

EARLSTONE

Had Mr P never written his letter perhaps none of this would have happened.

Dear Editor,

This will seem exceedingly odd, but please hear - read - me out. I must stress that I am perfectly sane. This Saturday morning at ten in the morning I shall be outside Earlstone police station with half a dozen eggs. These I will throw at the windows and walls of said building. Your photographer should be able to take some very interesting photographs for your next edition.

I shall not go into the reasons herewith for this seemingly senseless act. They will emerge at a later point, possibly in court, if events thereafter take the course I expect them to. The full story I shall make available to you as an exclusive, at absolutely no expense, at the propitious moment,

Yours faithfully,

A victim.

My editor, Graham Blower, had handed me this letter on a Friday morning. I was his rising star reporter cub. Once I had read it, I tried to gauge his reaction and wondered what mine should be. Astonishment? Amusement? Concern? - That a lunatic was on the loose? Was it merely a stupid hoax to waste our time? So I shrugged and raised my eyebrows. I respected Graham. He had contacted me out of the blue and given me this chance after I had had to resign my post as a junior doctor. I wanted him to keep his respect for my judgement - my *better* judgement - which had, with a number of good stories and angles, so far vindicated his decision to employ me. At that moment he was giving away no clues.

You would never guess he was a newspaperman. There was none of that stereotypical braces-twanging, get-out-there-and kick-an-ass extroversion. With his long, solemn face he could have put on a dog-collar and passed easily for a vicar. He reminded me a little of my eccentric, yards-long German teacher who cycled to school and often forgot to take off his bike-clips, exaggerating even more his enormous shiny black shoes. Graham always spoke quietly and politely, and usually after he had thought things over, not before.

"I'm inclined to cover this, Andy. I've got a feeling about it. One develops a nose, you know," he said. "Coffee?"

"No thanks. What makes you think this isn't just a drunken nutter?"

I handed him the letter back.

"Well, *you tell me.*" he continued. "What sort of person do you envisage from the language? Go on - here - have a *proper* look...Layout, for example?"

He passed it back over. I was being trained and tested. I concentrated. The paper was of good quality with a watermark, the addresses properly done and he had signed off *faithfully* not *sincerely*. I told him all this and also mentioned the use of handwriting rather than a printer. I thought he was an eccentric, old-fashioned sort of person.

"Well, *yes....*" he said with light mockery. "Notice it's in *fountain pen*, blue-black ink, *not* your common or garden biro..... Male or female?"

"Probably male. Throwing eggs doesn't strike me as exactly *feminine.*"

I handed it back again and he shook his head. He told me I had a lot to learn still.

“Look at the *language*.”

Back it came.

“Well, the spelling’s good and he uses lots of big words - *propitious*...”

“What does that mean?”

I had no idea. I blushed and he smiled.

“It’s a good job our readership is hardly much better educated than you. It’s pronounced *propishious*. It means *proper, appropriate, when the time is right*.”

A little stung, I said I thought he must be *pompous* to use such obscure words when easier ones would do.

“Exactly! Well done you! Very pompous and look here, at his *herewiths* and his *thereafters*.”

Look at the *style*!”

“Well he sounds like, I dunno, Charles Dickens or Jane Austen.”

“Age and background?”

“Quite old. 50 or 60...Oh, I mean *middle-aged*, not **old**, you know *elderly* old... sorry”

“Water off a duck’s back, Andy. Carry on...”

“I’d say he was well educated, a professional. Maybe a solicitor or a lecturer.”

“Good. So it might make a good story if some posh old fellah turns up at the local nick to throw eggs. He must be very angry and desperate about *something*. Now then, what about the legal side?”

“What about it?”

“Well, we have to be very careful about tip-offs. We are now accessories to a potential crime. I could call the police now to prevent it. But should I? What would you do?”

It was Friday afternoon and I was tired. I had been calling a councillor all day to get him to explain why he had claimed over two thousand pounds in expenses and only attended eight out of twenty-six council meetings, but he had cut me dead each time. I was feeling a bit depressed. I did not need this training session. What was the right answer?

“If I were in your shoes, Graham, I’d stick it in my drawer and pretend I’d never had it. Then I’d say, if anybody asked, I’d had a last-minute tip-off.”

He grinned, took the letter from my side of the table and put it in his drawer. He asked what I was doing at ten the next day. Anything special? Well, I had tickets for Eleanor and me to go to see the Tigers at Gloucester. We were planning a pub lunch somewhere. I calculated.

“If I’m away no later than eleven, I could pull it in.”

“Good lad. Go and find Jim and sort it out with him.”

“Hold on! Can’t you have a word? What if he tells me to take a running jump?”

“He won’t. Jim would go out in his jimjams at three in the morning if he thought he could get a good picture. He is Midland press photographer of the year, don’t forget.”

