behind closed doors."

"That is supposition, hardly proof."

"Mrs Pike, the noise coming from the bedsprings left no doubt whatsoever. Callie could hear this too. He wasn't trampolining."

She put her pen down. Now I turned the tables on her.

"You are obliged, are you not, to report any allegation of child-abuse or neglect to the CPU?"

She nodded.

“Then please do so. I’ll have a copy of those jottings at your earliest convenience.”

I got up and left. I had a new spring in my step but the sudden realisation that I might have condemned Callie to another care-order - undoubtedly against her wishes, no matter how depraved and deprived her home situation - deflated me and brought me to a halt half-way up the stairs.

What a shocking mess! What a foul year this was turning out to be! Through no fault of my own! I seemed to have stumbled into some swirling vortex of ill-fortune and could not get out!

At break Pete Reynolds came up to my room.

“Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Warden’s suspended.”

“What?”

“Suspended! For what he said in briefing on Friday. Sanders has made a formal complaint about calling him a brown-noser, and that old cow Pardew squiggled down what he said, word for word. He tackled Pike about it in his free and gave her both barrels. He’ll get a final written warning at the very least!”

I told him about my hearing on Thursday, reaching for my large manilla envelope.

He snorted. “There’ll be nobody left of the old crew, at this rate. This used to be a tolerable sort of place to work - kids alright - staff got on - Drake didn’t interfere - turned a blind eye - I’m looking at the Times Ed - Simon is - Chris is - That bloody witch is turning the place into a cauldron - She’s got green slime in those bulging veins of hers -“

He stopped in mid-sentence as I slid his statement under his nose.

“Where did you get this?”

“From her. It’s part of the evidence against me. You’re a witness for the prosecution, Pete.”

He went almost purple. I won’t list all the names he called her.

“The devious BASTARD! She’s tricked me! Said it was needed by the lad’s parents for an insurance claim! YOU BLOODY WAIT -”

Now, I’m no good at rugger - my interest and career brought to an inauspicious and agonised close when the sharp end of the ball had hit me in the testicles after five minutes one freezing day at school - and Pete had played for his county - but somehow I managed to grab him and drag him down as he stormed out.

“PETE! For God’s sake - CALM DOWN! Do you want to go the same way as me and Budgie? I haven’t got a wife and kids. You have!!”

WEDNESDAY 20TH JANUARY

The senior union official from head office, that sympathetic-sounding chap I mentioned, turned out to be quite a disappointment. After my hearing, as I reflected upon it, I wished that I had just represented myself. I had imagined an insightful, rigorous advocate, spoiling to declare an official dispute about the cack-handed way she had dealt with it, particularly if the outcome was the worst for me.

He breezed in through the entrance, all joviality, and almost shook my hand from the end of my arm. He had a beethovenian mane of dark swept-back hair and was only too delighted to brighten up our day with his swash-buckling presence. His friendliness soon showed itself to be a shallow, cheerful indifference. My misgivings began as soon as I saw him, and they sharply increased when he caught sight of Pike in reception and hailed her with a “Hi, Diane!” After he had finished with my hand he told me that he just wanted five minutes with her - (he had worked with her at her previous school)- and then we would get down to business. I sat in a

nearby office and had to listen to him guffawing and her whinnying at his jests, until the five minutes had stretched to more like fifteen. She knew I was there and she knew that I would surely be able to hear what a light-hearted person she really was with important, reasonable people. The spiteful, callous bitch.

"I'm sorry," he said, finally joining me, and not sorry at all, "We go back a long way, me and Diane."

"Really."

He read through the charges and the witness statements, sucking on his teeth, drawing in his breath sharply in a whistle, shaking his head, frowning and going through a repertoire of many other mannerisms he presumably thought compatible with disquiet.

"Mmm," he said, all seriousness, putting me in mind of a doctor about to break bad news to a patient regarding a terminal disease, "This do not look good."

I caught my breath in anxiety. I then produced the minutes of the discussion I had had with Baldwin present. If I expected him to read it and shout Eureka! I was soon disappointed. He laid it to one side and drummed with his fingers on the table.

"What about that then?" I asked.

"Which bit?"

"The bit about the bruise. It proves the lad's lying!"

He reread it, making a stupid popping noise with his tongue against his gums.

"Mmm, a good point.....trouble is you did get hold of him. You say so in your statement. And all these other pupils more or less tell the same story."

"But they weren't interviewed till over a week later! Look at the dates. They've had time to be influenced by one another!"

"Another good point....it just depends how well the committee - and the Head - are disposed towards you. Do you get on well with Diane?"

"I thought I did - until this all blew up. We are hardly bosom buddies."

"Does she rate you as a teacher?"

"Yes."

He thought this over for a while and asked me if there was any history of me being in disciplinary bothers, to which I answered no.

"What worries me most is that Harry's coming."

"Harry?"

"Harry Redshaw, head of personnel. He usually only shows up if the axe is going to fall. I might have to give my "begging for mercy" speech."

"Mercy speech?" I could barely say the words.

"Yeah. We have a set speech to give if the member is looking at dismissal."

"Well, how will you be able to tell?" I whispered, almost whimpered, imagining "Harry" putting a black cap on his head.

"Harry tips me a wink."

"When?"

"When you've been in and the committee has heard the evidence. You withdraw and they weigh it all up. Harry comes out and tells me which way the wind is blowing. Then I get my speech ready."

He said all this in such a matter-of-fact way, without an ounce of compassion, as if he was giving me a recipe for pancakes.

"Hold on, hold on!" I said, close to despair. I felt like a man on an unstoppable conveyor to a mangler. "There must be a way out of this. Can't I offer to resign and go elsewhere?"

"You might. It depends how much she's out for your blood. And never forget that a Head has a responsibility to other schools. I mean, what I just said that is the worst-case-scenario. You're much more likely to get a written warning or a final written warning - the cliff-ledge as we call

it! - than the sack. And Diane can't just decide on her own - it's the whole committee - that's why I was asking about your standing in the school. If you were a bad teacher I wouldn't hold out much hope."

"So she could be outvoted then?"

"Oh yes! But she's a sassy lady - I know what's she's made of from experience! She's not to be messed with. If she's determined to get rid of you then that will carry a lot of weight with the governors - don't forget that she's a governor herself - the most powerful one - the Queen on the board- apart from the Chair - and being new in post will make a big difference. And, as I said, the fact that Harry's here worries me - a lot."

"Thank you." I said, feeling as flat as a squashed thing on the road.

"You've really cheered me up."

He laughed at my gallows humour and told me not to worry. He had a feeling that everything would turn out alright on the night. I should have made up my mind to tell him to go to the devil there and then.

That evening I tried to compose myself. The snow had virtually gone, with a warmer west wind blowing rain over Earlstone and turning the streets a shiny jet-black once more. I went out for a walk. I found myself a few yards from Callie's house and stood looking up at the balcony. The windows were dark and there was only the faintest orange glimmer coming from the hall passage.

I must have stood for twenty minutes irresolute. I half-expected some eager customer to come past me and climb the stairs - or another, relieved in loins and pocket, to emerge. In anticipation I pressed myself into the narrow space between the factory gate and a wall. I watched until the rain - now becoming a deluge - forced me to seek shelter.

I could not go home. (Home!) I needed some distraction. I needed a drink. I left the terraced street and walked along the main road to The White Horse.

The heat, the noise and the smoke walloped me as the door opened.

In the far corner sat Callie and her mother. Callie sat picking at her nails and did not spot me.

The mother peered at me through the haze and waved me over. Like an automaton I went.

"You're soaking," she said.

"I've been out for a walk."

"I don't blame you - there's nothink on telly."

"How are you Callie? Looking forward to school again tomorrow?"

She smiled shyly and shrugged. She was drinking one of those alco-pops, sweet booze for teenagers.

"I'm looking forward to French," she said.

I reflected. My hearing was set for after break. Tomorrow might be the last day of my short career. I might never see Callie again. I had not got the courage to tell her that the Head had decided she would not be coming to French for a while, whatever the decision of the governing body might be.

"Callie," I said, sitting down, "Let me give you some advice. You must make your mind up to keep your thoughts to yourself and keep your temper. You are a really clever girl. These next three years are so important for your future - you cannot afford to lose another day from school."

The mother nodded vigorously. Callie stared at the wall. She seemed to be thinking this over.

The mother leant forward, took my arm and began to explain something to me. Callie could not hear.

"That man, on Friday night...it occurred to me the next morning that it might look, you know, a bit...s-suspicious...."

I did not know what to say.

“ He’s my landlord. I owe him some money for rent and I was just telling him about.....when I could pay up.”

No, you were paying him in kind, I thought. She finished off her drink and put down the glass. I took the hint. I offered to buy Callie a soft drink but she shook her head. At the bar a young man who had had a few too many began to slur at me.

“ Are you “in” there? Want any ‘elp?”

“In?”

“She’s a cracker, the dark one...but I don’t fancy yours much! The old prossy.”

His mate began to laugh.

“ You don’t remember me, do you Mr Brightmore?”

I dreaded this question. As soon as they left the school I forgot them, apart from the really brilliant and the really, really naughty. I gazed at him. I shook my head.

“Your face is familiar.....” I lied.

“Jason Jolly. I was bad news! You were always bollocking me! But I suppose you were only doing your job.”

I smiled and went back with the drinks but heard one of them call me a wanker, none too confidentially, as I did. I turned and looked at them steadily to show I had heard but didn’t care, and they sneered.

“Nice people” I said to the air.

“They’ve been looking over here all night, “ said Callie with a menace in her voice.

“Dickheads!”

“Callie, they’ll hear you!” I said. “They don’t matter.”

“ I hate men.”

I got up and sat on a stool with my back to the youths, blocking their view of Callie. I changed the subject.

“Guess what! My mother knew your mother, Ms Sykes! She was called Carol Blewitt, wasn’t she?”

If I thought that this would elicit an expression of pleasant surprise I was very wrong. She went immediately onto the offensive, and was offensive.

“What have been snooping around about me for, you nosey parker bloody teacher?”

Callie folded her arms and turned her back on her.

“But Ms Sykes, I’m sorry, you told me you lived near to us! I only asked my mother if she remembered -“

She slammed her drink down. “Come round our house with her - she’s only a kid - invite yourself in and start thinking stuff up about me.....”

I got up. I didn’t think it would help now to tell her that she was my half-cousin. I made to leave. One of the youths asked me if I had been given the brush-off. Could they have a try?

Callie followed me out and stood in front of me as I turned up my collar against the wet in the doorway.

“She can’t help it Paul. Sometime the drink suddenly takes her like that.”

The steady, pelting rain was turning her dark brown hair into straggles.

“Go back into her. Try and get her to go home. I can’t help you. I’m in enough.....” I stopped myself.

“Enough what?” she asked. Her dark penetrating eyes were looking at me in sudden anxiety.

She seemed to read my thoughts “It’s that stupid little cow Chelsea Dyer, isn’t it?”

I pulled her back into the shelter of the doorway.

“What about Chelsea?”

“All last week she kept boasting that she was getting you the sack.”

“How?”

“By saying that you had threatened her. In the end I told her to shut her stupid little mouth.”

What could I say? Thank you? A sudden shout from within made me look back. In her mother's corner there was a rumpus. She was yelling at the two youths. I told Callie to stay in the porch. As I opened the door the shrillness of her voice and the vileness of the language she was using made me cringe. The landlady had gone over to try and calm her and had been covered in ash and fag-ends as her reward. She picked up a bottle and threw it at the youths.

"You bloody old shagbag!" yelled Jolly.

"You watch your f***ing mouth! You keep your comments about me and my daughter to yourself, you little prick!"

I went to her and under a hail of abuse from them and her I managed to drag her out. Somebody said "He's a teacher! Nice company he keeps!"

"Don't bother coming in again!" the landlady shouted at her back.

"SHAN'T!SHIT-HOLE!"

The pouring rain seemed to extinguish her fury. We took an arm each and escorted her the few streets back home.

Once in home she took up a bottle. I grabbed it and told her she had had enough. Carrie took it off me and disappeared with it. To my surprise Ms Sykes began to weep.

"Don't you tell me about Carol Blewitt! She was no mother to me, she never believed me, always believed him, that DIRTY BASTARD!"

"Shush," I said, taking her in my arms "Callie will hear...."

"Callie already knows." said Callie simply, returning from the kitchen. "Callie knows everything about what's bad. Nothing about what's good. Nothing."

Then *she* burst into tears.

I waited until they were calm then hurried home and went to bed. It took two hours for me to drop off.

THURSDAY 21ST JANUARY

The big day. I ate a hearty breakfast of muesli and honey and went for a long walk before school to get my thoughts in order. I came back and changed into my suit.

I taught the first two lessons. Baldwin had come to see me at the end of school the previous day to tell me that I could have lessons one and two off if I wanted, and could come in at break. At first I was tempted but then it occurred to me that to act normally would be the perfect answer to Pike's efforts to intimidate me. I decided not give her the satisfaction.

The early morning air and exercise had sharpened me up and I gave two first-rate lessons. I suddenly realised that I had nothing to fear. My conscience was clear and that was surely the main thing. If I was to lose my job over such a trifling matter then the job was not worth a fig. I would rise above such petty scheming and not give anyone the satisfaction of watching me grovel or wring my hands in despair! If I was going to go then it would be with dignity and disdain for her and her bloody sanctimonious committee!

At break I took the unusual step of going over to the staffroom.

Pete whistled when he saw my suit.

"Off for an interview, Paul?" asked someone else.

Then it went quiet as it must have dawned on those present that this was my big day. As I emptied my pigeon-hole a young woman nearby whose first name, to my embarrassment I could never remember, whispered "good luck" in my ear and gave me quite a tender glance. This must have carried a little further than she had intended for now others were catching my eye and winking or smiling. Sanders included. Mind you, I was neither in one camp or the

other. (I kept myself to myself so much that I hadn't even noticed that that young woman, who had started in September, had a glad-eye out for me.)

The bell went and I sat and waited for Timpson, my dashing union officer, to come up as prearranged. When he came we retired to an office downstairs to consult and await our summons. He outlined his strategy - to admit that contact had been made and that pupils were given a good telling-off but that there had been no aggressive or malicious intent. It was the first day back, a class had been extremely poorly behaved on a dangerous staircase and it was vital to re-establish good routines and discipline, etc, etc. As for the third charge, regarding the boy who had charged home to wreck his living room, he thought he might ask for the member of staff who had made the allegation to be called to give evidence.

"This might be her major Achilles heel," he said. "It looks decidedly dodgy and might well blow up in her face."

"What about the bruise? And as far as I know she didn't re-interview the kids to find out where they were when I was on the landing."

In answer he gave me a sheaf of papers which he had forgotten to give me last time. Every child had written that it was either there on the landing or looking through the window. For the life of me I could not remember where they had been and my head and heart sank. I reminded him about the bruise. He scratched his head.

"It's a two-edged sword."

"Why?"

"Well if we raise it it might sway the governors to see what you did more in terms of a physical assault which caused actual bodily harm. People don't take everything in. I might say what you told me - about it not being possible to make a bruise like that on its own - but they might be thinking of something else and not be listening. At the end of the day, they might just remember "bruise", "teacher made a bruise, rotten bastard."

"But it proves Curtis is a liar, a drama-queen..."

He shook his head. It did not matter. What was relevant was the fact that I had technically assaulted him and had not dealt with the situation in the calm and restrained way in which the new staff-handbook stipulated. Her glossy handbook! With a start I saw it in my mind's eye, stuffed with all other unread handbooks, initiatives and memos in the third drawer down of my desk

"So, I'm guilty."

At this point, as if in reply there came a restrained tapping and the gentleman known as Harry put his hand around the door. He was white haired and avuncular, the sort of man to put on a cloak and a false beard and play Father Christmas; the sort of man to pronounce me dismissed with a rueful smile and offer me a useless token of sympathy.

He quietly, almost apologetically asked Roger (Timpson) if he could have a word. Certainly, Harry. After you, Harry. Harry, Diane, Roger. It was all so bloody amicable. Were such dastardly deeds carried out in a more pleasant manner or atmosphere anywhere else in the world?

When Roger came back he was so worried that he was rubbing his chin. I hardly dared ask what had been said.

"It's touch and go, Harry says."

"Touch and go?"

"Yes. He wants to know if we have anything else in written mitigation. He's very fair."

"Have we?"

"I told him, no. We would take our chances in the hearing."

I felt dazed.

Finally we were called in. Harry sat with his suede shoes crossed over on the edge of the tribunal, apparently gazing out at the bare, swaying oak on the lawn. She sat in a dark suit with sharp padded shoulders and a ferociously glinting string of pearls. To her right sat a large man in a creased suit whom I vaguely recognised. On her left sat a middle-aged lady I definitely recognised and to the left of her an elderly man with slicked back hair who had been a governor for ages. He was a Conservative councillor.

The middle-aged woman smiled sweetly at me and spoke.

“Good morning, Mr Brightmore, Mr Timpson. My name is Barbara Conway. I’m a parent-governor and the chairperson of this disciplinary sub-committee.” (Of course! Conway! I had taught her two daughters; musicians - good linguists - family holidays in Brittany, two of those rarer birds now migrating in numbers to the fairer climes of fee-paying schools. I felt my spirits rise!) “And this is Mr Pearson, our local councillor, and on the right of Mrs Pike (who, I take it, you know!)” - forced laughter all round - oh,oh,oh - they would have a really good laugh if I had to have my sinful head guillotined - “is Mr Bond, our Vice Chairman of governors..”

Bond! The solicitor! Of course! Surely he, above all, would be out for fair play and would spot the inconsistencies in the evidence! But I sensed - I do not know why - (perhaps it was the strange incident which would occur after the hearing which influenced me) a proximity more than spatial between him and Mrs Pike.

I could not help but stare at Mrs Conway’s wart, to the left of her right eye. She was by no means an ugly woman. Why did she not have it removed? I glanced up at a staring Timpson on my left and he seemed to be asking himself the same question. There was a brief silence in which papers were sifted back and forth. I have a habit of imagining really silly things happening, and even in this very serious environment I now imagined Mrs Conway continuing “Now, you might be wondering about my wart, and why I don’t simply get shut of the nasty little buggger...but the truth is we’ve become quite attached to one another ...”

I almost giggled but then, to my relief, she began to speak again.

“We have convened today to consider allegations of gross professional misconduct against you, Mr Brightmore and we have read your response. It is my sad duty to inform you that we find the allegations substantially proven, but before we decide which disciplinary sanction to take we do need to hear the allegations read to you and hear your reactions. Then Mr Timpson will speak on your behalf and you will have a final opportunity to address the panel before we come to our final decision. Do you understand?”

I was not going to be intimidated, nor intimidated.

“Yes I do, thank you Mrs Conway,” I replied perhaps too loudly. Harry Redshaw coughed and did not waver from looking at that fascinating tree outside the window. Now Mrs Pike inflated herself to the fullest extent of her self-importance. She had the evidence neatly filed and in her poshest voice she began to read through her papers. As she finished with Curtis she flicked to another page and added

“My panel” - (MY panel!) - “Have also been made aware that your gripping of Jamie Curtis’s arm, Mr Brightmore, caused a bruise, which I myself examined...”

I looked straight at Timpson and he held up his hand as if to say it had better wait until she had finished. When she finally paused and Mrs Conway asked me if I had anything to say, still Timpson gestured to me to wait. Thinking that he might have some Perry Mason-like coup planned I deferred to his wisdom and experience and shook my head.

She waffled on about Chelsea Dyer and this time I rejoined that the girl had been upset, not because of her telling-off but because of her home problems. She was also jealous, I said, of a new girl whom she imagined I favoured. Her complaint was all spite, I concluded, only made as an afterthought, which the date of her allegation served to confirm. I found it hard to judge what impact this had, but all members did appear to jot my comments down. Now the incident with

the litter in the hall came up and instantly Timpson seized his chance. I have to admit he handled this quite skillfully.

“I would like Mr Reynolds from PE to come along and speak to this matter. I request an adjournment while he is fetched.”

Mr Baldwin was summoned and toddled off to find him. We retired to our room.

“Why didn’t you challenge that bloody bruise?”

“I might,” he replied. “When I make my speech. They will be listening properly then. But I’ve just got this feeling that she’s over-egged the pudding over that nutty lad who ran home. If we can make her look vindictive towards you, then the sympathy will flow your way and they might be more lenient. That warty woman...”

“Mrs Conway...”

“Conway...I can tell she likes you...and Bond seems a solid sort of bloke...it’s her and that crusty councillor we need to worry about. He sits there wincing as if he’s got piles...If I was a betting man I’d go for a final written warning, but it’s going to be close.”

We sat and waited until Harry tapped the door and almost apologetically invited us back in. PE Pete was not there. Mrs Conway opened a note.

“I have to report that Mr Reynolds has refused to come along - as is his right - and has also repudiated his statement against Mr Brightmore.”

There was a thoughtful silence. For the first time I sensed that Pike was ill at ease. Bond seemed to squirm on his chair. Harry still gazed out of the window as if none of this was anything to do with him. Now Roger Timpson played his ace.

“I contend that my member has no case whatsoever to answer on this score.”

No-one said anything. No-one needed to.

“I would now like to address the committee on my member’s behalf, with your permission, Mrs Conway.”

She looked at an impassive Pike - who had clearly nothing else to add - and nodded at Timpson. He opened his file and actually began to read a printed statement. Basically it was a plea for mercy; how drastic a step would it be to dismiss a trained professional even though there might be grounds; how much better it would be to offer him an opportunity to amend his conduct and to receive counselling or retraining. It all sounded so sensible, so reasonable and as he read I thought I saw Conway nod. But of the bruise he made no mention. Now it was my turn to speak. Should I remind them of the bruise? What if they had forgotten about it? Roger had. I hesitated. Should I ask for an adjournment? I looked at the impatient, wrinkled face of the councillor. No. I took the plunge.

“I enjoy teaching. It’s not my life. I could live without it. But I’m good at it. I’m not going to plead for my job. But I do a good job. The results achieved by our students at the Upper School excel those of other feeder high schools by quite a margin. There’s no magic secret. I work them hard and insist on good classroom manners. I took over an ailing department five or six years ago and cured it of its ills. Just by good discipline and good teaching. I know I’m not particularly popular with the kids but they respect me in the main; everyone knows I can get rather heated - but they know it’s because I care. Nothing upsets me more than unfulfilled potential. Mrs Pike is our new head and she has a clear idea of what pupil-teacher relationships should ideally be. Unfortunately I have not quite adjusted myself to her new regime - but I have been trying - and I would request extra help and guidance from County Hall, if it exists, on how to handle more challenging pupils in a more appropriate manner. I am rather intemperate on occasions - particularly with ill-mannered children or with those who want to waste precious time - but I categorically deny intending to do, or doing any harm to any child in my care...”
Now I took a deep breath ...” And I wish to refute absolutely causing a bruise on Jamie Curtis’s arm.”

I sensed Roger flinch but I could not row back. To his amazement and everyone else's, including mine, I grabbed his forearm and pressed it as hard as I could between my thumb and fingers. He winced.

"I did not grab Curtis like this - but used the flat of my hand - like this, on the back of his upper arm - and not the right, but the left - to guide him to the place where I wanted him to stand. If Mr Timpson would mind rolling his sleeve back I will prove my case."

Roger now revealed five red marks on his forearm.

"Had I gripped him like this there would have been more than one bruise, as you can see for yourselves."

I looked up and saw Bond staring at Timpson's arm and my hand. Then he looked quickly at Pike before sitting well back into his chair, arms folded, to contemplate the ceiling. Conway was actually smiling. I saw a tell-tale flush of red creep up Pike's throat. The councillor frowned.

"Can we hev the lad fetched?"

Pike spluttered " Ah - well - I think - shouldn't parents have to be consulted Mr Redshaw?"

He gave the slightest of nods.

"Well, did he hev two or more bruises or just one bruise?" persisted the councillor.

She was forced to concede that he had only one.

"Peculiar" he said and gripped his own forearm.

"It's a bit like trying to pull out a thorn with broken tweezers." I added quietly. "You just can't do it."

I sat back and studied the naked tree which Harry was now staring at more intently than ever. A crow was flapping on a puny upper branch and proving to anyone who cared to think about it how unimportant and absurd this cosy charade was.

"Is that all you have to say, Mr Brightmore?" asked Mrs Conway.

I was about to nod yes but the silver-tongued diplomat inside me said

"No. I would like to say in conclusion that I appreciate that this has not been easy or pleasant for any of you and would like to thank you in advance for listening patiently to the evidence and for dealing with this in a fair-minded manner. Thank you."

And then we were on our way out.

Back in our room Roger looked serious and I thought I was in for a telling-off but he seized my arm, as I had seized his, and exclaimed

"You bloody genius! You've completely scuppered her! They can't sack you after that!"

But five minutes ticked on to ten and then nearly twenty. The euphoria slowly turned into anxiety.

Then Harry's head appeared around the door again.

"We're ready," he said kindly.

We sat down. My heart was thumping. Conway looked troubled. Pike would not look at me.

The other two studied their files.

"Thank you for your patience," said Conway. "After much deliberation we have decided, Mr Brightmore, to give you an oral warning. This will remain on file for twelve months and I personally would like to urge you to be as good as your word and accommodate yourself - however much that may go against the grain - to our new headteacher's way of thinking. I can personally testify that you are indeed a very gifted and exceptional member of a profession which is, alas, still rather dominated by the distinctly unexceptional."

Dominated by the unexceptional! Was this a barb aimed straight at her flushing neighbour? Had Pike indeed begun to make enemies farther afield than the staffroom?

Once outside Roger grabbed my hand.

"I can't believe it! Only an oral warning! That's bugger-all!"

We went back to the room to tidy up our papers. I asked him why he had not mentioned the bruise. He looked at me but did not have an answer.

“Well?”

“I wasn’t sure ...it was a two-edged sword...risky....”

It had saved the day for me, two-edged or not. I made a mental note to cancel my union subscription. As we came downstairs he muttered that he just wanted to say ta-ta to Diane. Ta-ta to Diane. All very intimate again; as if a man of some integrity had not just come within inches of the sack because of malpractice, malice and maladroitness. A useless Harry was already slinking away, back to the remote cloisters of County Hall. Timpson knocked the door and as he did, it sprang open and out marched a very red-faced Mr Bond, neither looking at him nor me. Timpson pushed at the door but met with resistance from within. I had gotten just a glimpse of her face, reddened and tearful.

“Diane?” he said. He knocked once more and pushed, but the door remained firmly shut.

“She must be too busy to see me,” he muttered as he passed me and nodded goodbye.

It was only then that it dawned on me what a humiliating defeat I had inflicted on her. She had wheeled out the big guns and I had been hit by a pea-shooter. She could have given me an oral warning simply within the remit of her own powers. Had that been the gist of Bond’s furious complaint? Those tears. The more I thought about them the more I wondered whether they were down to the disapproval of that key governor or of something more personal. Perhaps my naivety and inability to pick up signals, under the stress of such an experience, had finally changed for ever. I had woken up!

I went back to my room and took over from a grateful Baldwin. I took off my suit jacket and launched myself into a sizzling oral lesson with my ninth years. I basked in the warmth of my victory, never dreaming what a truly scorned, vindictive woman in defeat would be truly capable of.

FRIDAY 22ND JANUARY

As I was getting ready for 8 / 5’s lesson there began a shocking commotion at the door. There was shouting and the door was being repeatedly banged. My temper instantly rose - Had I not made absolutely clear to this class in what manner they were to wait outside my room? I bounded to the door and stopped dead as a voice - an oral warning! - within me told me to take care. I opened the door and a crying Chelsea Dyer fell in with Callie close behind, her hands grasping her throat.

“Go on! Ask him yourself, you stupid little cow!” she shouted “Go on ask him!”

“CALLIE ...STOP...!” I yelled but she was in full flow. Chelsea was on the floor now, scrambling backwards on her haunches to get away from her.

“Does he fancy me? Has he shagged me? Does he want to? Are you really surprised he’s still here? Why hasn’t he had the sack? Why hasn’t - Go on, ask him yourself, you fucking-“

I forced the door to and grabbed Callie by the arm and whisked her away.

“You calm down, Callie-Louise Sykes! THIS INSTANT!”

I turned to Chelsea, who though convulsed with terror, managed to shout “piss off” at her attacker. Callie now put every last ounce of hatred and fury into every fibre and it was only by a superhuman effort that I managed to hold her back. I wrestled her to the floor and, kneeling over her and panting with emotion and shock myself, I told her that this had to stop; that Chelsea wasn’t worth it; that if she stopped now she might only be suspended; that if she assaulted her again, and really injured her, that she would probably never return; that I would never, ever see her again. Gradually, like a brake, my voice calmed her until she lay like a great limp doll on the carpet, breathing harder than me, with an unearthly shrill sound, neither a sob, nor a scream, in her throat.

“She pushed me, Sir...” began Chelsea.

“Shut up, you stupid girl. Never speak to me again. Ever.” I said this as low as I could so that none of those staring through the door - window could possibly hear.

“Callie?” I said gently. “I’m taking you to the medical room. Alright?”

She nodded as her breath slowed. I pointed at Chelsea and then pointed to the farthest corner of the room into which I wanted her to go. I opened the door and told the class to go quietly down to the library where I would join them presently. As soon as the last ones were on their way I lifted Callie to her feet and helped her down the stairs and across the yard to the main building. “Callie has had an.....upset,” I said to a startled Pike. “She will need watching.” I had left her slumped across two chairs in the medical room. “I’ll give you my report at the end of the lesson.”

I had told Callie quietly on the way over to say absolutely zero to Mrs Pike.

I collected the class, led them back upstairs and issued the readers again to them. This time there was not a sound, even after the bell had gone.

“Now listen to me,” I said. “Firstly, you may or may not be aware that complaints were made against me as a result of that disgusting noise you made on your first day back and about the way I handled it. I am not getting the sack, no matter what a certain member - or certain members of this class - have been saying. Secondly, with regard to Callie-Louise Sykes; without going into her problems - that is not your business - believe you me, she has experienced more sorrow in her short life than some of you will ever know in a whole lifetime. The last thing that any of you should do is to tease her - today’s event should firmly convince you of that. She needs understanding, kindness and respect. If you cannot offer one of those three...” - and here I scrutinised the stony faces of Chelsea and her cronies - “Then it would be best to have absolutely no contact with her at all. If I get to hear of anyone baiting Callie-Louise again, no matter where it happens, I will personally take severe disciplinary action against that person. Thirdly, that some amongst you should make scandalous allegations that I am - or have been - somehow personally involved with that poor girl...disgusts me...I shall refer anyone who repeats such a vile falsehood immediately to the headteacher, and I shall seek, through my teacher association, the most extreme sanction to be applied, the expulsion of that person from this school.”

I surveyed their faces and could not decide whether this speech had made the majority respect me more or hate me more. I knew however that I had for ever lost the rapport which I had enjoyed with that class.

“You will remain behind, Chelsea Dyer.” The rest went. On the stairs I managed to catch Denise as she left her classroom for home. Could she help me out for just two minutes? She followed me into the room.

“Right, Chelsea. Mrs Brown will witness what I am about to say.

You have a clear choice. One, you can just say that Callie pushed you and shouted at you, which is basically the truth, and I will not report the shocking provocation and vile sexual allegations which you have made to her, about herand about me. Two, you can write a thick book about what she said and did to you. If you do, I will inform Mrs Pike about exactly what you said and involve my union as I said I would. You may get her expelled but at the same time get yourself expelled. Is it worth it? I shall write a report about Callie’s bad behaviour and - believe me - she will get into trouble. Now which is it to be? Come on, we can’t keep Mrs Brown waiting...”

I was bluffing of course but this stupid girl did not know. She whimpered straightaway that she was sorry for what she had said and would not make a big fuss.

“What on Earth has she been saying?” asked Denise after the girl had gone.

“That I’m having an affair with Callie-Louise Sykes.”

Amazed, she shook her head sadly and went. I found some paper and wrote the following:

At 2:10 I became aware of an argument outside my door. This transpired to be taking place between Callie-Louise Sykes and Chelsea Dyer. The former pushed the latter and she fell onto the floor of my classroom. Callie was so angry that I could not hear clearly what she was saying. I managed to separate them and, because Callie was clearly so upset that she could not stay in the lesson, I escorted her to the medical room.

I signed and dated it and tore over to the main building. As luck would have it Pike's door was closed and Callie was still in the sick-room, sitting up and staring at the wall opposite. I pushed my paper under her nose and told Callie that I had "fixed" Chelsea.

"Just say you were mad at something you thought she'd said."

She passed the note back and thanked me under her breath.

Pike's door now opened and a member of staff emerged and left. She held the door open for me and I went in. I put the report on her table and while she perused it I affected nonchalance.

"Something and nothing, really." I said stretching. "Just girls falling out....Callie got the worst of it in the end. Upset herself so much.....well you can come and see for yourself"

She stiffened but appeared to buy it. She took the note and put it into her record book.

"Will you give me a reference when I go?"

She looked at me and tidied her desk, camouflaging, I thought, her discomfort.

"I don't want you to go Paul. I want you to change."

"Don't patronise me. I'm fine as I am, thank you. I don't agree with your way of doing things.

I need to find a school with a more traditional view of discipline. Like this was before you came. Do you know that pupils' behaviour is noticeably worse under you?"

"Really?"

"Yes. They seem to sense that you are their guardian angel against the evil devils on the staff. They might be stupid but they aren't blind."

"I think you've said enough..."

But now I had the bit between my teeth.

"WHY can't you listen to another point of view? No, you are going to hear this! I know that since the Children's Act a whole new regime has come in - people like you - the liberal mafia - no, listen - but when I started in the eighties a child did something wrong, a teacher told it off and it got punished - now a child - sorry a student - does something wrong, a teacher tells it off and a teacher gets punished - Alice in Wonderland! I tell you, in two generations they'll have to bring back the cane -"

"What nonsense! I insist that in my school -"

"In your school! Norman Budge was here when you were playing kiss-chase at Juniors!"

"In the school which I run staff will speak and deal with students in a responsible and appropriate manner -"

"Appropriate? What if the child needs a bollocking -"

"Mr Brightmore!"

"What if the child needs a really good, angry - yes good old anger, a lost virtue - needs an angry telling off? Your sort are more interested in preserving their own dignity than doing what is really proper and moral - appropriate - in your speak. Righteous anger is very appropriate to combat malice, evil, inappropriate behaviour, as you would have it. Was it inappropriate for Hitler to invade Poland and murder the Jews! Chamberlain had a quiet word with him! You would have given Jesus Christ an oral warning for casting out the money lenders from the temple! What you view as proper is in fact misguided - and yes, cowardly - because you fail to properly discipline the child and leave it in a state of moral confusion."

"This is outrageous, Mr Brightmore! Enough said!"

“ Oh, I’ve hardly begun yet! What you and people like you dismally fail to realise is that the quiet word in the ear, the little homily just DOES NOT WORK with the vast majority of really naughty children. It’s bad science and bad psychology! The higher cortex which is amenable to reason does not develop until past the mid-teens. You might as well try to tell a cat not to scrat! They need to experience good, old-fashioned, untrendy FEAR, Mrs Pike in order to behave properly!”

“I used to work in a building like that and it wasn’t pleasant.”

“Is it more pleasant to have the teachers walking around in trepidation and the children ruling the roost?”

“Are you implying that this school -“

“The trouble with people like you Mrs Pike, the sanctimonious liberals who do not wish to trample on the individual child’s rights and deny them the space in which to.....blossom and find themselves....the trouble is that they are usually the ones living in the leafy suburbs, miles away from the council estates where the impact of their policies on the “liberated, free spirits” is to be seen nightly in broken fences, burned out sheds and people afraid to put their heads out of doors!”

There! I had told her - more or less politely, if candidly - what I thought of her without a scribbler in sight!

I sat back and watched the effect my diatribe had had. A long flush extended from her chest to her chin.

“The answer to your question is that I will write you an honest reference - if it facilitates your departure - but you do realise that I shall be forced to mention the current warning on your record? After twelve months it will disappear. So, it looks as if you will have to endure a further year of me and my “regime” - and believe you me, Mr Brightmore, any further attempt to apply any disciplinary code other than the one in your current staff handbook will be dealt with most severely, righteously angry or not. I urge you to read it.”

“I think we understand each other. I predict that you will have turned over - or turned out - 50 - 60% of the current staff in three years time.”

“Mr Brightmore, if colleagues cannot operate within County Hall guidelines for their conduct and in harmony with the ethos demanded by my board of governors, then they have only themselves to blame. Good evening.”

“There is one more thing. Callie-Louise.”

“Yes?”

“Did you act on my assertions?”

“Not yet. I would have done so yesterday but for a certain other matter.”

“Good. I wish to withdraw them. I jumped to a hasty conclusion. Ms Sykes told me herself - I bumped into her in the town - that the gentleman she was speaking to was in fact her landlord.”

“And of course, they were trampolining on her bed as they were speaking.”

I studied her for a trace of humour but found none. She reached for her notepad and flicked through until she found, presumably, the other notes she had taken from me.

“Mr Brightmore, I have to warn you. If you knowingly give false, incomplete or inaccurate information - or fail to report information which you have good cause to believe - in a case where a minor is in moral or physical danger, then you are liable to summary dismissal and to a criminal prosecution for withholding evidence...”

“She told me that she was discussing business with her landlord. Assume therefore that what I said about the bed was a creaking due to them sitting on it, there being probably no other furniture available in the room. They are very poor. Perhaps you would like to invite her in to interview her about her bedroom lay-out yourself.”

She threw back her head in evident disapproval. She had absolutely no sense of humour. Her staffroom laughter was ever a deliberate sham.

I knew I had covered myself, and she knew it too. After all, if she did not believe this, wasn't she now under the very same obligation, that she had pompously just reminded me of, as I was?

When I left her Callie had gone.

That Friday night as I sat nursing a glass of wine there was a frantic banging at the door. I knew at once that it was Callie. I flew down the stairs as Mrs Stubbs was opening her lounge door, shouting that I would take care of it.

It was Callie. In a terrible state, wet, bedraggled and crying. I held my finger to my mouth and and shouted "No! You can't come in! I've told you before, you must stay away!" I ushered her in and shoed her up the stairs. I knocked on Mrs Stubbs' door.