It was a dull, chilly Saturday morning in November. The police station stands at the top of a hill on a corner, across the road from the derelict cinema and opposite an art-deco pub, also abandoned after an abortive attempt to reopen it as a curry house (of which Earlstone had an ample sufficiency in those days).

I had picked up Jim as arranged and at nine fifty we sat parked on the other side of the road from the police station. In the direction of the town centre the road veered downhill to the left and on the right hand side, from a cheap-end supermarket, customers, mainly old, were furtively emerging to queue at the bus stop or struggle up the hill away from town. Jim glanced at his

watch.

“Wild goose-chase this, young man,” he growled. “A hoax.”

“You reckon? A queer hoax, though. What’s the point?”

He said nothing. We waited. He fiddled with his camera and I looked behind us in the direction of Bragwell village for the approach of any suitable candidate as a middle-aged egg-thrower. I checked the mirrors. There was a car still parked behind us, empty, and two youths in baseball caps were walking towards us. On the same side of the road as the police station there was no-one. I looked up. Amongst the shoppers there was a man I thought I recognised, my old English teacher. But I had not seen him for over fifteen years and could not be sure. A squat woman of about seventy in a dowdy overcoat was hobbling and lurching uphill.....But now, overtaking everyone there strode a tall, elegant woman, straight-backed and the epitome of poise. Her silver hair was particular striking and as she came closer she slowed and appeared to stare at the upper windows of the building. My nose alerted me and I nudged Jim.

“Here she is!” I whispered. He looked up and snorted. He told me I was mad. *She* was a Tory councillor. He had taken her mug-shot countless times.

“Mad as a hatter, she is.” he said. “But not *that* mad.”

“No! look! She’s staring up at the windows.”

I got out and stood in the road. Jim sighed and got out too. The lady quickened her stride, her head tipped back in apparent contempt for the world. Jim laughed.

“Now *that* would have been a story, young man!”

I scowled.

“Andrew?”

I turned. It *was* my English teacher.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Fine, thank you, Mr....”

Damn. What was his name? Oh no, was he coming over for a chat?

“I’ve been following your meteoric rise in the local news firmament,” he said from the kerb.

“I’m glad Mr Blower sent *you*.”

From a white bag he took out a carton of eggs and hurled them one by one at the nearest window, hitting the brick work with the last two. He looked at Jim.

“Did you get your photographs, Sir?”

Jim was so astonished he had failed to raise his camera.

“Never mind. Come on. Pay attention.”

He took out another six and did the same. Jim clicked furiously. The crump of the eggs on the window brought out a large policeman. He looked at the yolk dripping down the glass and then at my English teacher whose name was Peveley., William Peveley.

“Did you throw them?” he asked him.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I have not been cautioned, officer. I won’t say.”

I crossed the road. Another officer emerged, a woman. She looked at the window and did a double-take.

“Well? Aren’t you going to arrest me?” he asked. “I demand that you arrest me!”

Shoppers had paused and cars were slowing. Jim kept clicking. I was now almost opposite Mr Peveley and he smiled. His beard had greyed and his hair had thinned but he did not have the wide-eyed stare I would have expected of someone with dementia. And he did not reek of

alcohol. Strangely, he took out a tray of yellow fish, glanced at it and then dropped it back into the bag. His gaze at the policeman was steady and composed. He offered up his wrists together for handcuffing.

“Well?” he repeated.

“Y-you’re under arrest!” declared the young policewoman.

“On what charge?” he countered as soon as she had spoken.

They looked at each other to speak.

“For throwing eggs. At a building.” said the man eventually.

“Oh? Is that on the statute books? *Whereabouts*, might one enquire?”

“Come on. We’ll sort this out *inside*.” said she.

“Caution me!” he insisted.

“*Inside*,” she said again.

And the three of them went in, leaving me on the kerb. The world shrugged and went on its way.

I could not concentrate on the rugger that afternoon, as I re-ran those events over and over. I liked Mr Peveley. He had been strict and intolerant of laziness, both of thought and of action, but scrupulously fair, never appearing to favour nor bear a grudge against any pupil. But I knew that he liked me. His comments on my essays had been usually the sort that made me glow, and he had not been able to conceal his disappointment that I intended to drop English later in the sixth form to concentrate on the science A Levels I would need to pass to fulfil the medical ambitions which had already formed when I was a mere fourteen years of age.

He had a reputation as a fearsome critic of poor English and lamented what he described as the decline in the language of Shakespeare and Hardy. He described to us how he was not afraid to march into shops to point out the misuse of apostrophes - in such “*abominations!*” as Softleys Sofa’s. He was the scourge of misspellings, poor style and bad grammar on notices around the school and was often seen underlining such with a red marker pen. He thundered against such howlers as “less” rather than fewer people, “haitch” rather than aitch and “between you and I” caused him, he said, physical pain. We gathered that he was not popular in some corners of the staffroom because of his forthrightness, but no doubt his concern for watch-dogging accuracy and correctness amongst the fosterers of young minds superceded any worries - if he had any - as regarded his popularity.