"I'm really sorry, Mrs Stubbs. When I move I'm going right out of the catchment area. I'm sick of this harassment."

She approved and there was even a faint smile on her bony face.

"Well, I can't pretend that that won't be the best solution for both of us," she said.

I rushed upstairs. Callie sat on the sofa, head bent.

"What on Earth has happened?" I whispered.

Now she showed me her beautiful face. Her cheek was bruised and swelling. I fetched her a large bath-towel and my pyjamas. While she changed I went into the kitchen to make coffee. She was still drying her hair when I knocked and came back in. I picked up her scanty, soaking clothes and put them to dry by the fire. I put on some music to hide our voices. I applied a cold flannel to her face. I put my arm around her to warm her through. She trembled and laid her head on my shoulder. I could not help it. I began to dry her hair gently with the towel.

"What's this music?" she asked. It was Schubert, Death and the Maiden.

"Death and the Maiden," she whispered.

"Death comes for the maiden but she pleads with him not be taken. Drink your coffee."

"They don't know where I am. Or even if I am."

"Who?"

"The police."

"What has happened, Callie?"

She got up and and walked around, sipping at her steaming mug. She went into the kitchen.

"Where do you keep your sugar?" she called. I showed her. She stood on the cold tiles in bare feet. I fetched her some socks.

"My pyjamas suit you, Callie."

She smiled and winced. She looked in the mirror.

"God, I look awful."

"Who hit you? Your mother?"

She screwed up her eyes and shook her head. She began to sob again. The story came out little by little. When she had finished I put my hands to my face, appalled.

"Who was he?" I demanded, thinking it might be that cretinous Jason Jolly.

"Dunno. A new one."

"And what did your mother do?"

"She told him I wasn't for sale. Then when he starts on me she starts screaming. To leave me be. He was as drunk as she was. When he dragged me off the sofa she got the big frying pan and banged him on the head. Then he gets up and starts punching and kicking her - I tried to pull him off but he's too big. Then he comes for me again, with his trousers down. Then we hear the police siren, just as he's about to stick his - thing - in me and he gets off. I'm sure she's dead"

“But how did you get away?”

“I hid under the table and slipped out while they were trying to arrest him. She wasn’t moving.”

“You should have stayed with her.”

“Why the fuck should I? She never wanted me! What do I owe her? What would have happened to me if I’d stayed? I’m sick of being the child nobody wants. I’m not going into Care again - Care! - I’d rather be dead!”

I calmed her down. We went to sit back on the sofa.

“Death and the Maiden,” she breathed and slowly shook her head. “Why, why have I got this fucking life? Why? I’m thirteen already. What could it have been like?”

She looked gloomily around the room as the music began to plead again for mercy. I searched for a few words of comfort but found none. I felt so desperately sorry for her, a beautiful genie trapped in a filthy bottle.

“Paul. You’ve got to help me. I can’t live like this any more. I can never go back there. I hate her. This is the life I want. Close to you. Music, books, proper talking.....warmth, kindness. Paul. I love you. I want to live here. With you.”

She laid her head on my lap and stretched out her legs on the sofa. Her hand found mine and gripped it tight. Within a few moments she was sound asleep.

“I’ll look after you Callie,” I whispered. “I promise.”

After the music had stopped I eased myself from under her and fetched a quilt and a pillow. She half-woke and smiled as I made her comfortable. I kissed her bruised cheek and turned out the light.

SATURDAY 23RD JANUARY

I wrote her a note - ON NO ACCOUNT GO DOWNSTAIRS - KEEP QUIET - and tip-toed out early. It was freezing. The reluctant morning was slowly getting underway. Subdued cars with steaming exhausts queued at the lights; a few hunched pedestrians trudged toward the market. I walked to Callie’s flat and knocked on the door. As I expected nobody answered. But there were no crime-tapes so I assumed that Callie’s worse fears were exaggerated. I peered in and knocked once more for luck. From the next door along a white haired head appeared.

“Ah, hello,” I said. “I needed to speak to Miss Sykes-“

“They took her.” She replied and cackled like a crazy hen.

“Took her?”

She beckoned me in and offered me a cup of tea. To my astonishment the dismal menage of next door which I had expected to find replicated somewhat here, turned out to be cosy and smart.

“It was me who called the police. They were screaming the place down. Disgraceful goings on. Landlord’s not bothered of course - he’s been round the honey-pot himself, dirty bugger. It’s not too strong for you, is it mi duck? I like it strong.”

I drank it down -it was delicious - and asked for a refill. Old ladies make the best tea. That’s what they do all day. She tottered of into the kitchen and came back with a fresh pot.

“I reckon she’s on the game,” she tittered as she filled me up. “She’s a blackie, you know, her young friend.”

“It’s her daughter.”

“Daughter?”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Never spoken as much as a word to her. This used to be a respectable row of houses - until the riff-raff started to turn up. Then Mrs Roe died. And the lovely young couple moved out. Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m from Social Services.”

Mistake. Why hadn't I answered her letters, she asked. Why had nothing been done about the litter and the rats? And the noise from him underneath and the factory? How many times had she complained and got nowhere?

"That's not my department. That's the council. I just wanted to know where the lady next door was taken."

"Hospital. They fetched an ambulance."

"And where's the girl?"

"What girl?"

"The young woman?"

"Blessed if I know. Next door, I expect. Sleeping it off. Drunk as lords, the lot of them."

I drank my tea, promised faithfully to tell somebody about the rats and took my leave.

I phoned the hospital and eventually got through to the ward sister. She asked me who the patient was to me and, truthfully, I told her. She asked me about closer relatives and on the spot I made something up about a brother.

The news was not good.

I hurried back to the flat and found Callie prostrate on the sofa reading *Sense and Sensibility*.

"Callie. Your mum isn't dead."

She read on having, apparently, not heard what I said.

"She's had to have an operation. To stop some bleeding in her brain."

I hesitated.

"And?"

"Well, she's still asleep. She hasn't woken up yet..."

"She's in a coma, you mean."

I nodded. She shrugged and went back to her book. I made us some tea and a stack of bacon sandwiches, which she devoured. How could she possibly stay with me? She could not. But where could she possibly go?

I went to the supermarket and loaded up. When I got back she was still reading *Austin*. She had fetched a dictionary to help her.

"Her brother and sister-in-law were bastards to her, poor Mrs Dashwood. Why are people so selfish and mean?"

"It gets better for them later on, you'll see."

"Does Marianne marry old Brandon or Willoughby?"

"Wait and see."

After lunch I told her I was going to see her mother at the hospital.

She stared at me. Her confused eyes told me what she thought she ought to say. I helped her out of her dilemma.

"It's better you don't come. The sister said she was really badly bruised. When she's recoveredI'll take you then."

"And Mrs Wotsit downstairs might see me..."

"Exactly. Stay here and don't answer the door. Read your book. If you want, put some music on. Or the telly. But keep the volume down."

"It's brilliant to be part of a real mystery," she said leaping up and throwing her arms around me. I left her with another slab of cherry madeira cake and went downstairs. Mrs Stubbs opened the door.

"Is everything....alright, Mr Brightmore?"

She seemed to know already that everything was not alright.

“Yes!” I said at my brightest and breeziest. “Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered.” She closed her door to with that really irritating click. Damn! Should I tell her the truth? What might she be imagining? I knocked on her door.

“Yes, Mr Brightmore?”

“I meant to tell you, Mrs Stubbs, but I’ve had a busy morning -“

“Yes, I thought you went out rather early...”

“Well, my cousin turned up late last night - a surprise visit! He’s been abroad and needed a bed for the night. Working his way back up north. I hope you don’t mind.”

She smiled the bleakest smile her bony face could manage and murmured “I thought so.”

Bloody woman! What an intensely futile existence she had! Almost as futile as mine.

Without thinking, I gave the ward sister my name. She showed me into a side room. Amidst a network of tubes and paraphernalia lay Miss Sykes. I gasped to see her. Her skull was swathed in bandage. Where her eyes should have been were two blue tumuli. Her lower face was wired up. Two tubes snaked into her nose, or rather the squashed spud it had become.

“She’s in rather a bad way as you can see for yourself,” said the pretty sister. “Have you managed to contact that brother you mentioned?”

“No.”

“The police need to know. Could I have your address?”

It would be pointless to give her a false one. I wrote it down.

“Will she live?” I whispered.

“No need to whisper, she can’t hear you. Live? She will probably live...it’s just depends what you mean by live.”

She did not need to expand.

“The surgeon would like a word after you come out.”

I stayed with her a few minutes and listened to the machine helping her breathe; or breathing for her.

I reckoned I had a day or two, three at the most before the full truth came out, one way or another.

“Callie,” I said. “We need to have a talk.”

She had washed her hair and tied it up in a swathe of towelling so that she looked like an Indian princess. I sat by her on the sofa and took her book away from her.

“Is she going to die?”

“No-one knows. Have you heard of an encephelograph? No? It’s like a read-out of what is going on in the brain. The electrical activity. Well, your mother’s doesn’t look good.”

She laughed and said her brain had probably shrunk away.

“No, Callie. You need to understand. The surgeon told me there is no sign of brain activity.”

She took a sharp breath and put her hand to her mouth.

“It might be temporary - as if she is in a really deep sleep - but it might be more serious. Her brain might be.....dead.”

I left her to let this sink in and put the kettle on.

“The surgeon said that I might have to take a really hard decision..”

I gave her a mug of sweet coffee. She said nothing for a while then looked around at me, puzzled.

“You? Why should you decide? Decide what?”

Should I tell her we were distant relatives? I told her about the apparatus helping her to breathe, about the tubes feeding her and how they were keeping her alive. She thought this over and then said “But she might just wake up! I know her. The first thing she’ll shout for is a ciggy. Then a drink”

“She might.”

She studied my face and must have read what a slender “might” it was. She began to weep softly. I found her hand.

“I’m sorry, Callie.”

“I’m sorry. For me. Not so much for her. Me. Who have I got?”

I let her have her cry out. A waif. A beautiful stray. Was it now time to tell who I really was. Would she believe such a story?

Absent-mindedly I asked her about the whereabouts of her father.

She bridled. “Father? I have no father! That ...pilot ...he’s nothing to me...with his posh house, stuck-up wife and spoiled brat. I hated them! I never want to see him or them again!” She snatched up her book but the pages failed to turn.

To lift her out of her sad introspection I enticed her into the kitchen to show her how to cook mussels and tagliatelli. I showed her out to pull out the seaweed from the shells. She quickly overcame her revulsion and soon had them all cleaned. I showed her how to steam them open with just a splash of white wine. I peeled and chopped shallots and a clove of garlic and she copied me.

“As soon as you see steam, they are open and cooked. See? Take them straight off the heat.”

She stared at the little yellow beasts in their black shells.

“You’ve cooked them ALIVE?” she gasped.

“Yes but they feel nothing.”

“How can you know?”

“They only have a really tiny brain when they move around, and they swallow it when they stick to the rocks - or on the ropes where they’re farmed.”

“How can you farm a mussel?” She made a billy-goat noise into the pan and giggled.

I explained about fish-farming and she wrinkled her nose in surprise.

“Right, next job. Put all the juices into another pan - that’s it - good - and we have to reduce them by simmering them away. That intensifies the flavour.”

“Intensifies. Intensifies....” She savoured the word and watched the bubbles in the pan and the steam escaping. I gave her the job of prizing the cooling mussels from their shells and pointed out the occasional ones which still gripped their seaweed beards. Hesitant at first and screwing her face up, she soon became an expert, using the empty shell of one to extract its brother, as I had shown her.

Meanwhile I had begun to fry the shallots and the garlic in olive oil and butter.

“What a wonderful smell!” she exclaimed, breathing deeply.

“Add a little sea salt - go on - a sprinkle; now stir things round a bit with the wooden spoon. Don’t let things burn. The onions should be opaque.”

“Opaque?”

“See-through. Keep stirring. Good.” I went to the fridge and brought out a tray of huge grey shelled prawns. She pulled a face.

“What the fuck are they?”

“Language!.....They are king prawns.”

“Prawns are pink!”

“Watch.” I added them to the sizzling onions and as they turned pink she gasped with delight.

“Now add the mussel liquor - go on...”

“And the mussels?”

“NO! Not yet or you’ll spoil them. At the very end”

I gave her the tube of tomato puree to squeeze into the slow simmering mixture. As the squiggly worm curled around on the surface I stirred it in.

“Keep going! It has to be quite thick or it will just fall through the pasta and end up like a soup in the bottom of your plate...” “That’s it! Well done!”

She clapped her hands and twirled around. I opened a fresh jar of Italian herbs and let her inhale the aroma.

“Oh! That’s brilliant!”

“Hold out your hand.” I tapped the side until about a spoonful was cupped in her palm.

“Get your finger and rub them until all the oregano - that’s the slightly bigger pale leaf - is crushed.”

“Oregano! It sounds just like it smells!” She rubbed and smelt her hand again, then sprinkled the herbs into the sauce.

I showed her how to cook the tagliatelli with just a little oil added to the water.

“Oh, when can we eat? I’m dying to try it!”

As the pasta strands bent and coiled into the boiling water and the sauce thickened more I finally gave her permission to stir in the mussels. I drained the pasta dry and poured the sauce in.

“Now mix it round well while I grate some Parmesan.”

“What’s that?”

I put the chunk under her nose.

“Ugh! It smells like sick! I’m not eating that!”

“You wait till you try it.”

And eventually she worked up the courage to sprinkle some on. I laughed at her futile attempts to pick up the strands. Each failed attempt drew a progressively worse curse from her lips.

Sauce dripped from her chin.

“Watch.”

I took my fork and spoon and wound it slowly round, stuck a mussel and a prawn with the tines and told her to open wide. I popped the food in and she closed her eyes in rapture. Eventually she got the hang of it herself.

She watched me drink my wine and asked me for a glass. I hesitated and then poured her one.

She glugged it for a start until I showed her how to savour it with her nose, and sip it and roll it around her mouth. She ate every morsel of food and I fetched us some olive bread to wipe our plates.

“That,” she said “Is the most delicious food I have ever tasted.”

We sat together on the sofa. Without any activity to absorb us I began to feel a little nervous, a little uncomfortable. I put the television on, zapped through the channels and turned it off. I put some music on and told her a little about it. She asked me to teach her some more French and for an hour she listened avidly and repeated what I said and improvised upon it. Then she became more silent. I realised there was something she wanted to ask me. Finally she said

“Paul? Where is that girlfriend you mentioned?”

I laughed briefly and made some throw-away comment.

“There isn’t one is there? I can tell. There are no ornaments - no sign of a woman.”

I looked around at the barely subdued turmoil and had to admit she was right. I told her a little about Melissa, without mentioning her by name, but her intuition soon deduced the truth.

“She was the one my mother slagged off, wasn’t she? Melissa. You still love her?”

I shook my head.

“I wouldn’t believe my mother. She takes things people say and makes up stories. She can be very convincing - and hurtful. You told her her name.”

“Did I? But she described her!”

“No she didn’t. You did.” She looked around at the piles of books, the unboxed CDs and my ironing basket full of crumpled shirts. “Don’t you ever get lonely, here on your own?”

“No, not really.” Desperately. “I get by.”

She put her head against my arm. “I’m lonely,” she said. “I have no-one to talk to. So I mess around. Play the clown. Act outrageous. I need a good friend.”

I refilled my glass and gave her a little more.

“I’m going to look after you, Callie. Your mother is my mother’s niece. Your mother is my cousin. We are second cousins, Callie.”

She sat up and looked at me. I explained as succinctly as I could. She shook her head in disbelief. I asked her if I would tell her such a lie.

“It’s true, Callie. We really are family.”

We listened to a Beethoven symphony and I told her little bit about him. I listened to her breathing slowly beside me and then looked at her directly. I could not look away.

“Paul,” she said “Do you believe that two people who were meant to love.....and care for each other.....can be born apart....in the wrong place...or at the wrong time... because of some cruel trick?”

That night as I lay wondering what to do about her she pushed open my bedroom door and got in with me. I pretended to be asleep. She cuddled up to me like a child; like the lost, lonely child she was. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world; however inappropriate it might be.

SUNDAY 24TH JANUARY

I rose before she woke and went for a walk in the freezing dawn. I considered my options. Should I tell Pike everything the next day? Would she believe me? Should I go to the police? Where would Callie end up if I did? I reckoned up how much I had in my bank and saving accounts. Should I transfer it all to my account in Saint Cast in Brittany, and just take off with Callie? Impossible! Crazy!

I came back at about nine and turned on the local news. It said that police had charged an Earlstone man in connection with an assault which had left a 32 year old woman, Deborah Sykes, in a coma. The police had been called to a house in Wortley Terrace after neighbours reported hearing screams. They were appealing for a much younger woman, of mixed race, who might have been a witness, thought to be living with her at certain times, to come forward. So that was that. It would only be a matter of time before we would be found out. I took her a cup of tea and told her that the police wanted to talk to her.

“I won’t. I’m staying here,” she cried.

“But you can’t.....for ever...how can you?”

“You’re my family. Where else can I go?”

“You could be fostered - for a while -“

“You said last night I could stay here!”

She launched her mug at me and it smashed against the wall.

“You’re no better than the rest. Nobody wants me!”

I fetched a cloth and wiped the brown stain off the wallpaper and the carpet.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

I brought her two boiled eggs and soldiers. I watched beguiled as she tucked into them. I phoned the hospital and was told that there had been no change.

A while later my bell rang. There were two policemen. Mrs Stubbs clicked her door to, probably disgusted. As we approached my door I raised my voice and mentioned “officer”.

Callie had shut herself into my bedroom when we entered. I motioned to them to sit down. They asked me, as I was the cousin, firstly about the non-existent brother. I said I thought he was working on an oil-rig in the North sea. The younger glanced at the older. The latter asked me if the victim had any children. I hesitated.

“The landlord of the victim told us that she had a daughter - name of Kylie, or Callie, he thinks...Is that wrong?”

“To my knowledge, yes. But you must realise - we’re not very close.”

“Not close?” piped up the younger one. “You live within half-a-mile of her - and knew of the assault yesterday morning. How? It wasn’t on the radio - to my certain knowledge - until late yesterday afternoon. You phoned the hospital around ten.”

“I - I bumped into her by chance - in the sub post office on Leicester Rd last week. Yesterday morning I was there again...I heard two women talking about an attack in her road - and I went round to check on her” - (God, what was her first name?) - “and that’s when I found out...from a neighbour....an old lady.”

The older policeman was looking intently across the room. I followed his eyes across the floor. Callie’s trainers. Under the chair.

He looked quickly at me feet then at my face.

“My girlfriend’s,” I said but felt my cheeks flushing. I got up and turned the radio off.

“Why are you lying to us Mr Brightmore?”

“He’s not lying.”

Both span round to see Callie standing at my door. She was in my dressing gown. She had tied up her hair. She looked at least eighteen.

“And you are?” asked the younger one. She looked at them with contempt.

“Melissa.” She closed the door.

They got up to confer outside on the landing. I remembered then with a start the radio report - “a young woman of mixed race.”

They came back in and one asked me how old I was. Seeing where they were going I answered without a second’s hesitation that I was 27.

“And what do you do?”

“I’m a lecturer. At Warwick University.”

Their eyes turned to my bookshelves.

“In modern languages.”

“Really?”

The set of yellow exercise books. In the armchair opposite. As they admired my library I aimed a cushion over and covered them up. What was I doing? This was madness! Tell the truth!

“Is Melissa a local girl, Sir?”

“As far as I know. I met her at the White Horse last night.”

“And her surname?”

“Martin. I think.....Now look, officers, I don’t know what you think I’ve done but I’ve got lectures to prepare for tomorrow, so if you wouldn’t mind getting to the point - ”

“What do you think we think you might have done?”

“I just told you I don’t know!”

“You’re not telling us quite a lot, Mr Brightmore,” said the one who had spotted the trainers.

“Well, to be honest, I’m a little embarrassed. About Melissa.”

Indeed, what does a young beauty like her see in a stick-in-the-mud like you? - I could almost hear them thinking.

As they went through the hall I prayed they would not bump into Mrs Stubbs. But that bloody nosey-parker just could not resist coming out and whispering “Now what’s he been up to you?”

I should have seen them out. It was all my fault. I went out onto the landing but only just in time to see a blue trouser leg and large black boot disappear into her lounge. I told Callie to get dressed. Could I smuggle her out?

Five minutes later they were rapping on my door again.

“Why did you tell us you were a lecturer when you’re only a schoolteacher, Sir?”

Only a schoolteacher.

“Because I was embarrassed. Melissa is only seventeen.”

“Could you ask the young lady to step out and have a word -“

“Why the FUCK can’t you leave him alone,” she screamed, wrenching the door open. In her scanty, teeny clobber she looked only sixteen. I sat down heavily on the pile of books. The officers stood like statues and gaped at her.

“He’s not done anything wrong. LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

In my autonomic schoolmasterly manner I said, “Callie, calm down.”

“Callie?” said the young one. “Callie Sykes?”

At the police station her voice, at first a volley of loud, angry protests eventually subsided and disappeared completely from earshot. Then there was a depressing silence. I sat in a dismal interview room. In the corridor a door, which no-one could be bothered to oil, squealed open and shut over and over again until I thought I would go mad. I decided, as I waited, that the whole truth would have to come out. I had nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. I had acted, if not appropriately, humanely.

A young male detective in a hooped Leicester Tigers shirt sauntered in, followed by that busybody woman from the CPU. She wore an eager snarl and reminded me, in her jerky movements, of a pirhana. The man languidly unwrapped a cassette tape and put it into the machine, then drawled the necessary details before making himself comfortable. She sat next to him and took out a pencil and notepad.

“Could you confirm your name, age and address for the tape please” said he. I did as he asked.

“You are a teacher of modern languages at Forest View College in Earlstone, Mr Brightmore?”

“Yes I am.”

“And you teach Callie-Louise Sykes, aged thirteen?”

“I do.”

“You knew and know exactly how old she is?”

“I do.”

“Would you mind telling us, for the record, what she was doing in your flat?”

“She came around in distress last Friday night - the twenty-second of January - having witnessed a serious assault on her mother. She had nowhere to go. I let her stay.”

“Nowhere to go?” interposed the woman. “You know perfectly well that the proper course of action was to inform the authorities! You are a professional!”

“She begged me not to tell the police. She did not want to go into care.”

“That was not a decision for you - or her, a minor - to take! You are a trained professional....I’m...I’m...speechless!”

No bad thing.

“In my expert opinion - as a human being - Callie needed warmth, a home and comforting. Not an impersonal room, like this, or a bare plasterboard bedroom in a hostel. What am I suspected of doing? Kidnap? Child rape?”

They both stared at me and said nothing - as if they wanted me to keep talking and hang myself.

Was it a crime for an adult to take in a lost child, I asked.

“Has Callie made an allegation against me?”

“She has mentioned an attempted rape,” said she.

“Oh COME ON! You know perfectly well that was the bloke who attacked her mother! I’ve done nothing illegal have I? That’s what is pissing you off!”

“That is for the CPS to decide. We are just gathering evidence.”

“So you’ll try and think of something. Where’s Callie?”

“That’s absolutely none of your business,” said she contemptuously.

“But it is my business, WPC!” said I, deciding to play my ace. “Callie-Louise Sykes is my second cousin. I’m virtually the only family she has got. I want her put into my care.”

They both laughed.

“Just like that,” said he. “Can you prove that she’s your cousin? If you’ll excuse me saying, Sir, the resemblance between you and her is not striking. Can you honestly expect us to believe such a nonsense?”

I told them my mother’s story.

“Any documentary proof?”

No. All hearsay. From an un-interviewable source; a dead woman, my grandma.

“You could do a DNA test, couldn’t you?”

The rigger man scoffed at the idea.

“Our DNA testing is only for forensic evidence. It’s not there to prove paternity or fraternity, and whatever else.”

“Anyway,” added she, “Whether she’s a long-lost second cousin - as you maintain - or nothing whatsoever to you, is not the point. She is a minor. Your pupil. You acted foolishly. And you’ll find yourself - deservedly - one way or the other - in deep doo-doo.”

MONDAY 25TH JANUARY

Monday at school was short and sweet. I was home by break. Suspended sine die.

Pike had looked more bewildered than indignant. I arrived, summoned first lesson, in her office, leaving Baldwin - poor old Baldwin! - to face my least amenable class. She sat with the chairman of the governors at her shoulder. He put me in mind of a fat, perching bird of prey; her creature. I sensed distinctly that my career at Forest View was rapidly approaching its denouement, literally its unknotting. I panned around her office as one might take in for a final time a scene one never expected to see again. I would not miss it. My reverie was interrupted by the knock of Paul, my union rep.

“Unbelievable!” rasped Robson into the ether.

Pike took this as her cue to begin.

“I have just finished speaking to the deputy director at County Hall, Mr Brightmore. The CPU have been in touch as a matter of procedure. In respect of Callie-Louise Sykes..... And yourself.”

She sighed and shook her head as if lost for words. Robson sprang onto the offensive.

“You gave us an undertaking - here - in this office, not more than a week ago never to allow young students over your threshold again. And yet here we are - with you accused - and admitting - having a thirteen year old girl there with you for TWO WHOLE BLOODY NIGHTS!”

I allowed him to bluster on until he was all blown out.

“It turns out that Callie-Louise is my cousin - my second cousin.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s perfectly true. Would you refuse sanctuary to one of your own, Mr Robson?”

“Well - I - that’s hardly the point....Can you prove she’s your cousin?”

“No, not with documentation. It’s family history. Can you prove you have a cousin, Mr Robson?”

He opened his blubbery mouth but nothing came out.

“If this is true, why did you not tell me?” asked the Head.

“It was not your business, Mrs Pike. Anyway, I needed to let it all sink in for myself. But now I’m sure.”

“When did you find out?”

“Nearly two weeks ago. My mother told me. I hope you are prepared to believe me.”

“Whether I believe you or not is scarcely the issue, Mr Brightmore. To have a minor staying with you - in secret - without the knowledge of her parent - is professional misconduct of the grossest order!”

“It wouldn’t be easy to get the permission of a mother in a coma. I assume you know what happened to her and Callie? That she came within a few seconds of being raped? As far as you, and anyone else needs to know, I took in a very needy girl, who I believe is a relative of mine, out of no other motive than to protect and comfort her. And my conscience is absolutely clear.”

“But ‘ow does it look, Mr Brightmore, a man of your age and.....position...?”

I stared straight into Robson’s slitty eyes and said “I don’t give a fig how it looks. Dirty minds can think what they like, and will, no doubt, no matter what I say. It’s not a question of how it looks but HOW IT WAS. A girl needed protection - and yes, love - and I gave her what she needed. What she has never had. And, you know what? I’d do exactly the same again.” I brought down my hand sharply on the table and unsettled all her papers.

“You will be suspended on full pay while the police decide what charges to bring against you.” she resumed. “When those issues have been resolved you will face a disciplinary enquiry into your conduct at County Hall. In view of other deprecable events this month the governors will be seeking your dismissal. You may of course preempt that by resigning.”

“Resign? What? And deprive you of your Finest Hour, Mrs Pike? I should never forgive myself for being so spiteful! Good day!”

I went to my room and removed a few posters and personal effects while the class, normally so boisterous, watched in silent awe. They knew!

“Auf Wiedersehen, Kinder !” I said and left for ever that room for where I had toiled, mostly in anxiety, throughout those years.

A note through my door at home informed me that I would have to vacate my room by the coming Friday.

I phoned the hospital and found out that there had been no change in Callie’s mum. I phoned the police station and tried to find out where Callie was. I was told I would be phoned back but I never was. The phone rang but it was the doctor wanting to know if I could come in that afternoon.

“If you are her cousin, Mr Brightmore, and her only traceable relative, then I shall have to ask you to make a very difficult decision about Deborah. Is there really no-one else?”

“She has a daughter, thirteen.”

“That would be out of the question. But you say that you can’t prove your relationship to her?”

“No. I only discovered that we were related last week. My mother revealed that she was the sister of Deborah’s mother - a love child.”

“Could you - or she - ideally both of you swear out an affidavit?”

“I would. If it helped to do the right thing. But I couldn’t say my mother would.”

“Deborah’s brain is dead. I can say that with a hundred percent certainty.”

“But I couldn’t possibly give permission without telling her daughter first. She might want to come and see her.”

He shook his head. “You’ve seen her for yourself. It would scar her for life. No way.”

Now I had genuine solid grounds for getting into contact with Callie. I left and went straight to the police station and explained the situation. This time I knew that they would get in touch.

I waited impatiently at home. Finally the phone rang. My request had been granted. I would be allowed a supervised visit to a hostel called The Outwoods on the northern periphery of the town.

TUESDAY 26TH JANUARY

I arrived, as prearranged, mid-morning. I had brought a small holdall with a selection of books and that moist cherry cake which she adored. The warden - a skinny efficient woman in her forties - insisted on a thorough search of it.

"The file is in the cake." I said without humour. Without humour she looked into my eyes and looked away.

I was escorted along a regulation bare yellow corridor and shown into a room with a table and two plastic chairs. Some lop-sided mountains were blu-tacked to the wall, beleaguered by a dismal ocean of cream plasterboard. Why does public Britain insist on being so vile?

When she was brought in I stood up and hugged her. She shook with sorrow. "It's horrible here," she wept. "I can't stand it. Get me out."

I was too upset to say anything for a while. I just held her hand. The warden had been replaced by a rather fat young woman, owner of a ripple of chins.

"Could we have a glass of lemonade - or water?" I asked her.

She opened the door and glanced up and down the corridor. As she did, as Callie watched, I slipped a mobile phone and a battery charger into the side pocket of the bag.

"I'm sorry" said the attendant. "I can't leave you."

"Are you eating well enough," I asked Callie. She gave me a gloomy look.

"How can you ask me that after what we cooked on Saturday night?"

I began to explain to Callie what the hospital was asking me to do.

"You really are Mam's cousin?"

"Yes. Unless my own mum is a total liar. I must be. I believe I am. It's not so surprising really, if you think about it. We're from the same neck of the woods. Who is really related to whom? Half the people you see walking round have different fathers to what they imagine."

"And what's an affidavit?"

"Affidavit? It's like an oath you swear, your word of honour that what you say is true. It's legally binding. If you lie, you break the law."

"And will you do it?"

"Callie. The doctors say your mother is being kept alive by machines. Without them she'd die. No - not die because she really is dead. Her brain is dead. She will never have another thought, another dream again..."

"Nor another nightmare. Never suffer any more..."

"That's right, Callie! Be honest...her life, as she was...was she enjoying it? Was she ...happy?"

She shook her head.

"She often said she wished she was dead. Said she had bugger-all to live for."

She finally agreed that I should ask her to be switched off. Then burst into floods of tears.

"I've got NOBODY," she sobbed.

"No, Callie. You've got me. Tu vas me téléphoner, d'accord ? »

"Speak English, please !" exclaimed the guard, patently, like the vast majority of her obese, stupid peers, a monoglot.

"Trou de cul," muttered Callie, and embraced me a final time. I told her that I had brought her Sense and Sensibility, a dictionary and Emma.

"Emma?"

“By Austin. It’s about a young busy-body who fancies herself as a match-maker. It’s funny. You’ll like it. And it’s a love story.”

“Did she always write about love?”

“Yes, but she never married. She was disappointed in love. She died a spinster.”

“A spinster? It sounds like a spider.”

There were tears again on her cheek. I took out a hanky and dried them, whispering so that our spy would not hear, “Je t’aime, ma petite cousine.”

That evening she phoned me.

“It’s me,” she said softly. “I’ve got to go to school tomorrow. I don’t want to. Chelsea and her gang will be waiting for me.”

“Just try your best, Callie. If people try to wind you up, just walk away. Go into the library. Mrs Curry will give you a little job to do.”

I told her she should not stay on too long and to phone me again tomorrow.

WEDNESDAY 27TH JANUARY

By midday I had managed to find another flat to move into by Monday. I booked a room for the weekend in a nearby B & B. I began to pack up my books and CD collection.

I went down and knocked on Mrs Stubbs’ door.

“Would it be alright if the removal van came on Monday, Mrs Stubbs? I’m leaving on Friday evening.”

She nodded. I paid her what rent I owed her. She folded the notes and asked me quietly if I would come in for a cup of tea. I hesitated, then accepted. I had never before been into her inner sanctum, her lounge.

A sepia photograph on the wall drew me over. A young woman with fair curls and a laughing RAF officer, cap raffishly askew, stood arm in arm.

“I haven’t changed much, have I?” she remarked grimly, returning with two china cups. I went in closer to the portrait and tried to sense their joy.

“He was my fiancé. Robert.”

“You were a handsome couple, Mrs Stubbs.”

She was absolutely right. The radiant young woman, with the full, dimpled cheeks, hardly bore a resemblance to the bony body she had become.

“That was taken in May, 1944 when he was on leave. A month later he was gone; brought down over Normandy. Missing in action. Still missing.” She sat down heavily. “That’s getting on for sixty years ago. How can that be? Sixty years. I was eighteen. I never quite got over him. Never married. In the end I took his name. Stubbs ”

I looked around. This elegant room was her tomb. There was also a picture of a very young queen and her handsome prince; in the silence as we sipped our tea the tick of the clock - a glass contraption with brass balls whirling backwards and forwards above the one glowing bar of her electric fire - seemed to grow louder. Tommy, her great ginger cat, an occasional visitor to my rooms, was curled up on his cushion like some bronze bauble, with one crafty eye just slightly open and fixing me. The television was on but the sound was down. She pulled her shawl around her.

“I hope you don’t think too badly of me, Mrs Stubbs. I’ve got myself involved in a bit of a mess - but it’s not nearly half as bad as you might think.” And I began to tell her all about Callie. When I had finished she smiled at me and for a split second she almost did resemble that young woman she had been.

“It’s a great pity you didn’t think to come down and tell me the truth. Telling lies - even if for good reasons - always ends up making things worse. I told myself for years that Robert might come back one day. Life passed me by and then one day it was too late. I even refused other

offers. I still even dream today he'll just knock on that door, with a massive box of chocs, and say - Hey up, Elsie! - like he used to do. Anyway, you've told me the truth now and I'm sorry you're leaving. You can stay if you want."

"Thank you, Mrs Stubbs, but no. I don't know what I'm going to do." I told her I was suspended from school.

"So you might lose your job? Because you took pity on someone? It's become a hard world."

"I didn't follow procedure, Mrs Stubbs. There's not much room now for philanthropy. We have morality by clauses. If this, you must do that. Everything and everyone has to be appropriate. Initiative, unless it's to make money, is old-fashioned. Humanity is only for behind closed doors, if at all. The victim might sue the Good Samaritan today for picking him up and causing internal injuries..."

"Would you like another cup?"

"No thank you."

In the school lunch hour Pete Reynolds popped round.

"How the hell have you got yourself in this bother? You, above all people? You know what they're saying? That you've been to bed with Callie."

"No. She came into my bed, Pete."

"You BLOODY fool! She was trying to get you into trouble, like Budge! Couldn't you see that? Baiting the bloody hook with herself?"

I shook my head my head vigorously and told him exactly what had happened from the very beginning. Still he did not sympathise.

"She is a schoolgirl, Paul. You do not go there!"

"I know you're right. But you know what? I don't feel a bit guilty. I did the right thing at the time. It's only looking back that it seems so unwise."

"Well I doubt whether she'll be back after this morning."

Oh no. What had she done now?

She had only slapped a supply teacher. Pete did not know why. He only saw the supply teacher storming out of the lobby swearing that she would never return and would spread it far and wide what a foul dump Forest View was.

"Two good kids are leaving at the end of the week - Harry and Nicola - going to Saint Margaret's. I tell you, that stupid bloody woman will be left with the dregs the way she's going. Some of the governors are talking about putting the brakes on her. Getting her out even."

"I don't give a shit about the school now. So Callie will be suspended?"

"Three weeks at least, Terry Baldwin says - by the way he's really pissed off with Pike - ordering him about like some henchman... Yes. The next thing that our Callie does she'll be history." He blew through his thumb and index finger. Then he looked around.

"Are you moving, Paul?"

I told him about my notice to quit.

"It gets worse! Got anywhere lined up? Me and Laura could put you up for a bit if you're stuck."

"Thanks, but don't worry Peter. I'm sorted. I won't be around here much longer." I told him I was thinking of going back to Brum.

"You'll never get a job teaching again if you're sacked. They might put you on the register."

"I might try writing. This might make a good subject. I'm not hard up. I've got some fat to burn off. I fancy a period of withdrawal. Truth is, Peter, modern Britain disgusts me; the ugly drabness of everything; the gutter press; the damp chill; the suspicion; all the self-righteousness, moral outrage and indignation; the Daily Mail; the utter hypocrisy. I'll take my chances."

At ten thirty Callie phoned. I asked her why had she lost her temper. Why could she not control herself? The fucking supply teacher, she cried, that was why. She had seen straightway that she disapproved of her. She had that look which she had seen before in racist faces. I told her it was an overactive imagination.

“No. You have to be one of us to see it. That old git of a copper had it. Lip curled down to the chin. They can’t help it.”

“But what did the teacher say?”

“Told me to put my feet off the chair onto the floor. Slaves shouldn’t mucky up the furniture ...should know their fucking place....”

“Oh, Callie. You mustn’t hate everybody. People are stupid and silly but they mostly mean no harm.”

“Says you, Mr Nice - and - Comfortable! Well, you should see them through my eyes. Take the deputy warden here - fattie, in his forties. Sturgess. He looks at me with those groping eyes I’ve seen before. He’s probably off having a WANK as we speak and undressing me in his fat head!”

“Callie! Come on! Be positive!”

“About what? This shit-hole? You fucked up, Paul. It’s your fault I’m in here.”

The phone went silent. I didn’t phone back.

THURSDAY 28TH JANUARY

The police came around and sort of arrested me that next morning. I was sat down and read the Riot Act. Did I realise that Callie-Louise was a material witness to an attempted murder - or murder; that she herself was a victim of an attempted rape; that forensic evidence had almost certainly been lost due to my insufferable arrogance? Did I realise that I had come within a whisker of being charged with an attempt to pervert the course of justice and a conspiracy to withhold evidence?