His outrageous act that morning - and he must have had a genuine grievance - seemed to be entirely in character. But would he lose his job over it? I felt afraid for him. Schools needed teachers of his calibre and principles. His stories of confrontations with shopkeepers and with members of staff who would “remain nameless” kept us not only richly entertained but also reinforced - and here was surely his ulterior motive - those basic points he was trying to teach us. Yes, I *liked* Mr Peveley - not the easiest or most pleasant - and certainly never in danger of becoming the pupils’ favourite member of staff - but a more original, more intelligent and more excellent teacher there was not to be found in the entire school. A true enthusiast.

“You didn’t seem to enjoy the game much,” said Eleanor as we drove back in the dark. It had been a mud-bath, very forgettable.

“No. It was a bit tedious. And I had something on my mind.”

“What?”

“Ah, nothing. Just work.”

I had a quick word with my editor over the phone on Sunday and on Monday morning I went in

to see him first thing. He seemed unsurprised about what had happened. He fetched the original letter from his desk and handed it to me.

“This is just up your street, Andy, with that slightly dry sense of humour you inject.”

“But I told you I *know* him. *And* I liked him. I don’t know that I could be objective.”

“Precisely. That is one reason I want you to cover it.”

“How do you mean?”

“It will force you to stand back a little and keep your emotions out of it. Good training. Don’t worry. I’ll look out for all the positively charged adjectives. That’s my job.”

Another stage of my apprenticeship. He told me to get into touch with Peveley and ask for an interview.

“If a bank doesn’t get robbed and if the mayor doesn’t announce he’s having a sex-change, then this’ll be our front page on Friday. The Mercury hasn’t sniffed it. We’ll scoop them!”

I got the number from Directory Enquiries and, quelling my nerves, gave Mr Peveley a ring.

“Ah! Andrew! I wondered if you might be in touch.” he exclaimed.

I asked him if I could come around for a chat about the events of Saturday, and he readily agreed. Not twenty minutes later I drew up outside a tall Edwardian house, one of ten in a terrace row, facing a companion row opposite. On an inlaid square of mortar below the roof was inscribed the year 1904. The house had the bearing of a strict, respectable soldier with its uniform of red brick and solid front door which was topped by a fan window of red, blue and yellow segments. But for a marked discoloration of the brickwork by the porch it might have been put up weeks, not a century before. This house seemed entirely in keeping with the straight-backed, proud man it enclosed.

I looked around. This was not a part of town I knew well, being from the village of Sharnstoke which lay to the east, at the other edge of town. To my right, three houses away, the gentlemanly row came to an abrupt end and there was a small car park I had not spotted, having approached from the other direction. I decided to park on there in view of how narrow the road, Priestley Road, was, and because I was almost double parked with a van. As I got out of my car I was taken aback and disgusted to see, on the side wall of the last villa, a mish-mash of garish graffiti-tags interwoven with a liberal scatter of abuse. One slogan in green arrested my eye. It read PEV=PERV. On the opposite boundary of the car park there was a scruffy private hedge, unclipped, and through a gap I could see a recreation ground with a collection of broken swings. On a far bench sat youths with others standing shivering around them. One was revving a scooter. Some of the smaller ones looked of school age to me. It was half-past-ten. Beyond the reccy, clustered around a hill topped by two medium-rise blocks of flats, were short streets and closes of modern houses in yellow brick. There was a parade of shops and a pub. This was the Eskdale estate. To the left of it was a cluster of allotments and partly hidden by trees beyond them was a long, flat building, Eskdale school. In the far distance, running to the horizon, were pastures, and alongside the silver thread of the Watling Street, there rose up – or rather poked up, like a miniature black volcano - the spoil-heap of a coal pit which had been closed years before the names McGregor and Thatcher had even been heard of.

I could hear the clear tuneful voice of a woman and a piano. I assumed it was the radio but when I knocked the music immediately stopped. The grand, old front door opened and there he stood, in a sleeveless pullover and tie, in baggy old corduroys, greeting me with a genial smile. This was how I had pictured him while reviewing my inner image gallery of his classroom and this was the same kind of uniform he had worn to school in my day. I was invited into a hallway smelling of polish, hung with pictures, watercolours, of village scenes, inns, churches and

thatched cottages, in contrasting pale and dark shades, almost like sepia photographs - into a hallway carpeted in gold, red, cream and brown patterns putting me in mind of a pebbled streambed - and past an ornate banister pillar in highly polished cherry wood. I was walking along a passage into a preserve of values, cultural and moral, which now existed exclusively in the private homes of the middle-aged and middle class.