I sat, I admit it, in stunned misery, and winced at every blow. Of course, everything which that vicious little woman from the CPU hurled at me was true. My unofficial philosophy seemed pretty paltry under the weight of this onslaught.

“So what do you intend to do with me?” I asked in the shocked silence which she had now permitted. She refused to reply and sat shaking her head with her arms folded.

The young ruggerman spoke. “Well, Mr Brightmore, it appears, because the girl, Callie, approached you, and because there is absolutely no evidence of any abuse of her, sexual or otherwise, and because your actions - however naïve and ill-advised - were inspired by some....compassion....” (The little woman stiffened up even more at the word)”and because Callie was not raped by Johnston and because we have him bang to rights on other charges, and because it is not really seen in the public interest to prosecute you, that the CPS have decided not to press charges. You’re a lucky man.”

I’m a lucky man! I almost laughed.

“But you’ll never work with children again,” said the woman.

“Oh really? One might almost deduce from that that there has been some collusion between the police and my Headmistress! Perish the thought!”

“Will she write you a reference? I doubt it. I wouldn’t! You’re the walking dead as far as a profession is concerned, Mr Brightmore.”

I left abruptly and went into the nearest pub for a drink. And another. And another....

In the afternoon, as I lay dozing on the sofa my phone rang. It was Callie. In some distress. She was whispering so soft I could hardly hear her.

“Where are you, Callie?”

“On the toilet. He can’t come in here”

“Who?”

“Sturgess. There’s hardly anybody around. They’re all at school. He keeps hanging around me. Says he wants to talk. Wants to help me. Every time I look up I catch him staring at my tits.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the telly room.”

“Well, he can hardly start on you in there. Somebody might come in.”

“But he’s on duty tonight. Why would he tell me that? I know he’ll come to my room. I just know it.”

“Tell the warden?”

“Gilchrist? No way. She’s his big pal. They’re always laughing and joking with each other.”

“Keep away from your room. Stay in public areas. Callie, you don’t think you’re imagining things? Because you’re upset?”

“I’m NOT!”

“You can’t go around accusing people because they look at you, Callie. You are a really lovely girl. Everbody looks at you. I look at you.. That doesn’t mean I want to....you know.... People do look at lovely people. They can’t help it. He’s probably not even aware that he’s looking. If he says he wants to help you, take him at face value. Trust him a little.”

“I’m really frightened Paul. Please get me out of here.”

And out of the thin air came the sound I hated and dreaded; the soft weeping of this lovely, unlucky child.

“I’m coming over. Don’t worry.”

I wanted to speak to the warden, I told the intercom. It asked me if I had an appointment. I replied that I was concerned about Callie-Louise Sykes; I taught her; she was a distant relative of mine; I had important information to impart. The crackly voice wanted to know what kind of information that might be. Confidential information, I replied. The disembodied voice vanished.

Five minutes elapsed. Then a large man who I guessed was Mr Sturgess approached the door. He was a jolly character with a down-to-earth manner. I took a liking to him immediately. If he was, shall we say, more than professionally interested in Callie, I needed to put him on his guard but at the same time not give our little game away.

I needed to confide in him about Callie, I told him. He needed to know that she had suffered sexual abuse while in care some years ago. He frowned. I told him also, truthfully, about the experience she had had at the hands of the mother’s third partner.

“She told me all this at the weekend. She told me she was terrified about coming into care. She may look very grown up but inside there is a very frightened, deeply unhappy child. I thought, as a fellow professional, that you really ought to know the whole story....and keep an eye on her.”

He put down his pen and looked at me. He had been chewing a sweet. He offered me one and I shook my head. He unwrapped another from a baggy pocket and rolled it round his mouth. He was a local man.

“I understand your concern, Mr Brightmore. But I do assure you we are allays on the look-out to nip out any inappropriate under-age sexual activity in the bud. We know what we’re doing. We’ve never ‘ad a complaint yet.” I could sense some resentment in his voice. But I decided to press him further.

“Well I just thought you needed to know. And you have probably seen the firier side of Callie-Louise.”

“Indeed I ‘ave.”

“Believe you me, Mr Sturgess...if anybody was so much as to look as if they were about to lay a finger on her, she would scream the place down!”

I saw then, I thought, that he understood me exactly. He ceased chewing and studied me. A little bead of sweat trickled down his shiny dome.

I left feeling reassured. At ten thirty she rang. She was laughing and in the background I heard another set of giggles. She had made a good friend - a new girl called Kristie-Leigh - and they were looking out for each other. She was sure she would be alright now. Sturgess had kept his distance. She kept laughing at what her companion was saying and did not hear half of what I said. She sounded blithe and unconcerned when she finally said cheerio. I felt a little annoyed. I realised some time afterwards, with a pang of conscience, that what I stupidly felt was hurt. And jealousy.

FRIDAY 29TH JANUARY

That night at about nine o'clock I was packing up my kitchen things when the phone rang. It was too early for Callie. It turned out to be the doctor. Had I made any progress with the affidavit? I told him that I had been busy getting packed up to move home. There was irritation in his voice. I promised to sort it out the following week. (Exactly how, I had not got a clue). Within seconds the phone rang again. It was a voice I did not recognise.

“Hello? Is that Paul?”

For a few crazy seconds I thought it was Melissa. I could not speak.

“Paul? This is Callie’s friend. Kristie-Leigh. She told me to phone you. She’s in a bother.”

My heart froze. What had happened? She told me that she had been taken to casualty after a fight with boy.

“Is she badly hurt?”

“A black eye. She’s having an X-ray as a precaution.”

“What caused the fight?”

“He’s been trying it on wiv her all day. A new lad - full of hisself - really fancied his chances. She kneed him in the bollocks after dinner. This is a BLOODY DUMP!”

The mobile went dead.

I sat and thought. I suddenly knew what to do. I found my passport, grabbed a suitcase and hurried out to the car. I dirtied the number plates with a handful of mud, drove to the hospital and parked in a far corner.

She sat in Casualty next to the gangly warden who was engrossed in a magazine. She was holding an ice-bag to her eye. She did not see me. I slipped in and sat at the back. The place was filling up. Some of those waiting were drunk and bleeding. A prim family sat apart with their small son who had obviously had a tumble. I waited. More people came in. Few went. It became rather rowdy. How could I get Callie away? A security guard had arrived and was making his presence quietly felt. I began to hatch a plan. What was the warden’s name? Then I realised that it didn’t matter. I left the room and once outside I phoned the hospital switchboard. I had stored the number. I asked to be put through to Casualty.

“Hello? This is Mr Martin from The Outwoods children’s home. I need to speak to my warden urgently. She is with one of our charges in Casualty. Could you ask her to come to the phone? ...Yes The Outwoods....”

As soon as I had finished I went back in, in time to see her get up and walk to the receptionist. I coughed. Instantly Callie heard me, turned and sprang up. She followed me out. I put the phone to my ear.

“Just one moment please. I have an important call for you, warden. Please hold the line.”

I switched off, grabbed Callie's hand and ran. We got to the car.

"Lie down behind the front seats!"

"Where are we going?"

I drove carefully around Earlstone, obeying all speed limits. But once on the motorway I put my foot down and did not stop until I reached Toddington. I parked in the remotest, darkest area I could find.

"Where are we?" she whispered from behind the front seats.

"At the services. Let me see your eye properly." As one who had taken parties of schoolchildren abroad I held a first-aid certificate.

I examined around the eye as gently as I could and found, to my relief that the socket was not fractured.

"You'll look like a boxer for a few days, but that's all. I hope you gave him a souvenir too."

She tittered. "He won't be trying to get his leg over for a while."

"Callie. Being vulgar doesn't suit you. Look, here's a tenner. Go and get something to eat."

I fished around in the glove compartment and found my dark glasses.

"Go in there and look as if you own the place. If anybody tries to chat you up, ignore them. I mean it. NOT A WORD!"

"Yes, Sir."

"And make sure you go to the toilet. It's our last stop for a while."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see. It's a surprise. Back here at quarter past twelve."

I watched her walk gracefully to the building and a few minutes later followed her in.

I found the cash machines. I had five credit cards in my wallet. I figured that I could drain my current account as necessary and leave the direct debits to sort out the payments. At some point I would need to go online somewhere to transfer my money on deposit account to current. For the time being I withdrew five hundred quid. Stocked up with notes I went into the cafeteria and bought a coffee.

She sat with an air of utter nonchalance on the far side with an empty plate in front of her. Occasionally she sipped her drink. I entertained myself watching others react as they spotted her; saw how men would steal glances at her as their female companions' thoughts and eyes were elsewhere engaged; watched as men in pairs nudged each other and smiled in her direction. She sat with a gorgeous pout and behind her dark glasses was probably amusing herself to watch, without self-consciousness, what interest she was arousing in her vicinity.

I pondered how difficult it must be for a lovely young girl not to be carried away with the admiration she provoked wherever she went. Then, more grimly, I contemplated what her lot would be if she were to remain in the confines, moral and cultural of Earlstone; probably a premature pregnancy, as she made a futile search for affection amongst the local louts; a dependency on drugs and alcohol; a slide into a dead-end. I was convinced I had done the right thing by her. And by rescuing her, I realised, I had rescued myself. Now she saw me and smiled briefly. I shook my head slightly and she looked away.

A few minutes later we were back on the road. She asked me again where we were going. I told her to get her head down on the back seat. This was a mystery tour. A few miles farther on down the M1 I could hear her snoring softly behind me.

We arrived at the Channel Tunnel at about four in the cold morning, after first stopping in a dark lay-by on the M20 to put Callie in the boot. I dragged out my bags to make room and then put the back in to cover her. She laughed in delight at the game. I drove on, praying that the news of her disappearance had not been flashed to ports and airports. Surely, I reasoned, in

the dark weariness of the night that would be unlikely. It would take a while for the penny to drop, I hoped, that I might be involved and about what I had in mind. Then it occurred to me: what might a detective make of my picture of a French village in my toilet? Then I remembered, with a surge of relief that I had packed it, out of sight, with a load of other things. I bought a single ticket. There were a lot of coaches in the carpark. Booze-cruises, I realised. It was Saturday morning. That might be a blessing in disguise.

Finally we were on our way; the lines of traffic moved slowly forward until it was my turn to reach the kiosk. My passport was cursorily examined. Would I be sent out of line for a security check? I had packed all my bags around her. If they emptied the boot we were finished. Luckily the white van in front had attracted the interest of the yellow-vested officials and I was waved through. I drove carefully onto the train. I had made it. I had no intention now of ever returning.

Making sure I was unobserved I opened the boot a fraction, moved a bag and saw Callie sound asleep curled in my tartan blanket. I sat back in the car and then realised how weary I was. But I could not give in to the temptation to sleep. On the other side I would need to get my head down for an hour or two, before the mammoth trek into Brittany.

But where? I studied the map for ages before it came to me. Of course! I could hold up in the huge carpark at Auchan, the massive hypermarket near Boulogne. We could have breakfast there and not a soul would take any notice of us, on a busy Saturday, with so many thousands of English shoppers. Callie would need clothes. We could buy baguettes and cheese for the long journey. It would be better to avoid restaurants and cafés on the way. Then I remembered that there was a used car lot there. I would withdraw enough Euros on a card to buy an old Deux Chevaux, and dump the car.

We disembarked. In the gloomy twilight, as soon as we had cleared the environs of the terminal, and when there were no cars behind me, I pulled over and popped the boot. I took out the suitcase. She clambered out and opened the passenger door.

"I'm freezing," she said. Where are we?"

"Nous sommes en France, Callie- Louise ! »

« En France ?? » she exclaimed in amazement, looking all around her.

"Oui. Au Pas de Calais. Nous allons en Normandie et puis en Bretagne. »

She clapped in delight and stuck her nose to the window. Then I explained that I needed an hour or two to sleep.

She adored the hypermarket. She stared in wonder at the huge fish counter; kept picking up vegetables she had never seen before and asked me what they were, and went running in delight down the clothes aisles. On three credit cards I had drawn out twelve hundred Euros. We went to the cheese counter. I told her to ask for five hundred grammes of Mimolette and three hundred of Roquefort. When the woman smiled kindly and sliced up the cheese Callie was astonished.

"She understood me!" she yelled, much to the disapprobation of an elderly lady at her elbow.

"Madame comprend Mademoiselle!" I explained to the lady, and she began to laugh. We arrived at the check-out with underwear, jeans, shirts, cheese, beefy tomatoes, baguettes and apples.

"How long are we going to stay here," she asked, suddenly subdued as I settled down for a kip.

"Oh I don't know, Callie. How would for ever suit you?"

When I awoke she was gone. I searched everywhere for her as calmly and as unobtrusively as I could. Finally, as I was beginning to panic, I saw her sitting in the café.

“Look,” she said excitedly “I’ve ordered a café crème!”

She confessed that she had “borrowed” some Euros from my jacket pocket as I slept.

“C’est votre fille, Monsieur?” enquired the waiter, obviously charmed and puzzled.

“Non, ma petite cousine.... Un grand crème, s’ il vous plaît. »

« He thinks that you’re my daughter » I said out of the corner of my mouth.

“ God, how old does he think you are?”

About as old as your poor mother.

“Well, being a teacher ages you, can’t you tell? It’s all those terrible, noisy

kids.....Callie” I whispered, “ You gave me real fright. Don’t ever take off like that again.

And you’ve aroused his curiosity. He’ll remember us now.”

This punctured her elation. I patted her hand and told her I would fix it. I called the waiter over

and asked him where I could park in Boulogne and to recommend a place to have lunch. I

explained that this was a special day-out for Tanya, a birthday treat.

“Bon anniversaire!” he wished her.

“ He means “happy birthday”. Say “merci” “

“Merci, Monseur!”

He returned with a chocolate éclair on the house for her, which she promptly ate, eyes closed in ecstasy .

“I love France, Paul!” she shouted. “ J’adore France!”

In bewilderment the clientel looked around at her and laughed.

The waiter told me to park on the Grande Place and to eat at the Estaminet du Château - The Castle Hearth. I knew already that this was a fabulous place to eat and smiled at this confirmation.

I told her to sit in the car and went off to buy an old banger. Within half-an-hour I was back, pulling up beside her and tooting my horn. She laughed and came running.

“Une voiture française” I shouted. I transferred everything across and bade my brave old Rover a fond farewell. By early evening, I calculated, we should be in my beloved Saint Cast.

The “deuch” was a game old bird but I did not want to push her. Whenever we were on the strait a steady stream of sturdier cars came racing past us. Uphill she struggled a little. When Callie-Louise woke I insisted on talking French to her. I pointed out for her to repeat all the names of shops in the towns and villages. She marvelled at the low houses with their green shutters and remarked that there were no hedgerows in the country. I explained that every inch of land was given over to growing things because the smaller farmers were so hard up, with only a few acres of land because of the antiquated inheritance laws in France. I explained that in some ways France was the most old-fashioned and conservative country in the EU.

“When the farmer dies his land is divided up between all his children. Sometimes they have just strips, a few yards wide and a few yards long. A lot of land lies deserted because it’s not worth the effort. The Parisians and Brits come along and snap up the land and the old cottages.”

It was a bright day. The sun and blue sky were endeavouring to bring the best out of Normandy’s not particularly spectacular landscape. We stopped for a picnic outside Rouen. She loved the crusty bread and the Mimolette, but found the Roquefort rather daunting and pungent.

“C’est les Pieds de Dieu, Callie! God ‘s feet!”

« God’s feet ? »

I popped another piece in my mouth and bit on a juicy provencal tomato. I rolled my eyes.

“Stop it!” she yelled “You look horrible!”

“Can you think why it’s called God’s feet?”

She had not got a clue.

“Well, the bacteria that make your feet smell are the same ones that make milk into cheese. Cheese is rotten milk.”

“THAT IS REVOLTING,” she cried.

“Not really. You liked the Mimolette, didn’t you?”

“I think I’m going to be sick!”

“Oh no you are not! Eat your apple!”

“Ma pomme! Je vais manger ma pomme!”

« Et ton œil, il va mieux ? » To explain I lifted her glasses and examined her eye. I nodded.

“Mmm. Il est bleu, ton œil.”

« Ton œil est bleu! » she said.

« Non, ton œil est bleu, pas mon œil. »

Instantly she saw her mistake, giggled and corrected herself.

“Ça fait mal, Chérie? Does it hurt? »

« Mal ? Oui. Mon œil fait mal.»

« Un peu ou beaucoup ? » I showed her what I meant with a mime.

“ Un peu, Monsieur.”

“ Excellent!”

We drank our jus d’orange and we were soon on our way again. I taught her “Alouette” and as she sang along at the top of her voice and did the actions I wondered when and where, and if, she - or I - had ever been so happy.

The day wore on. The relative flatness of Normandy gradually gave way to the hillier, more rugged terrain of Brittany. Darkness fell and Callie fell asleep.

We struggled over the brow of a steep hill and with joy I saw the glittering necklace of St Cast le Guildo, her light grey curve of sand and beyond that, the dark flat slate of the Atlantic stretching out for miles to the razor sharp horizon above which a huge white moon was suspended. I nudged Callie awake and told her in French we had arrived. She gasped at the beauty of the scene before her.

“ Ta surprise. Mon cadeau pour toi. Saint Cast!”

“Saint Cast....”

“You see the dark headland above the town?”

She leant forward.

“That’s where my little cottage is, looking out to sea.”

She confessed that she had never seen the sea before.

“Never? Not even on a day out?”

She shook her head, wailing and laughing madly at the same time.

I roused a surprised Mme Forrestier, my closest neighbour and my dependable house-keeper, from her kitchen chores. To her I always entrusted my keys and for a small fee she ensured that my little jewel was clean and tidy after the departure of holidaymakers in the spring, summer and autumn. I briefly explained the situation and she gave Callie such a hug.

“Mais comme elle est belle, M’sier Paul, votre cousine! »

Callie laughed in embarrassment. She understood. I would have to think very carefully about how much to tell Madame about what I had done.

The house was freezing. I wrapped Callie in a duvet while I went from room to room lighting log fires. Soon the one in the kitchen was roaring and crackling up the chimney and throwing a bright mosaic of shadows onto the stone walls. From Madame I had scrounged a large can of cassoulet, refusing ever so regretfully, on the grounds that we were exhausted, her invitation to dine with her and her son Gaston, before he went out in his fishing smack.

We ate the pork and beans greedily with the remains of our bread. I had been down to unlock the cellar and fetch up a soft, fruity bottle of Bourgogne. I poured her a half-glass and showed her again how to appreciate it. We finished off the fruit and cheese. I turned out the light and with the fire at our backs we looked out to sea. A solitary boat-lamp was climbing steadily across the calm dark sea like an aircraft on the night sky.

“That’s probably Gaston. Tomorrow we’ll walk down and buy a crab off him. I’ll show you how to cook it...and the special way to eat it - and I’ll show you how to make a mayonnaise with a touch of lemon and curry powder to dip our crudités in...”

“Crudities?” she said in surprise, wrinkling up her lovely, turned-up nose in that inimitable way of hers.