In the sitting room I was invited to take a seat on a brown chesterfield sofa which had obviously hosted a great number of bottoms, and I managed to squeeze past a low table loaded with plates of biscuits without upsetting them. On the upright piano a hymnbook stood open at a page entitled *How Great Thou Art*. Above it there was a photo of a young man, evidently the son, wearing a mortarboard and grinning joyfully at an adjacent photo of his sister in similar pose and regalia. A large bookcase ran the whole length of the longer wall. A black cat was kneeling, sphinx-like, looking out on the grey morning through lacy curtains. The tall, blonde lady, with an animated, attractive face, who had been playing the instrument when I knocked, had risen from the stool to greet me. She said she would make tea and then left us alone. My host sat down on the chair opposite and wedged the large book he had been reading between the cushion and armrest. He put me at my ease and we chatted about the old days at school and mainly about me. "You were a rare creature, Andrew, a polymath, and a fine sportsman."

"Well," I replied with all the modesty I could muster "I had so many good teachers. But there were plenty cleverer than me in their particular field. You remember Carstairs and Cowlam, of course. Danny Statham? He did history at Durham rather than Cambridge. His mother came from Durham..... I was just lucky to be *alright* at everything, well most things...."

He asked where I had studied and I told him rather shyly, Southampton.

"Ah, yes of course," he said. "I'm sorry. I should have remembered."

Yes, you *should* have done! The disaster which had befallen me there and derailed my career had been reported in the local paper and even in a national one, filtering back eventually to The Earlstone Gazette.

"I could not believe it was you," he added rather lamely.

I shrugged. "Stuff happens, Mr Peveley."

He did not invite me to call him William as I anticipated he just might in view of my thirty-one years, and in fact he never did. Mrs Peveley eased my discomfort by returning with her tea-tray. She sat down next to me and I watched her long slender arm and hand reach out to pour me a cup of Earl Grey mixed with breakfast tea which I had offered to try at her rather insistent suggestion, with lemon rather than milk. It was good. But I declined a biscuit.

"It's Andrew *Clayfield*, isn't it?" said she. "William mentions you a lot. He's taken quite an interest in your career at The Gazette you know."

"I'm flattered. I admit, I do enjoy it."

"A stepping-stone to greater things, I imagine," she continued while he watched me carefully.

"You've certainly livened up the stale old beast somewhat. We liked particularly your piece about those idle councillors who never attend meetings and claim expenses."

"It upset people," I said.

"But so it should!" he declared. "The Gazette used to be such a cosy old puss - the *mayor* on his charity round...the MP at the fete, the Round Table, opening this and that, stuffing his ugly mug at Constitutional Club banquetsnow it scratches and bites a bit. The town needs it."

"A *bomb* would be better," she added quickly.

Poor old Earlstone. So much of the old town - the workshops, the factories, the bus station, the cinemas, the shops - was derelict. Estates like Eskdale clustered around its centre like cold planets

circling a dimming star. Some days it was almost deserted and at night it was roamed by children with their tinnies and by youths on pub-crawls.

“Not a bomb,” said he. “It needs demolishing and greening over. Its function, its *raison d’être* has gone. Bring back the countryside, I say. The new shopping mall idea is ludicrous. *Ponds, spinneys, fisheries, allotments, pleasant walkways...* that’s what we need...”

She laughed bitterly “And what would happen? *They* would trash it all, as soon as look at it.”

Who *they* were I did not need to ask. The letters into the editor’s tray complained weekly about *them*. Self-consciously I picked up a chocolate biscuit. It was not really up to me, as his guest, to steer the conversation around to eggs. Oh yes it is! - I heard my editor exclaim. *I* was a reporter and it was my *job*.

“So, Mr Peveley, what can you tell me about Saturday?”

“I shall enlighten you, but only a little” he said with an enigmatic smile, leaning back and clasping the back of his rather unkempt head in his palms. “Since I took early retirement, I am fulfilling a lifetime’s ambition. To be outrageous!”

“Honestly? Is that it? Can I quote you on that?”

“No! Of course not! And if I am to give you the story you must promise to give me the right of censorship and final say.”

Here was my second challenge. There was absolutely no way, my voice said, that the editor would allow such wholesale interference. I cleared my throat and slipped out my notepad.

“Mr Peveley, I can’t guarantee you that. Any more than a reader’s letter to the paper for publication can be exempted from editorial control.”

“Very well. Perhaps I did not make it clear. What I mean is, if you make light of what happened, I shall never speak to you - to you as *reporter* I mean - again. Saturday’s events, however insane they seemed, had a very serious purpose.”

“Well, can you tell me what it was? And what made you decide to do it? Have the police upset you in some way?”

“Those *scoundrels* have let us down badly,” said she. “William has my total support. It was time to make a protest.”

“How have they let you down?” I ventured to ask.

“*That* Andrew, will remain a secret until I get my day in the Magistrates Court.”

“So you’ve been charged?”

“I have.”

I thought of his challenge to the fat officer.

“What with?”

“It’s derisory. Disorderly Conduct.”

“Can I report that?”

“Of course.”

He handed me a printed sheet of A4 which he had taken from between the pages of his large book. I read the following.

Ex-teacher William Joyce Peveley has been charged with Disorderly Conduct and bailed to appear before Earlstone Magistrates in connection with an incident of egg-throwing outside the police station on Saturday 8th November. He intends to plead Not Guilty and will defend himself. At that time he intends to explain what purpose lay behind this seemingly senseless act.

“That is basically what I want you to tell the town for the present. Dramatise it by all means - I

want you to get people's attention - but if you sensationalise it or devalue it with such nonsense as "eggstraordinary" or is he a good "eggsample"? I will go to the Mercury. Can I rely on you?" "You can rely on me not to belittle you. That would be unprofessional. I tell you what. I'll email you my copy and if there are any factual inaccuracies or comments you don't like, you can let me know. But you can't choose the words."

He smiled.

"It will be just like old times when I marked your essays, Andrew. I think I can trust you. No, I *know* I can."

I stuck my neck out. "Is this anything to do with graffiti? I did read what they wrote about you on the wall down there - *Pev equals Perv.*"

He hesitated. He looked at his wife. She nodded.

"Alright. It *is* indirectly linked.....Right. I will tell you this much. You can refer to it obliquely if you wish in your report, just to say what a misery life is becoming around here. Because of *them*. My old tutor told us in 1973, whatever else we did, never to live in our school catchment area. I took his advice and when I married Caroline in the summer before I began teaching at Holywell High, we settled in Stapleford, over yonder, six miles from Fairleigh Parva, Sharnstoke and the eastern side of Earlstone, which were of course the catchment areas for Holywell, with good pupils like you and its Cowlams and Carstairs's. Not that it would have mattered in those days whether we had lived *next door* to the school! It was a good school and parents were still in charge of their children. Then in 75 this house came up for sale and we knew we had to buy it. Behind it in those days were open fields. Eskdale was only a glint in a planner's eye. So we moved here. Admittedly, we were now two and a half miles closer to Holywell but children from these old roads back then used to go to Earlstone High in the town centre, before *Eskdale* was built. Then Mrs Thatcher's wonderful regime decided to shake things up. Abolish boundaries and let schools compete for pupils! So the odd few began to turn up on Holywell's doorstep from over there - but good kids, keen to learn, and if you were keen, our school, your old school, was *the* place to be in the eighties when you were thereThen, alas, in the nineties began the gradual decline into an age of vulgarity, me-ism and parental weakness and indifference. The New Child slipped out of its pupa free of constraints, empowered by the Childrens Acts, glistening with spitefulness, and programmed to do as it pleased with impunity. Suspensions and exclusions rocketed and County Hall decided to pressurise Heads into doing yob-swaps. You know, we expel one to you for one of yours. So four years ago Holywell was fortunate enough to acquire a tiny twelve-year-old, angelic-looking Tania, Tania Dyer, ex-Eskdale, who proceeded to live up to the implicit foulness of her homonymic surname. She had set fire to a child's bag at Eskdale and that was the final straw. In exchange for the delightful Tania, Eskdale got a revolting fat boy from us who could not control his wind or mouth. I did not know who she was and what she looked like - this *Tania* - being fortunate enough not to have to teach her, and one morning on break-duty, I made the catastrophic mistake of pulling her up for chewing gum. "Sgottadowivyou?" wondered the fair damsel. So I pointed out all the mini-splats of chuddy on the tarmac. "Zactly" retorts she. "What difference's one bit more gonna make?" So out it pops, out of her rose-bud mouth, onto the yard. We debate whether she should pick it up and her crowd of supporters votes no. I point her out to the headmistress, one of the liberal neo-fascists fresh from the fast-breeder at County HQ, and find myself taken aside and taken to task for not "cutting" the poor child "enough slack." I was so furious that I retorted to the Head "Ah, you are evidently not in favour of zero-tolerance then?" Now liberal fascists can tolerate every variety of vileness in the child but, alas, have no patience at all with sarcasm and dissidence from members

of staff, particularly one who has already made his opinion pretty clear that she has far fewer brains than the caretaker - I mean *premises officer*. The child, she informed me, only had to follow four or five rules in the Code of Conduct at the outset. Chewing and spitting were not covered. My ignorance of this, and my failure to read minutes of staff briefings where such nuggets were to be found, showed "a lack of professionalism" and I was put in my place - *formally*. But it did not matter to me of course. Things had deteriorated so much in the classroom since that woman's arrival that I had already made up my mind - with her blessing - to go early. Unfortunately little Tania could not get over the trauma of being so abominably treated by me and it was my further misfortune to be spotted by her as I was doing the front garden one afternoon. And the rest, as they say, is history. I kept telling Caroline that one day Tania would grow up and out of it and that the abuse and harassment would stop, but she has, it seems, an inexhaustible supply of little siblings, a set of Russian dolls, all stamped with the same genetic predisposition to be thoroughly anti-social - and not only them - they have little allies. All have one thing particularly in common, a dislike of crusty old teachers like me. PERV is quite polite in comparison with some things they say and write - mainly say, as writing can be a little challenging for them."