“Slivers of peppers, carrots and celery...we’ll buy a crunchy lettuce and a baguette, some Port Salut cheese, and wash it all down with sweet cider...”

She put her arm around me.

“Paul. I feel so happy. This is so wonderful. I never dreamed that life.....could be this good...I’ve been living in a dark cellar all these years.”

“I know you have, my Sleeping Beauty. I’m your Prince Charming. I’ll never let you go back there again.”

The boat sailed behind the headland out of sight. I stood away from her and, between us, leaping like a huge yellow cat into window, the fire licked and devoured the sea.

I showed her where she was sleeping. The fire there had made the room cosier still. I found my washbag and bathed her eye as she sat on the edge of the bed.

“A few more days and you will look as gorgeous as ever.”

“Am I very ugly?”

I laughed. “Stop fishing for compliments!”

“I don’t understand. What is fishing for compliments?”

“It means getting others to say nice things about you, when you know perfectly well what those nice things will be.”

She clouted me around the head for my cheek and giggled.

“Ouch! You don’t know your own strength, Callie-Louise. You might get excluded for that.”

I rubbed my ear in mock agony. I stood up and got more bedding out of a large cupboard and went to draw her curtains.

“No! leave them. I want to watch the stars. I’ve never seen so many.”

I turned out the light and showed her the Plough, Cassiopea and Auriga, the charioteer, sparkling above us.

“Auriga, “she breathed. “How beautiful.”

“I’ll teach you all their names. I’ll teach you the names of all the birds and flowers that live on the cliffs, I’ll teach you all the fish which swim in that sea....We’ll recite the poems of Apollinaire and Verlaine, we’ll listen to the music of Saint-Saens and Berlioz....and I’ll take you to Paris, to Monet’s garden.....and -”

“Eurodisney?”

I laughed long and loud. “Yes to Eurodisney as well.”

I kissed her goodnight on the cheek and wished her sweet dreams.

“Paul,” she said, now looking shy.” If ever...if ever...you wanted...you know...”

I looked at her and shook my head then went over and hugged her.

“Callie, I love you. But I want nothing, nothing from you. It’s enough to see you here, free and smiling, enjoying your life, not worried...Never offer yourself again.”

“But Paul. I love you too. I think....I’m in love with you.”

“No, Callie. You’re in love with something else. You’re thirteen, Callie-Louise...”

“But you don’t understand...I need.....”

“Go to sleep Callie. We’ll talk things over tomorrow. Good night.”

I fetched a bottle of cognac from the cellar and watched the moon set and the stars wheel around as if in a dance of delight. In all that vastness was there Anyone to pass judgement on me? Did anyone know or care that in this tiny village a lonely man was living “inappropriately” with his lovely girl? Who had the right to deny to them this gem of happiness in the black void which surrounded them and would ultimately swallow them up and leave not a trace?

That night I had the most bizarre dream. I was with Callie on a fairground. We were eating enormous sticky toffee apples, then cheese and baguettes. We paused to admire a mechanical organ. It was belting out a tune I recognised but could not put a name to. There were automata beating cymbals and others doing pirouettes and other jerky movements. Now I looked closer at the pasty, clownish faces and recognised the five police officers, with the WPC at the centre, beating time all in a row. Above them the figure of my union rep and the fat chairman of governors were bowing to Pike who stood kicking out her long meaty legs between them; and at its zenith sat Harry Redshaw, turning round and round, arms folded and little legs crossed, staring out into the blue yonder.

I woke and the blaring music stopped. A log tumbled down and crackled in the grate. And then, first to my surprise and then to my comfort there reached my ears the alternate whispering and roaring of the sea as it fell back and then embraced again the cliffs below.

When I woke again it was light. A fierce gale had sprung up and clouds of various greys were being harried inland. I pulled on some clothes and battled my way down to the bakery, returning with croissants, baguettes, butter and jams. I made strong coffee and, for Callie, drinking chocolate. I built up the fire into a blaze in the kitchen.

I woke her with a bowl of sweet chocolate.

She loved the hot croissants. I dunked my bread and jam in my coffee and after a customary “ugh!” she copied exactly what I did in her own bowl. I watched her savour everything and savoured everything she did; every gesture and facial expression, every tiny cry of delight.

The gale had bated considerably by the time we reached the quayside. From a queue of small fishing boats crates were being disembarked and sorted. Lots were being bid for and sold in a baffling cacophony of cries, in which the circling gulls were bidding unheeded. There were mackerel, seabass, herrings, crabs, langoustines and many fishes I did not recognise. The salty smell was intense and the excitement of the crowds was mirrored in the flapping tails of the expiring fish.

I heard someone yell my name.

“ Hé! M’sieur Paul! Salut! “

I looked along the line of boats and there, with his boot on the side of his boat was Gaston. He stood waving to us, looking like a young rogue of a smuggler in his breton cap and navy blue top . He was selling many of his haul of crabs and lobsters to the locals who were gathering, bending and examining the crawling baskets he was unloading.

“Gaston! Tu as ton propre bateau maintenant! » I shouted.

« D’accord. Depuis novembre. Je fais fortune ! »

He was, I calculated, just about nineteen. And indeed he looked the young master, sleeves rolled up and surveying his customers with a confident swagger and roll of his hips as he threw yet another basket down to his mate on the quayside. A squabble broke out between two woman, one a matron whom I recognised as the proprietor of a local restaurant. Gaston pacified

them with a downward gesture of his outstretched hands, insisting that there was enough for everyone.

Now he spotted Callie who stood at my side. He doffed his cap and a mass of dark brown curls fell out around his whiskery face.

“ Mon Dieu! Ma mère a raison. Votre cousine est belle, exquise. Quelle âge as-tu ma petite ? »
« Dix-sept ans ! » she replied without hesitation.

“Et tu parles français! Comment tu t’appelles, chérie?”

“Je m’appelle Callie. »

He examined her eye with concern and asked me what had happened.

“Juste une petite dispute avec un garçon » I explained. He frowned then picked up a scabbling crab and thrust it at her, saying he wanted to give her a welcome present. She yelled and turned her head, much to his and everyone else’s amusement. I let it plop into my shopping bag.

“ Tu n’aimes pas les crabes, hein?”

« J’ adore les crabes ! » she retorted, making him laugh louder.

He picked her up like a feather and whirled her onto his boat. She screamed with delight - and then horror, when she saw that she was surrounded by boxes and boxes of wriggling things.

“Tu es mon capitain, Callie! » he joked.

« Paul, make him get me off » she yelled, not sure whether to laugh or burst into tears.

“Que dit-elle, la belle? Parle français, toi, comme tu es en France! »

I explained and he stepped back onto the boat and lifted her back onto the quayside. The crowd cheered and applauded. She picked up a crab and hurled it at him, which he ducked just in time. The customers hooted and someone shouted to him that he had met his match at last.

I told her as we walked off that he was Gaston, my neighbour’s youngest son.

“Well, I don’t like him! He showed me up! The bastard!” She looked back at him and crossed her arms.

“He was only teasing. You’ll like him when you get to know him better.”

Away from the quay, running parallel to it was the sheltered main street - in fact the only shopping street of Saint Cast. It was Sunday and only a few shops were open. From my ruddy-faced friend Monsieur Botton I bought long sweet peppers, celery, large spring onions, eggs and cheese.

The afternoon was calm and, for the end of January, very mild. We walked down to the beach and made for the cliffs. The tide had left its bounty of seaweed and driftwood scattered on the wettest sand. We were drawn to the black glistening rocks at the foot of the cliffs. Our feet kept sinking into the soft beach down there. She turned and looked back at the hills and woods inland beyond the village. The clouds had ceased racing and as we looked back our shadows appeared long in front of us as the sun, smuggled by the clouds all morning out to sea, finally broke through.

“Hey, Callie! Look how long and skinny you are. Like a bean-pole!”

“You can talk! Look at you!”

I watched her long shadow-arm push mine and watched as I staggered like a great stick in slow motion and fall on my side. Then her shadow came loping past me as she ran off hooting towards the rocks. I turned and lay on my back, watching the blueness appearing through the higher, thinning clouds.

“Paul! Look! Come quick!”

I caught her up as she stood bent, examining the great black molars of rock constantly swilled by the surge of the sea.

“Look! Mussels!”

And there were scores, no, hundreds of them crammed tight into every crevice amongst the weed. The rocks were not really black at all!

“We can live for free!” she shouted to the breeze which - and I’ll never forget it - blew her long hair horizontally behind her, reminding me of a figure in Botticelli’s Primavera.

“We can bring a big bucket down tomorrow. I’ll cook them for you if you tell me what to do.”

“Mmm..mussels....” I thought aloud....”With onions, peppers and red wine.....”Moules à la Callie-Louise”

“Moules?”

“The French word for them....and it’s rather rude as well.”

“Rude?”

“Yes it’s the slang word for....should I be saying this?....what...women have....”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh come on! I don’t have to spell it out for you, do I?”

My meaning suddenly dawned on her and she threw her hands up to her face.

“Is that what they’re called? Moules? I think that’s really cute...better than fanny...or the c-word or.....minge. MOULES!! MOULES!! MOULES!!” she cried.

And spotting a cave at the base of the cliff she ran off shouting the word at the top of her voice. Her footprints disappeared almost as soon as she moved on.

“I’m going looking for treasure!” she shouted back and added something else but the wind blew her words away.

“Be careful!” I yelled but she was gone. My feet sunk heavily into the sand as I went in pursuit. When I had stumbled deeper inside still I could not see her. Dark pools lay in stony basins, as if sea monsters might have just been standing there to wash themselves down. Beyond, high above my head were great boulders blocking the back of the cave. Here she had scrambled up like a goat and disappeared from view. There was a narrow gap through which she must have squeezed. I could hear an invisible steady gush of water at the back, draining, no doubt, patiently through the limestone from way above on the headland and ploughing out a furrow onto the beach. The sea had obliterated it every day for thousands of years and every day it had returned to reestablish itself. I bent down and tasted it. It was fresh and sweet.

“Where are you Callie?”

In reply a shell pinged me on the head. I heard her snigger and just caught sight of her face amongst the rocks. I tried to clamber up but kept sliding back.

“Be careful! These rocks aren’t safe, Callie.”

“I’m looking for buried treasure.”

I gave up climbing. I sat down by a pool and as my eyes adjusted I watched a small crab circling a starfish. I put in my hand and watched my wrist bend out of true. I pulled the crab gently out. It opened and closed its claws impotently. I placed it on the palm of my hand.

“Now crab; do you want to stay in there or come out here into the bigger world and take your chances?”

I placed it carefully on the rock and watched it plop again into the pool.

“Callie! Time to come back down!”

“No you come up here! It’s amazing!”

“I can’t. I can’t get a grip.”

“I told you there would be treasure in here somewhere! Catch!”

A bottle came flying over the top and landed in the soft sand at my feet. It was a full bottle of rum, with an old-fashioned metal spring stopper. I pushed it up with my thumb and drank. It burnt my throat. Her face appeared above a crag. She held up two more bottles, one in each hand.

“I’ve found a whole crate of the stuff, half wedged under a rock.”

I felt a surge of water at my heels. Callie cried out in alarm. I turned and saw the tide running quickly back in.

“Quick, Callie! Come down now or we’ll be trapped!”

By the time she had found her way down, the freezing water had risen to my calves. I caught her as she jumped down the final few feet and we fell back into the next swell. The sand, soft before, was now sucking treacherously at our feet every time we tried to get up and run out. We clambered onto a rocky ledge on the edge of the cave and picked our way around until we had reached the beach. Running just ahead of the tide we eventually got to firmer terrain and breathlessly sat down. I undid the bottle and took a good swig which made me cough. She lay flat on her back laughing still holding one of the bottles. I looked back and now saw only intermittently those rocks where we had found the mussels. I realised that our cave would soon be full of water.

Callie sat up and began laughing again, pointing at me.

“Look! You’ve lost a shoe!”

“And I can see straight through your T-shirt.”

We were both soaked to the skin. She tried to open the stopper.

“Oh no you don’t, Miss! You’re not old enough.

“But I found it!”

“It doesn’t matter. You can have a little wine but absolutely no spirits. You don’t want to sound like a bass singer, do you?”

“But I’ve had spirits before,” she wailed.

“I don’t care! You’re under my wing now!”

She fell silent and pensive. She had probably thought of her mother lying there helpless. I said nothing.

She shivered. I shivered. I helped her up and we loped back up to the cottage to get dry and warm.

I fetched a large towel and built up the logs on the kitchen fire. While she peeled off her clothes I held the towel in front of her.

“Rub me dry Paul!” she pleaded.

“No Callie.”

I went upstairs and changed. When I came back down she sat entirely naked on the kitchen chair with her legs tucked underneath her. I shall not describe her. It would not be right. Only imagine the most beguiling rosebud opened up to achieve sheer perfection - a perfect blend of lighter and darker shades and a perfect subtlety of complexion. The towel around her head was falling back like a cape behind her. She was pouting. And utterly lovely. She had allowed me to see her secret inner sanctum. I knew then that I had no other choice but to be its guardian from that point on. I went back out and closed the kitchen door.

“Callie. Please, put the towel around you, go upstairs and put some dry clothes on. Then we will talk.”

I went into the small sitting room and turned on the radio. The France-Inter news was on. To my relief there was no mention of us. Had no-one figured it out yet? Perhaps they thought Callie had simply run away. I considered. Even if the penny had half-dropped and they had gone around to Mrs Stubbs, what would she be able to tell them? Only that I’d left for another flat; and that the removal van would come Monday. I decided I would phone her.

Callie came down in her new pink top and red jeans. She looked rather crestfallen. I went into the kitchen and made us some hot chocolate.

She took a sip and stared at me. At last she spoke.

“You really don’t fancy me, do you? Like you said that Friday night.”

I simply did not know what to say.

“You’re not...gay are you?”

“No, no Callie. Anything but. You are, without doubt, the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen. I admire you. I appreciate you...your wit, your intelligence, your mad energy. I care about you. I love you. I would never have rescued you if I didn't. I've given up my career for you. If you are fishing for compliments again - here - I'll give you them by the bucketload.” She looked at me and bit her lip. She flexed her bare toes in front of the fire. I could hardly look at her for fear of showing her how adorable I thought she was.

“If we change things - I mean the way we are - if we

“ If you shag me, you mean.”

“There! That's what I mean. It would change everything, cheapen everything. It would spoil everything and we could never be the same again. And it would be AGAINST THE LAW. And...and you don't know your own mind, Callie-Louise. No...hush... let me have my say out and then I'll listen to you. I know that you're much more than a girl, yes a young woman with strong....urges, no doubt. I'm not blind to that. But you are vulnerable, Callie-Louise.”

“Vulnerable?”

“Yes, you're in a difficult situation. I'm not going to ask you about...your....sexual history. It's none of my business. But I sense that you feel under some obligation to make some....offer because you feel deep down that that is what you think might be expected of you. You said that Friday night that you were not a virgin. Is that to do with some.....abuse which you suffered?”

Of course, I already knew the answer. She fell silent and I sensed that she felt shame and embarrassment. I stood up and embraced her. She began to whimper. I told her to drink her cocoa before it went cold.

“Callie. You must not think that what you imagine you desire now is the right thing for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think. When you were ten, what did you really want then?”

“A proper family.”

“Of course. But what else?”

“A rabbit.”

“Do you want a rabbit now?”

“ No.”

“That's what I'm driving at. Now, imagine yourself at twenty or twenty-five. What you say - or think - you want now, because you are only thirteen, will look as pathetic as that rabbit. Do you see what I'm trying to explain to you? Because you have felt so upset, so lonely and unwanted all your life you are vulnerable. You think you have to offer something really valuable - yourself, your own body - to gain their liking and interest. You are vulnerable - you are so easily hurt and easy to damage. I want to take you out of that....that....awful mental prison. You think, because I've come along, taken an interest in you and whisked you away from that bloody awful town, you have to pay me back somehow. You feel flattered because I'm interested in you. You think you are even in love with me! But, Callie, look at me! I'm losing my hair, I'm getting chubby, I'm not particularly handsome. I'm not your ideal guy, be honest.”

“You don't understand me at all Paul. You have changed me and my life. I don't love you for what you look like. But for what you are. You make me laugh. You teach me things I would never have found out. You open my eyes. You cheer me up. I love you. If I have a child I want him to be like you.”

I sighed and put my head in my hands. I prayed that it would not all end in tears.

Later I phoned Mrs Stubbs and explained that I had a problem, but before I could go into detail she interrupted.

“The police came around again today, Mr Brightmore. I told them that you were staying locally, at some B&B. They wanted to know which one but I hadn't the foggiest.”

“What else did they say?”

“They just had a look upstairs. As if they did not believe me that you weren’t there.”

I told her that my mother had been taken ill. Could she let the removal men in the following morning? She would. I phoned my new landlord and told him the same tale. Could he let the removal men in? He could. I had paid him three months rent in advance. He did not live anywhere near. As far as he would be concerned I would have moved in. Who would miss me now? Who would give me a second thought?

I phoned my mother. She said she had been worried. She had been phoning my flat all weekend. I confessed that I had taken a few weeks off on stress leave on the recommendation of my GP.

“Stress?”

“Yes. I’ve been a bit down. It’s the time of the year. You know it gets to me. The cold. The dark. I’m in France for a while. To get over it. I’m going to resign my post and do a bit of painting and writing. I’ve made my mind up. That’s already made me feel better. Look...if anybody asks for me you don’t know where I am.”

“Ask for you? Who might then?”

Who? How would the police find out her address in Brum? Did that bloody school have my mother registered as my next of kin? Almost certainly. Could anyone today honestly just disappear without a single nosey-parker knowing?

“Well, mum, to be honest, the police.”

“The POLICE?”

I told her briefly that I had been accused of a minor assault on a pupil. It would probably lead to nothing, I said.

“I thought you were hiding something that Sunday, our Paul.”

“I thought you were too, mother. Well. I’m resigning. They’ll drop the case, it’s so trivial. I’m fed up with teaching. The teachers get into trouble now, not the kids. It’s Alice in Wonderland. I’ve done the right thing, don’t worry. If things swing back in ten, fifteen years time, when everybody’s come to their senses, then I might go back in. I’m in Montpellier with an old friend from my student days. I’ll phone you back in a few days.”

Callie came back into the room and perched on the arm of the old leather armchair.

“If I ask you something Paul, will you answer me honestly?”

She looked up at the bare, clumsily plastered ceiling.

“When you lie - on your own in bed - do you...think about me? Imagine me?”

I suddenly felt very hot and was afraid I was blushing.

“I think about you, yes, of course I do. Think about what you’ve said, how you laughed at things. Of course I do.But you don’t mean that do you?”

“No.”

“I try not to think about you in a....physical sense. If I ever I...I.. start I stop. There. Will that do?”

“So, you do think about me? Well, I think about you.”

“Listen Callie. We all have our private thoughts. I don’t ask you to tell me yours - I don’t have the right - so you should respect my right to keep mine private. Our brains think them and we can’t help them, can’t stop them coming. It’s how we’re made. I hope I don’t look at you in the same way that that warden, Sturgess did.”

“No. You glance away. I want you to look at me. But you only do when you think I’m not watching you.”