"So in other words, the Eskdale kids give you a hard time?"

"Not only us," said she. "Other neighbours have told them to shoo and are sometimes targets themselves. Priestley Road has become a diversion for the nuisances - and we can't imagine that doesn't bring some relief to Eskdale. There would be a street party here if we moved out."

"So why don't you move?"

For the first time he lost patience with me a little. Why **should** they move? - he demanded.

"And the police? What about ASBOs?" I asked.

They looked at each other and then back at me to explain.

"The police turned up one evening, Mr Clayfield..." she was so choked she could hardly carry on. "They turned up one night - you won't believe this - after we had called them and they went over the road to chat to this abusive gang - there were about ten of them - and then came back to ask me if I had taken photos. I said I had and this *policewoman* told me to erase them - (we might be paedophiles of course-)"

"I'm a *paedophobe*..." he interjected.

" - And we were more or less ordered indoors. They had told her that they were waiting for a mum to pick them up - all *ten* of them within only *two* minutes of their homes- and the stupid woman had believed them....or pretended to, for an easy life...."

"And as for ASBOs - forget it," he almost shouted. "I called the councillor and she promised she would look into it. Last we saw of *her*. And, of course they wear their hoods. And they make sure they're only here now and then. It's hopeless."

I had begun to understand their predicament. I had to be at the office by midday, so I began to take my leave. The front door closed and I found myself back in the grim present. I went to my car.

This was about far more than a stupid story over eggs. I looked down into the dying old town, with its unsmoking chimney stacks and jagged factories, huddling in the natural hollow out of which it had extended its tentacles over time. Rain was falling. I thought of what Peveley had said and pictured the vale restored, green with the same pasture which surrounded it and realised he had a point. I peered into the recreation ground which was recreating nothing. Five or six children were still there. One was clinging to the chain of a broken swing and nearby the spindle

of a vanished roundabout protruded from a bare circle. The field itself was cratered and rutted and in an instant I pictured motorbikes and cars scrambling and churning up the soft mud. What was the point of this area? It *would* be better if it were wooded or converted into allotments. On an impulse I walked the hundred metres or so towards the group and as soon as they saw me they straightened up and looked uneasy.

“It’s alright!” I said “I’m not the truant man. Or the police. Hang on a minute!”

Suspiciously they looked me up and down. They were about thirteen I guessed.

“What are you then?” said a boy.

“A vicar?”

“A teacher?”

“A paedophile?”

I laughed. I told them I was a reporter. I might want to write about them.

“What do you think about Eskdale estate, the school.....Earlstone?”

For a few seconds they were silent and then poured out a torrent of insults and expletives. I told them to hold on and let each other have a say. A girl of about thirteen with eyes which, I sensed, had been sharpened on seeing too much for her years, spoke for the others.

“We hate school, like, because it’s, like, all about *levels* and all that shit? You got to work hard and revise and get, like, nothing for it? And we’re all, like, well stressed out and the Xs - I mean the teachers - can’t relax or nothing and are doing our heads in? You know what I’m saying? And we hate it cos it’s just boring shit. And the town is well shit an’ all. So we just hang out hereand talk and do stuff. That’s it.”

She knew her life was dreadful and she made it sound so. The others echoed what she said but with nowhere near her street-eloquence.

“But if you hate this place you could get away if you did well in your exams.”

“Nah!” she said. “I’ll do Health and Beauty at tec an’ get a job in a nail parlour.”

“We don’t wanna move” said her friend who was already showing signs of becoming a bloated adult. “Why should we? If it’s OK just to hang out here?”

“But you can’t hang out here for ever.”

“No, I’m gonna get a boyfriend and settle down.....and maybe have a baby? My sister has a flat up on the hill. She’s got a little boy and a girl now? And a new bloke who works at Asda? She gets cheap baby food, you know, and stuff?”

So much for their ambition. I asked the girls their names and gave them my card. The tall thin one was Demi and her tubby mate was Briony. Did they know a girl of about sixteen called Tania? This again brought a burst of comments. A boy said he hung about with her brother. I asked him what they got up to when they hung about. They laughed.

“Do you do tags?” I asked. “Hang around up there on the posh road? For a laugh?”

“Yeah, or we raid the allotments.”

“What for? Carrots?”

They laughed. “Nah, we just like to wind the Xs up a bit - the sad old gits. Something to do?”

I took my leave and Demi shouted and asked whether they would be in the paper that week. I turned and shrugged. I had almost sunk into a muddy rut and my smart pigskin shoes were looking rough. I remembered then what Pev had said about allotments. I surveyed the dismal park and the estate and could not help but blurt out the bright idea which just came to me out of the grey.

“Hey! How would you like an allotment of your *own* to grow your own stuff? And maybe sell it? On the estate?”

They looked at each other and at me as if they thought I was crazy.