Now I felt my cheeks were glowing with embarrassment. “I don’t mean to. It’s not my fault that I have EYES! If you were ugly there would be no problem.”

Now she came back with a devastating question.

“So you would not have helped me if I had been ugly and stupid?”

What could I say? I got up and went into the kitchen. She was in possession of a formidable curiosity and perspicacity, and of an arsenal of sharp weaponry which she had yet little control of. How could I teach her to draw back to a safe distance?

Later on I watched her out the back, bending and looking at the herbs in my kitchen garden. The air was growing blue with the gloom of twilight. I eventually called her in to show her how I was going to make an Austrian potato salad. She skipped in through the door and kissed me on the cheek.

While she skinned the cooling tiny potatoes I had boiled, I mixed some caraway seed, some chives, white wine vinegar and vegetable stock in a basin. She inhaled the fragrance deeply and chopped the potatoes up into the mixture until all the liquid was absorbed..

“Very good, Callie. I’ll make a chef of you yet. That will go brilliantly with the crab.” She looked up at me and with a sad smile said that she was sorry. I hugged her.

“Oh, Callie! Don’t let’s analyse things too much! Let’s just enjoy this time together. Who knows how things will stand in two months time or in two years time - if we have that long. Don’t rush things! Your lovely body is a sacred place - respect it, care for it - don’t sell it cheap. You’ll know when the right time comes. Everything - your whole mind and your whole body will say - this is right for me.”

She embraced me with a shudder.

“Promise me, Callie-Louise,” I said “Not to embarrass me again.”

“I promise.”

A loud banging came at the door and made us start.

“Qui est là?”

“Gaston, M’sieur Paul!”

I let him in. He had to duck to get his handsome head under the doorway. He scraped off his beret. Callie stared at him and pouted her lips in defiance.

“Toujours en colère, ma petite?”

“He wants to know if you’re still mad with him.”

She tried to glower but he gave her the same face back and made her giggle. He rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue and she was worse.

“J’ai un autre cadeau pour M’sieur et M’m’selle »

From behind his back he drew a hessian bag and thrust it toward her.

“Des huitres!”

Uncertainly at first, and then expectantly she peered in. But she drew her head back in disappointment.

“Rocks? What do I want with soddin’ rocks?”

“Regarde, Callie!”

He took one of them and ran a short blade along the edge, revealing, to her amazement an sloppy oyster at its centre.

“Ugh! What the fucking hell is that?”

Then to her further astonishment and unconcealed horror he tipped the slime into his mouth and swallowed it. She squealed in disgust.

“Tu n’aimes pas les huitres, M’m’selle Callie ? »

I told her it was an oyster. She screwed up her face.

“C’est très bon!” he exclaimed and after first patting his belly, he pointed with little subtlety at his trouser-pouch and with a guffaw added “C’est aussi bon pour Maître Gaston!”

She actually blushed. He threw back his head and laughed, and with a slap on the back for me and a blown kiss to Callie he went to take his leave of us.

“Stop. J’ai un cadeau pour toi!” she shouted and ran to to fetch him the bottle she had retrieved. He studied it and asked where we had found such an old-fashioned bottle. I told him it was our little secret.

“ C’est bizarre.” He pushed up the stopper with his thumb and his face lit up as he took a swig. “C’est du bon et vieux rhum! » he announced.

« Pour un autre crabe, une autre bouteille... » she said quietly.

He laughed in surprise. « T’ es une petite capitaliste ! Une commerçante ! »

« You’ve got a business brain, he reckons. »

“I understood him.”

When he had left, Callie asked why he had pointed at his trousers. I told her that oysters are supposed to be an aphrodisiac. She understood this. She took the bag and with her tongue in her cheek said that she would hide them from me.

“What nonsense!” I exclaimed. “We’ll have them for starters before our crab salad.”

She could not watch as I dropped the crab into the boiling water. There came a squealing from the pan as its juices came to the boil.

“It’s in agony!” she cried.

“No! I killed it with a spike between the eyes when you were upstairs. It didn’t feel a thing.

That’s the noise of it letting off steam.”

I let it simmer for twenty minutes and removed it to cool.

While it sat there on the plate I showed her how to make a mayonnaise in my ancient mixer, with egg yolks, olive oil and Dijon mustard. I added some lemon juice, some creamed garlic and a half-teaspoonful of curry powder. Eagerly she asked me if she could try it and she dredged out a little on her little finger. With eyes closed she pronounced it delicious.

What a feast we had! I even prevailed upon her to try an oyster, and soon she was struggling to open another for herself. Just as she was about to give up and hand it, with a curse to me, she found the right angle and open it popped. I dribbled a little lemon and sprinkled some sea salt on it and with less trepidation she swallowed it. I showed her how to crack the crab legs and claws open with the haft of her knife. I showed her what to remove from the body of the crab - the grey dead-man’s-fingers - its guts - and chopped the beast into two, revealing all the snow white flesh. I took a spoonful of mayonnaise and stirred it into the brown head meat and held some up for her to try. She loved it. We had the strips of vegetables and crusty bread to dip in the mayo and lots of weak cider to wash it down with.

As we sat listening to music she remembered the mussels. Could we go down to gather some for tea tomorrow? And couldn’t we fetch out another bottle of rum for Gaston?

“How much is down there?”

“I couldn’t tell for sure. It was dark. But there were two or three cases in the sand.”

“Smugglers must have hidden it from the excise men.”

“When?”

“Who knows? Perhaps it’s been there for years. Perhaps the smugglers died - or were captured - and we’re the only ones now who know about it.”

“Smugglers! How brilliant is that?”

Before we went to bed I told her that the next day we would have to begin lessons. She pulled a face and asked how long for.

“We’ll have three every morning. Tomorrow French, English and maths. We can do French history and geography as well later in the week. And some science. We’ll draw up a timetable.”

“But not RE!” she cried.

“Well, it’s compulsory in Britain...but against the law in French schools.”

She cheered, but I told her it depended how well she behaved herself.

We would go down to the book shop and buy text books and other materials. In the afternoons we could go on nature walks and other visits - and we would paint. I had some canvas and oils in the cellar.

Money. I calculated that my pay would continue for at least a couple of months. There must be public Internet access somewhere in Saint Cast. I would transfer all my money on deposit to current account and gradually empty it by using my credit cards. I had quite a lot in my account at the Crédit Agricole through my lettings. The time would come when I would have to turn my hand to something, but for the foreseeable future we had plenty.

The next morning I got up early to listen to the radio news. To my relief there was no mention of a teacher on the run with a pupil.

We had just begun lessons when Gaston called. Could Callie help him on his boat? It was such a calm day. There would be no danger. She could have a crab and a lobster for her pains and twenty Euros. She readily understood and begged me to say yes.

“As long as you make up the lost time - and don’t fall overboard.”

I made her put on two pullovers and gave Gaston some money to buy her some gloves. He had brought a quilted jacket for her to put on. As they left Gaston turned and said that, by the way, we were invited for dinner that evening.

In the early afternoon I rang my mother.

“They’ve been round, our Paul. The police.”

I felt my heart freeze.

“They took a photo of you away with them. I had to give it to them - or I would be obstructing them in their enquiries.”

“Which photo?” I whispered.

“Of your graduation. It’s the most recent one I had.”

That was from ten years ago. But perhaps they could mess about with it electronically.

“What did they tell you, mother?”

“They just wanted to find you. But I told them nothing. I’d burnt your mobile number. I couldn’t remember it anyway”

“But they can get hold of your phone records. Did you tell them where I was?”

“No. I said that as far as knew you were in Earlstone. But there’s worse. You were on the local news at eleven.”

My heart froze again.

“Something to do with a girl called Callie.”

“It’s the girl I told you about. She’s your great-niece, Callie-Louise Sykes - Carol Blewitt’s grand-daughter. Her mother is on a life-support system. She has nobody but me.”

“But the report said that she’s been missing since Friday and that you may have abducted her....”

“Abducted is rubbish. She really had nowhere to go, except a bloody awful council home. If I could I would adopt her, not abduct her. She’s as happy as a sand-girl here.”

I looked out afterwards at the cool blue sea. I thought it might be Gaston’s boat which was chugging back to port. The calm scene suddenly seemed fragile, even cruel. How long could it last before I was tracked down and the serenity and joy of this illusion was shattered? Soon the search for us would be extended nationwide and then abroad. They would find my old car. We would be on French news and satellite TV. I had hoped for a longer respite than this, dreamt

even that my deception would not be discovered. We had perhaps until the end of the week, if that. Should we make a run for it? France was a huge, half-empty country. But we could not live in a cave; there would have to be contact with others. We might go undiscovered a few weeks. But on the run would be no better than than being stuck in Earlstone. I knew I could not allow Callie to be dragged back to England. If I explained the full and honest situation to Gaston and Madame that night without alarming Callie, perhaps they could suggest some kind of sanctuary for her.

She returned at about seven. After all the fresh air and fun she had enjoyed she looked utterly radiant. Gaston hugged her and kissed her on the cheek, telling me what a good sailor she was. "J'ai parlé français Paul! J'adore la mer et la pêche ! »

She showed me with pride her twenty Euro note and I gave her a little pot to put it in. She boiled the crab herself and put it into the fridge when it had cooled.

We walked up to Mme Forrestier's at eight thirty. The most delicious aroma wafted through the door as it opened. Mme had cooked us her speciality breton fish stew with potatoes, carrots, onions and a host of other ingredients. There was crusty bread to mop up the thickened juice and bottles of white wine to accompany it. Gaston had Callie next to him and showed her how to lift the flesh from the bone and, holding her fork-hand, he mashed down her vegetables into the garlicky, herby sauce.

As soon as the conversation about the day's events had faltered I began to tell them the full story of Callie-Louise, lying only about her age, which I now confessed was a mere fifteen. Gaston stopped chewing at this in surprise, and looked her more closely up and down, dwelling long, as he now had a perfect excuse, on her full bosom.

"Quinze ans? Pas possible! C'est une femme!"

I explained carefully that if she went back to England she would have to go into an institution - the very same place where she had sustained the black eye - and where she would be likely - not for the first time - to be sexually abused. When I added that her prostitute mother was lying brain-dead in hospital, Madame could contain her tears no longer and rushed around the table to clasp the bemused Callie to her own ample chest. I told Callie only that I had told her about her mother, but I could see in her eye that she had understood a lot of what I had said. Madame swore that she would help us if "les flics" came knocking on our door. Gaston had been thinking it all over. Suddenly his eyes lit up and he banged the table, sending the wine in our glasses into turmoil.

"Tante Odile!" he exclaimed. His mother at first looked dubious but by the time he had finished telling me about his notorious aunt she appeared to see the sense of what he was suggesting.

Odile Forrestier lived twenty miles back along the coast in a tiny village beyond the oyster beds at Cancale. Philippe, Madame's only brother, eight years older than her, had married her, infatuated, against the wishes of his own parents and grandparents. Her grandfather had been a smuggler and her father a drunken braggart, a notorious celebrity in the community with whom no-one would sail; but Philippe was not to be swayed. He had broken with them and Saint Cast and had moved away. Odile was now a widow of about fifty but with the looks the strength and spirit of a much younger woman. She ran the only café-tabac in Evran-sur-mer and could outdrink the burliest fisherman and out-blaspheme the foul-tongued worst of them. She had inherited from her family a deep-seated hatred of the Authorities, both temporal and spiritual, and especially of the self-appointed guardians of public morality. Above the café were rooms which had long been silent, since the hotel had been closed following the demise of the local cannery. The occasional room was let to the odd summer visitor or fisherman in distress. There

Callie could live in perfect concealment. People minded their own business, especially where Odile's business was concerned as she had a famous temper, once almost knocking down the door of a neighbour who made the mistake of gossiping about her. Odile, I was assured, would never give Callie away.

For the next few mornings I got up as early as I could to listen to news broadcasts on France-Inter and Europe-1. There was still no mention of us and I began to relax a little. Perhaps after all the news would not blow, like a bitter wind, in our direction.

I bought books and music and sat down with Callie to teach her. The weather had turned wintery so that there was no question of her going out fishing with Gaston. We built a couple of easels from wood in my cellar and one inproving afternoon we settled down on a sheltered part of the cliff to paint. I showed her how to start with a colour-wash and how to build up the details slowly. She loved it. I watched her flick white seagulls with the point of her brush onto the splendid blue of her sky above a brown fishing boat and on the pale yellow sand she fashioned a tanned figure running towards the surge of the tide. It wasn't Monet but it was a lovely canvas, much more eye-catching and lively than mine. I told her she had talent and, with a smile she swirled in a great golden sun and sat back to admire it.

When it was dry she presented it to a delighted Madame (who now insisted Callie should call her Tante Adèle) and an obviously impressed Gaston. I could see that he absolutely adored her. "C'est toi sur la plage Callie?"

"Oui moi. J'adore la plage!"

« C'est mon p'tit bateau ? »

« Oui. Ton bateau. Et te voilà ! C'est toi. »

She was pointing to a dark blue blob on deck with a raised arm, and as she did, she sniggered.

"C'est moi, Maman! Comme je suis beau, hein? Tu peins bien, Chérie !"

She looked puzzled, so I told her he meant that she painted well. She leant forward and planted a kiss on his stubbly cheek.

"Oh, là, là...mais tu embrasses beaucoup mieux que tu peins! »

I laughed and explained that he thought that she was a better kisser than a painter. She squealed with indignation and gave him a mild slap on the cheek at which he burst into a pretend wailing lament.

Callie was determined to cook them something the next evening. We went down to the rocks as soon as the tide was out the next day and filled a bucket with mussels. Callie went into the cave and emerged in triumph with two bottles of rum. As we walked back to the promenade I suggested that she cooked paella. We bought a large pan in which to fry the peppers and rice. From my garden she picked some rosemary and as darkness fell she began to fry the sliced peppers, garlic and rosemary slowly in olive oil. I explained what I meant by the rice becoming translucent and suddenly she saw for herself what I meant as the grains turned into glistening pearls and then added the white wine, tumeric and mussel juice. At the end, when the rice was plump with the absorbed juices she put in peas, the mussels and some crevettes we had bought and stirred everything well together.

When they arrived the dish was perfect. She watched in delight as we tucked in. Tante Adèle declared it to be an absolute masterpiece and Gaston promised that he would buy her a fish restaurant when he was rich. She beamed.

After they had left and as Callie was settling in her room my mother phoned my landline, the number of which she already had.

“You’ve made the national news. And you’re in the papers.”

I heard her rustling a page and she read out the story.

“CALLIE AND THE FRENCH TEACHER. “Police have extended their enquiries from the Midlands in an effort to track down Paul Brightmore, a thirty-three year old languages teacher from Birmingham, and a thirteen year-old runaway of mixed race, Callie-Louise Sykes. It is believed that they must be travelling together.” The photo makes you look like a desperado, Paul.”

I took a deep breath, ice-chilled inside, and asked if it said where they were looking.

“No. It just describes Callie; tall, of mixed race, looking sun-tanned, very dark brown hair with blonde patches, very attractive, husky voice and looking much older than her age. There’s no photo.”

No, I thought. Would any photo of her exist?

Realising suddenly that the phone was risky I ended the call as soon as I decently could, telling her, futilely, not to worry.

The following day I asked the Forrestiers if Callie could sleep there from now on. I told Callie that it was just a precaution. She cried in despair.

“Why can’t they just leave us alone? We’re not hurting anybody. Nobody’s hurting me. We’re so happy here. It’s not fair!”

It told her that it might pass; that hot news one day went cold the next, especially if a big story blew in from another quarter.

“The police have other things to do, Callie.”

But deep down I knew my days in Saint Cast were numbered. My car would be found.

Someone at school would remember I had a house in France; some, like Linda in PE had even rented it. And of course some ambitious gutter newshound would not take long to sniff us out.

Then to my utter despair for the first time on the France-Inter six o’clock bulletin the next morning we were mentioned as a footnote. My car had probably been located.

That night, after a day spent in an agony of inner turmoil I scoured my cottage for any sign of Callie-Louise and bagged it up. She had already gone round to Tante Adèle. Adèle looked at me in dismay when I went round and she whispered that we had been mentioned on the television news. Gaston broke the silence. How would Callie like to go on a midnight boat trip? She clapped her hands when I explained. He slipped out the back and collected her things from the cottage as we had prearranged. We walked down to his boat in the windy darkness. There was not a soul about. Gaston was there to help her onto the boat. I bit my lip and tried to sound matter-of-fact. Was she warm enough? Would she make sure she ate something to keep out the cold? Would she do as Gaston said and get some sleep in the night? Yes, yes! She would do all that. Tomorrow we could have fresh herrings, I told her. And I pulled her to me and held her as tight as I had ever held any body.

“I’ll see you in the morning,demain matin,” she shouted as Gaston started the engine. As the boat pulled away from the harbour wall it soon entered the darkness beyond and her waving hand disappeared. It dawned on me later that from the boat my contorted face would still be visible to her in the pale lamplight of the quay. I heard her cry “Paul??” two or three times but then there was silence as the ever-present on-shore wind intervened.

I went back and opened a bottle of rum. I built up the fire and sat at the window in darkness looking out to sea. I looked around to the east until what I thought was Gaston’s lamp had rounded the next headland. There was no difference between sea and sky. A greyness had drifted in in the late afternoon and settled down for the night. I sometimes imagined I saw a

star out there and occasionally a pearly glimmer seemed to hint at a frustrated moon but the darkness ruled. Blindly I put on some music. I could not place it for a start and then after a while it came to me. It was Robert Schumann's second symphony. The first, second and fourth movements were superficial, banal even. But the third, which I seemed to hear properly for the first time that fateful evening, moved me so intensely that I was reduced to helpless weeping. Perhaps the rum helped. But the third movement was scored almost exclusively for strings; and the depth of yearning - surely for his beloved Clara Wieck - a pianistic virtuoso, composer in her own right - was utterly sublime. I consoled myself with the thought that poor Robert had - in spite of Herr Wieck's resolute opposition - made her Clara Schumann. (Was it he - or Johannes Brahms - who talked of Beethoven as the Colossus who dogged his every musical step? I could never remember.)

But then I recalled that Schumann had lost his mind and had drowned himself in the Rhein. This made me smile and then, cruelly, I burst out laughing. I looked out into the bleak, cold black beyond the fire-glow in the window and resolved that I was too comfortable with the fire at my back and the glow of the rum in my belly and glass to go racing - or staggering - down to those sharp, dark rocks and fling myself into the Néant.

Le Néant. There can surely be no word in any other language to express so violently and so awesomely, so chillingly, the utter finality of the end of existence which the néant - the black ocean of nullity - evokes.

I put on Schubert's Unfinished and in that empty room, as the fire died, I never felt so terrified by it. I remember trying to get up to turn it off but I never managed to get there. I must have fallen. Next I sensed a silence as I almost woke. It was chilly but I could not move. I lay there with my head spinning until the dawn crept in from under my kitchen door. An obsessive impulse - neither quite an image neither a clear thought - kept racing through my head. The dawn was a relief and I must have drifted off to sleep again. Those dreams we have in the morning when we are not properly asleep are the most vivid. At first I could not see who I was talking to. The words were French - or were they German? Then, I heard the chairman of governors banging the table, and next, he was leaning over me, shaking me and shouting Réveille-Vous!. But his face had changed - he had a moustache and wore thick, dark glasses. I felt a sharp slap. I opened my eyes and found myself lifted onto a chair. The kitchen was full of people in uniforms. The poor old outside door had been removed from its hinges. As soon as I realised that I was awake I tried to shout in protest as the door to the stairs was wrenched open and the police charged up to the bedrooms.

"Where is ze girl, Brightmore? TELL ME!"

I fell off the chair and was slapped again and again. Cold water was thrown in my face.

"Il est ivre, le CON! Comme il sent mauvais - pouah!- c'est du rhum !» the voice shouted. I saw the bottle of rum picked up and thrown against the wall. I heard myself called a CON and a SACRÉ PÉDÉ over and over.

There must have been a centimetre or so of spirit left in the bottle. A pungent aroma, sweet and dark, arose from the floor and wall. A coughing gendarme threw open a window to aid its escape. At once a sudden cold gust of wind burst in from the doorway and leapt through the banging window, leaving nothing but the wild fresh air of the sea.

"Fermez la fenêtre!" ordered the irate inspecteur "Y a un sacré courant d'air!"

The two halves of the window were closed immediately and the door was lifted and shoved back into its slot. The smell of rum had magically vanished. An comforting inner voice whispered that Callie was safe.

The angry officer could get no intelligence or sense out of me. At one point I remember his junior intervening as he completely lost his temper and screamed " OÙ EST-ELLE, VOUS CON?" barely an inch from my face. Seeing, I assume, that I was in no state to be of use he

ordered his team out to interview neighbours and go into the village with copies of my photograph. A delicious peace and quiet returned to the kitchen.

Eventually I smelt hot, strong coffee under my nose and I heard another voice, kind and encouraging at my ear.

“Gaston?”

“Non, c’est Didier. Bois du café, Paul. Vas-y.”

I took it and gave him a wink.

Next I was in a van, rolling around between Didier and another gendarme. I was handcuffed. My head was pounding so much that I was sure I would have to be sick. I had gotten roaring drunk years ago on rum and had sworn to never touch the stuff again. In pouring rain I was escorted into a large building and put into a cell to sleep off my hangover.

“God, Brightmore, you look twice as rough as I feel. And I tell you, I feel dog-rough.”

I looked at him as his colleague fiddled with the tape recorder. I was still drunk. For a moment I thought it was PE Pete and I think I actually asked him how things at Forest View were. (Have you ever sat at stations and airports wondering how long you would have to be there before a person you actually knew walked past? And how many people do in fact come past who bear a strong resemblance to a character you know?)

Anyway, I took an instant liking to the detective opposite. He even had a bluff manner like Pete’s - and he even seemed to sympathise - unless it was a ploy - except in one major respect. “Personally I don’t see what you see in this bloody country, Brightmore. For one thing, it’s too bloody BIG. Do you know how long we were on the road in the night from Saint bloody Malo? And for another thing there are no bloody airports here. And these gendarmes are a bunch of thugs. Whatshisname...” (and he looked at his younger colleague for help, who whispered “Inspector Salles”)That’s the one - Salles. He was all for dragging you out of your cell three hours ago and attaching the fucking electrodes to your bollocks until you told us where Callie is. (Personally, Paul, I don’t think they would have worked, having stood in the freezing bloody cold this morning in a shit hotel room waiting five minutes for the fucking hot water in the shower to kick in... All that stuff about Hitler humming and ha-ing about when to invade us... Operation Sealion?.....What a load of bollocks! The Germans found so much that needed fixing here that they never had time to get round to us. France’s secret weapon? Being a fucking dump.)Right. Enough beating about the fucking bush. Where is she Brightmore? Where is Callie-Louise Sykes?”

I had honestly never even considered what to say to such a question. My inevitable hesitation brought my “friend’s” fist crashing down on the table a few inches from my nose.

“If you don’t tell me Brightmore, I can’t guarantee your safe passage. What you don’t know is that the police hereabouts fucked up big-time last month - a bit like over Marc Dutroux in Belgium - (Remember him? Mate of yours?) - and a fourteen year old girl - a bit of a slapper, but that’s hardly the point - was raped under their noses in Dinan by Uncle Tom Copley and all - (Are you getting this?) - and if they don’t get the right result over this, many heads - and twice as many testicles - are going to roll. So speak up. The tape’s on. We’re all ears.”

“She ran away.”

“She ran away! She ran away.....We know that fucker, Brightmore.

She...ran...away...with...YOU!REMEMBER? You!....Paul James Brightmore, of 12 Headley Terrace, Earlstone, fucking abducted her from a HOSPITAL. Is it all coming back to you now, you pisshead?”

I looked at him. I could see what a good friend he would make in another lifetime. But not this time around. He looked impatiently at his watch and, aside to his unflappable colleague,

wondered aloud if I was yet in a fit and proper state to be questioned. He added that he wanted to get the late evening boat back. He had tickets for a game the next day.

“She ran away in Calais.” I volunteered. He shook his head and raked his hair with both hands. “Won’t do, Paul. Local plods in Saint Cast have shown your photo around. Several say they’ve seen you with a girl matching Callie’s description. Come ON! I know you’re a bright guy - university degree and every-fink - but PLEASE give us and ours a little credit for being a bit brainier than the average fucking BRICK. My brief is to return with you AND the girl - or my Super will have my balls on toast. (I’m going to go berserk, Steve, if I have to stay one more night in this DUMP. Look you have a word with our weird friend. I’m going to the bogs! That greasy breakfast.....)”

I didn’t see him again. On our way home - (home!) - Steve told me his boss had fainted in the toilet and would be spending a couple of nights under observation in the hospital.

When we landed in Portsmouth they were all waiting.

“Did you sleep with her, Paul?”

“Are you a paedophile?”

“What?” I laughed back, as the flashing cameras exploded in my eyes. “A paedophile? Do I love children? No, not really. They are mostly the by-products of some pretty vile people, don’t you think? Occasionally a really special one turns up. Such was Callie-Louise. She was lost. And I rescued her!”

“Where is she then now, Paul? Don’t you have a duty to reveal her whereabouts?”

“You moron. Who are you to call me Paul? As if I’d tell you hyenas where she is.”

“Come on! Where is she, Mr Brightmore?”

“As if you care about her! For her own sake. If you found her, what would your greasy editor want next? To offer her 20K to get her kit off for your Page 3? So your fat white-van-men could have a good gawp at her in some lay-by? You bunch of bastards!”

“Only doing our job, Paul.”

“As the guards at Ausschwitz said. You revolt me. Go to hell!”

“Daily Mail, Mr Brightmore -“

“Daily Mail! Pretentious scandal-rag for semi-brights.....half-wits. Full of spite. I’d rather have the other lot than you - pretentious hypocrites! Fuck off!”

Of course I pleaded not guilty to abducting Callie. In my arrogance and in the aftermath of my disappointment with my rep. Timpson, I decided to defend myself. That, I realised later, was a mistake. It further antagonised the judge, a prune-faced woman, who could not help but raise her eyebrows at some of the contentious heart-felt arguments I tried to sway the sour-puss jury with. They looked like twelve governors. Why did what sounded so totally sturdy in my head go sprawling like a foal in the silence of that court room? Oratory was a skill I did not possess, I realised some time later as I lay mulling it all over in my cell. For a short time I had become a celebrity but I failed to carry my day. I had presented all the arguments; I had maintained that at no time had anything improper occurred; I insisted that Callie-Louise had been happy and relieved to be rescued from her predicament; that she had gained immeasurably from it. But the prosecutor had been implacable and ruthless. Why, if Callie-Louise Sykes had been so delighted to be abducted - for abducted she had been, without a shadow if doubt, in the most underhand way from the care of a professional and highly competent member of the Social Services - from a Casualty unit, of all places, in which an essential X-ray would - and should - have been taken but for my stupidly crass and immature over-emotional intervention - why had

she then run away from the cottage in which I had hidden her? What experience had been so unbearable that she had felt obliged to take herself off - a girl of thirteen who only spoke a few words of the language of a country in which she was a total stranger - what indeed? Where was she now? In what predicament? How could the jury believe any of my assertions without the corroborating evidence of that poor unfortunate girl? Had they not heard from Mrs Pike for the prosecution that in her professional opinion I was not a proper person to be in charge of young people in spite of my technical excellence as a teacher? Had they not heard from DC Louise Staples - who read from her notes - that I appeared to have an irresponsible, cavalier attitude to child protection issues? And that she and her colleague had found me in an inebriated state at six-thirty on the evening of their interview with me? Had I not told a series of deliberate lies to investigating officers after Callie's "so-called" disappearance? Could anything I said be relied on? Could anyone seriously believe I did not have a sexual interest in the girl? Who could seriously believe that she was my second cousin? Could the evidence of my (hesitant and unimpressive) mother be believed? Was I not, by dint of my own actions, a devious fraud? Had I not tried to cover my tracks by swapping cars in France? Had I not somehow evaded Custom checks at Dover and concealed Callie - for a police check had revealed that no passport existed in the name of Callie-Louise Sykes?

When I took the stand he tied me in knots. Why had she run away? Was I lying, as was my habit? Had she run away in a panic? Or was she being concealed somewhere, against her will, by my accomplices? What confidence could the court and the jury have that, if that was the case, she was under the supervision of fit and proper people? Was I - defined by my own Headmistress as not a fit and proper person to be in charge of minors - able to judge who might be fit and proper?

The jury was clearly not impressed by my assertions that I had been kind to Callie and had not abused her. Nor did they appear to believe me when I said I had no idea where she was. The two halves of my evidence did not add up to one; and her failure to materialise, despite the thorough search of the police and welter of publicity, left an ominous, sinister question hanging unanswered in the courtroom.

Had Callie been nearer to fifteen than thirteen then the judge might have taken a more lenient line. She was minded to take the most serious view of my actions - as a deterrent to others tempted to follow in my footsteps - self-styled do-gooders and self-appointed judges of virtue on behalf of others less well placed than themselves owing to their youth or lack of mental acuity - who might seek to cloak dubious designs beneath a tissue of lies and dissembling - whether faintly related to such vulnerable young persons or not, as could not be established - and with a relish she sent me down for seven years.

I knew that there could be no chance of parole. I would resolutely maintain to the last that I had no idea where Callie was and deny any guilt. Even when she had passed the age of sixteen - the minimum legal age to live unparented in France - to tell of her whereabouts would lead to the discovery of her illegal status in France and lead to her expulsion; thrown out as a non-person back into this cultural and spiritual nowhere.

In prison I began to write about those events which had so unexpectedly shattered that rather cosy but tedious pattern of my existence that January and February.

I had been attacked in the shower (not badly - I sustained a few cuts and bruises) and it was decided that I should be transferred to an open prison sooner rather than later. There I was surrounded by tax-evaders, embezzlers, frauds and other minor criminals. I kept myself to myself and spent most of my time reading novels or writing about my experiences. I played chess on occasions with an elderly man who, according to a warder, had killed a child on a

zebra crossing while under the influence of drink. We never talked. He invariably beat me. He showed no interest whatsoever in what I had done.

“You have a visitor, Paul,” said the kindly warder one early summer afternoon. It would not be my mother. (She had been two or three days earlier with a reluctant Brian in tow. He had sat in silence for ten minutes, had made some excuse and had not returned.)

With more than a little curiosity I entered the visitors’ room.

Across the table sat Melissa.

She looked grave and ill at ease. For a while I could not find any words and could not trust myself to speak. I felt anger, pleasure and sorrow in equal measure. I studied her blue eyes and noticed, as she attempted a smile, that she had developed crow’s feet at the temples. She had lightened her hair and shortened it to ear-lobe length. She was still a very pretty woman. And I thought I could detect tears glistening in those eyes. My Melissa. Here she was again. Unable to help myself - for the sudden thought leapt straight into my mouth - I blurted out that I had torn up her school photo. She looked puzzled and shook her head in wonder. She put out her hand to me and I held it. I noticed immediately that her wedding ring had gone. She saw that I saw. “He died,” she said simply. “Of meningitis. My little boy.”

I commiserated. As I began to enquire about her husband she held up her other hand to tell me to be silent. I nodded. I understood.

“Did you know Deborah Sykes?” I asked after a while.

At first she did not answer. I asked her again.

“She was a sort.....of cousin...,” she finally replied.

“How?”

“Through my mother. Her first marriage. She was very young. She was married to one of Deborah’s uncles. He gambled and drank.”

“And did you give Debbie a...hand...in that hotel?”

“She told you that?”

“She did.”

She lowered her gaze to the floor beneath the table but said nothing.

“Why did you give me the wrong number? In Leicester that time?”

She looked up startled. “I didn’t! I wanted you to call me! When you didn’t I was really upset. You must have misread my writing.”

She repeated the number. An eight and a nought. She really did have shocking handwriting. I had taken her eight for a nought.

“You knew where I lived, Melissa. You could have looked me up.”

“You told me you were with someone. A history teacher?”

I told her that I had nobody and never had had. Since her.

“Is that why you...ran off with that....girl....because you were.....lonely?”

“Lonely! Come on Melissa! Mealy-mouthed is not your style. You mean frustrated. Is that what you honestly think? Do you honestly think I had sex with a deprived thirteen year old girl? My own second cousin? Didn’t you read what I said in court? Do you think my morals are on a par with yours, Melissa?”

She took back her hand as if stung. She looked very sorry for herself.

I apologised without reservation. What right had I - a convicted felon - to sit in judgement on the foibles of others? I just had an unstoppable urge to know why.

“Why, Melissa? Why was I never...enough for you? Why were you always looking elsewhere? Why?”

She shrugged and began to snuffle. I waited patiently for an answer. Perhaps she had never considered it herself before.

“ I found out when I was 18 that Don Martin was just my step-dad. My real dad was Debbie’s uncle. I had a terrible row with Martin. About you. And it all just came out. The bloody snob.”
“A row? About me?”

“Why was I wasting my time with a.....nobody? Couldn’t I see that you hadn’t two ha’pennies to rub together? He refused to give me a decent allowance at Uni - unless I threw you up. Said it might bring me to my senses, being poor - and if not, he said, it would be good practice for getting used to being poor, marrying a bloody teacher, like you said you wanted to be. He said it showed I wasn’t a proper Martin - not like my little sister - (the scheming little bitch.) He made me hard, Paul. I had to look out for myself. You know the rest. I hate Don Martin.....and my mother for marrying the bloody fascist. In the end I became a teacher just to spite them.”

“But you hated children!”

“I did and I do...more and more....I hate their absurd conceit, their rudeness....their lack of originality.....and their stupid silences when you ask them perfectly straightforward question.....those stubborn silences....I think I hate those even more than the filthy noise they make. The more I’m with them, the more I loathe them...”

“Then out of respect for them and for yourself you should get out. Do something else.....Anything.”

The word died on my lips when it occurred to me what anything had entailed for her beforehand. She must have read my thought. She blushed.

“When you get out of your prison, I’ll get out of mine.”

I asked her what she meant.

“I’ve.....known..lots of men, Paul. It’s just the way I’m built. I can’t help it. Can’t settle. You are the kindest man man I ever knew. My first love. And my only love. My only real one. I’ll wait for you now Paul. I’ll meet you out. You’re a great cook. We could open a place together, buy a guesthouse, here or abroad. Paul. I’m asking you to come home.”

Home!

I thanked her for the kind invitation and took her hand again.

“It’s too late now, Melissa. The fact of the matter is - and it has taken me years to realise it - the fact is...I don’t love you any more. I love Callie.”

Callie will surely soon be sixteen. I do not even know when her birthday is! Even if I did, I would not be able to send her a card.

What else needs to be said in conclusion? Well, I found out from my mother that her niece was switched off by court-order two years ago.

And I’m fed up. This is a kind of living death which I can’t be switched off from; I’m on a life-support system where I do not make one single important decision from the moment I wake to the moment I go to sleep. I mostly lie and imagine what Callie is doing. Does she still go sailing with Gaston? Is he her boyfriend? Does she help Tante Odile in the café - tabac? Why had no-one realised that this was “la jolie et jeune Anglaise” which the radio, television and newspapers had mentioned? The newshounds must have tried to dig her out but had obviously failed. Had Odile managed to fix her up some false papers through the Préféture? I imagine that

no-one would take much notice of a young foreigner in a country awash with foreign workers. After two and a half years Callie is surely safe.

I had insisted to Gaston that no-one should contact me until she was 18 (16!). When she is twenty I will be released. I keep wondering what she will think when I eventually turn up again; almost forty. I persuade myself that I can and should have no expectations. Callie has no idea where I am. I hope that Gaston had told her what I asked him to tell her; that I had returned to England to try and explain to the authorities why I had taken her abroad.

That paragraph might have been the end but today I received a letter. It was crumpled and in an envelope which I vaguely recognised. Then I placed it. It was Mrs Stubbs' stationery. The envelope inside had been posted to her, she wrote, with a note to send it on to me if I was no longer at that address. I looked at the postmark. It had taken a month to get to me.

It was from Callie-Louise.

My dear Paul,

Why don't you write? I'm so worried about you. I love you and miss you so much. I've written to your old landlady and asked her to send this on to you, wherever you are.

Tante Odile frightened me at first. She has such a booming voice and she scowls at everybody. But it's all for show. She has a heart of gold.

Paul - nous avons un restaurant ! Gaston va pêcher et je fais la cuisine avec Tante Odile le week-end. If it works we will open up the rooms above the café in the week as well. I cook all those wonderful things you showed me and I really have a knack for shellfish now. Tante Adèle has shown me how to do her fish stew. She's going to sell her cottage and move in with us.

Paul. You'd be proud of me. I've read all the books you bought and more. I have nearly a bookcase full. And lots of CDs. Mozart is my favourite. Please wherever you are, please come and live with us. You could help in the kitchen, welcome the guests, buy the wine and the food and do the invoices. And choose the music for the restaurant.

(I lay back on my bed and held the paper which she had touched, to my lips. A photo dropped out of the envelope. There was Callie - looking even more lovely than I could ever recall - with a baby in her arms - and next to her a beaming Gaston - clean-shaven in a suit. Adèle and a much taller, handsome woman, who I guessed was Odile, stood in a state of obvious delight and pride behind them.)

Mechanically I read on.

Paul. I'm a mother. Je suis mère! Mon fils s'appelle Paul. Gaston est le père ! J'adore, j'adore, j'adore Gaston.

(I heard the warder outside talking to someone. Where could I hide the note and the photo? Should I rip them up? I took down the nearest book - Gide's Symphonie Pastorale - from my bookshelf and slipped them inside but before I did I read the postscript.)

Paul. You saved my life. Please come back and see us as soon as you can. I love you.

Callie.

CALLIE-LOUISE

In my eyes she looked to see her own admired,
The darkest eyes I think I ever saw;
My surgent love her breathless own inspired
Fired up by passion's all-consuming law.
Yet in my voice where caution ever spoke
Did adoration ever change its key?
I never did and never would provoke
Great hope in her there burned great love in me.
Too young a rarer love to understand
- Nor could I sift the nobler fires from base -
How could she see the blessings I had planned
Nor in my heart her prominence of place?

And nor indeed did I, till she was gone
And found, than me, a more indulgent one.