“No, I’m serious. You and your friends - to give you something to do? Maybe even keep a few chickens. For your own eggs. And what about goats? Would that be cool, or what?”

Briony snorted with derision but Demi came closer. The cynic in her eyes had faded a little to make way for the child. She almost beamed.

“You’re having a laugh. You couldn’t sort that out, could you?”

“Not on my own. But do you think it’s a good idea? If you don’t, there’s no point.”

“Yeah, if you like. What do we have to do?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m off to think about it. I need to talk to somebody else as well. Send me an email and I’ll be in touch. But...” I hastened to add “Make sure you tell your parents why you’re emailing me. I don’t want them thinking stuff about me. You know what I’m saying?”

“*She* won’t care.”

“Don’t lose my card.”

*

EGGED!

Passers-by and shoppers looked on bemused as a middle-aged Earlstone man let loose a salvo of eggs at the police station last Saturday morning. Our award-winning cameraman Jim Doyle happened to be passing and captured the very moment in these remarkable pictures. Mr William Peveley, ex-teacher of Holywell High School, is shown being arrested. Duly charged with Disorderly Conduct, he has since told this reporter that he intends to plead not guilty and to defend himself when the case is heard by magistrates. His motive for the throwing of eggs, which he described as an act of protest, will become apparent at that hearing, he added. He did however concede that they are related to continuous incidences of nuisance and vandalism in the Westfield area of the town.

Watch this space!

I emailed this to Mr Peveley and within ten minutes received this reply.

*Eight out of ten, Andrew. It should be **it** (describing the **motive** or the **attack**) in the penultimate line, not **they**. The eggs are neutral and definitely not related to “incidences of nuisance“! Related is also rather odd style. **Connected to** is better, though still a little odd-sounding. How about it arises from? But your worse mistake is your confusion of continuous with **continual** (√√√). A continuous attack would have no let-up, hour after hour. (I think even we would consider a house-move if it became that bad!)*

I know that I cannot choose the words you use, however.

William Peveley

My smug smile vanished. I fiddled around with the wording, substituted the phrase *its causes lie*

in recurrent incidences..... and emailed it to Graham. He did not reply, so after a while I went to his office. He told me the copy was fine. He liked the word *salvo* with its overtone of the mock-heroic. He thought it was fair to everybody and was a nice appetite-whetter for the main course.

All that evening I kept seeing and hearing Demi and Briony; hearing their heavily circumscribed ambitions and in Demi's eyes, a gleam of, what? Hope?

"Boss" I said to Graham Blower the next afternoon, having had a good think, "I talked to some of those kids who give Peveley a hard time - and his neighbours. I don't approve of what they do, of course, but they are *kids* and I think.....well., I know, they're deprived."

"Deprived? What with all their computers, mobiles and gismos? God, if they'd been brought up in a fifties council house without central heating, they'd know what deprived was!"

"You sound like my dad used to. I don't mean deprived of *things* and *comforts*. No, they're emotionally deprived, and deprived, oh, I don't know, of the *simple* life and the *play* kids used to have. They live in a threadbare environment, left to amuse themselves and when they look into the future, what do they see? It's depressing. They are depressed. They're in a pressure-cooker at school. Some of them can't cope. And so stop going."

"So why are you telling me what I already know? Every generation of kids has had to put up with stress - it was just called something else then. We had post-war austerity - in black and white. They'll get over it. What's your problem?"

"I'm pretty sure Mr Peveley did what he did because he was angry with the police for not protecting him from those kids. But we're only telling half the story. This town is dying on its feet! The kids are depressed. No wonder they're a bloody nuisance! I would be!"

"Oh come on, Andy! Spare me the deterministic analysis. Earlstone was a dump years ago when you were a teenager. Were you and your mates damned nuisances? No. You weren't."

"It's not that straightforward."

"Precisely! It's down to loads of factors - parents, money, upbringing, booze, drugs, genes, family history and the rest. The fact that Earlstone is a dump is irrelevant. How do *they* know it is? Where *else* have they been brought up? Stratford-on-blooming-Avon?"

"Graham, you are the editor of The Gazette, Earlstone's paper. Shouldn't you care about what is happening to the town and its kids? Some sort of debate or campaign could boost the readership."

"Andy, your heart's in the right place, but street-kids aren't exactly popular these days. But if you must, go and get it off your chest and I'll have a think about it."

I went back to my corner and produced this.

Demi, Briony and friends seem quite bright kids - Demi in particular. It is sad therefore that at such a tender age, around fourteen, they take time out of school, preferring to hang around in the drizzle on a churned up wasteland, absurdly designated by the council as a recreation ground. The broken swings do not swing, the roundabout has vanished and the rutted baize bristles with tins, bottles and neglect. They tell me how frustrated they are with their school where they feel under continuous pressure for results which do not matter to them, and with a town they find unappealing and unpromising. The girls

have ambitions though. Demi will lacquer nails. Briony aspires to a flat on the hill with a child, and maybe a boyfriend willing to settle down with her. Her role-model is her elder sister, who has already achieved those goals. Should one wonder that these kids tend to be street-nuisances in such a wasteland? The wonder is perhaps, their numbers are not swollen by others who feel equally lost and disaffected.

I emailed Jim and asked him to supply any photo in his vast archive which would illustrate the points I was making. Not ten minutes later I had his reply with the perfect attachment. Dark silhouettes, thin and despondent-looking, stood in the background of the very same park I had visited. Was there any aspect of the town he had not photographed? I forwarded the copy and the attachment to Graham and waited. In the end I went down to his office. At my suggestion, he opened the mail and read it, then studied the picture.

“Not bad,” he said. “OK, I’ll think about it.”

“What is there to think about? Shouldn’t we take a lead on this? Readers are fed up with kids causing nuisance.”

“Sure. But this will just wind them up. Do you want us to be seen on the side of the vandals and trouble-makers?”

I felt exasperated. I knew that Graham Blower’s room for manoeuvre had been strictly limited by a staid board of shareholders once dominated by a man called Brierley. I had heard that many of Blower’s predecessors had either quit in frustration or been forced out by Brierley’s determination to keep *The Gazette* as a mere uncontroversial mirror of Earlstone’s social events and fund-raising activities, with a dash of nostalgia and, of course, the saltier reporting of the town’s petty criminality. I had been a medical student in Southampton when a shocking criminal scandal involving Brierley’s son and the police force had led to the father withdrawing from all public life and offices. Graham had become the unexpected beneficiary of a loosening of the reins. The partners who had bought Brierley’s share were younger and able to persuade the rest to allow the new helmsman to take the old tub out of safe harbour into choppy waters. Sales and advertising revenues increased and the dissenting voices were silenced - at least for a time. So why was my editor so reluctant to discuss this issue? To my mind it was a win-win situation and I told him so.

“OK. You might have Mr and Mrs Disgusted writing in and threatening to cancel their order - but it will stir things up and get lots more people talking and buying a copy.”

“Hang on though - you can’t afford to upset your core readership, particularly of a small paper like ours. Our readers are mainly lower middle-class and middle-aged. The very people who get upset by these kids - or by the thought of them.”

“Well, I think they need to hear the kids’ point of view.”

“I *said* I’ll think about it.”

* * * * *

We sat eating.

“This town is dying Eleanor. Pass the wine, can you.”

“How many of your school friends have moved away?” she asked. “All but Gary?”

Of course she had a point. What was there here besides pubs and Indian restaurants? How many

people over thirty went into the town at night? What about the arts?? Joke! I recalled an angry letter from the secretary of Earlstone Music Club deploring the council's decision to withdraw his grant. How could he now hope, he demanded to know, to persuade a famous chamber orchestra to come up the M1 to perform their usual biennial Mozart programme in the URC chapel? Max, amongst other things our drama critic, had told me how hard it was becoming to mount productions at the town's amateur theatre - which decades beforehand had, by united efforts, been fashioned from a derelict factory. Membership of the various drama groups had fallen, roles could not be properly filled, actors were less willing to brave Earlstone by night, and the theatre-going devotees had aged and dwindled.

Most of the retailers who brought a flavour of individuality and originality into the town had retired or gone out of business. Their premises had either been boarded up or been given over to small bars or the perpetual jumble sale of charity shops.

"Well Andy," said Ealiner. "I had to drop into town this afternoon to get an ink cartridge. I couldn't believe how many of the people were fat, vulgar and tattooed - *and* there were loads of foul-mouthed kids from the upper school mouthin' off and pushin' past people. And what wasn't fat or vulgar just looked - and I'm sorry to say it - decrepit. That's what you should do a piece about."

She got up to clear our plates away and brushed her hair behind her ears.

"Ah, so you reckon I should start a campaign against obese and elderly people going into town! Blower would love that. Who would there be left?"

"But that's my point! Younger, affluent people don't go there. Who's going to pay nearly a quid to park in a place with pound shops and charity shops, when it's free to park eight miles away up the motorway at The Boundary, with its Marks and Sparks and all the rest? It's as cheap to drive there - and quicker - as to find a parkin' space here. Earlstone is *finished*. I'm not *against* fat, vulgar, clapped-out people. I just don't want to rub shoulders with them. And nor do you - don't look so righteous and shocked! When was the last time *you* went into the Dead Ferret for a pint?" This was her name for the Dog and Weasel, a pretty low inn by anybody's reckoning. Even so, I did accuse her, lamely, of snobbery. Eleanor was not an Earlstone girl. We had met in Southampton. She had a Law degree. She had forgiven me and stuck by me that awful summer. She had come to live in my home town, managing to get a promising position with law firm in Coventry. With Eleanor it had been hatred at first sight as far as Earlstone was concerned. So we had settled in a tiny house in Fairleigh, a village with a charming chocolate-box centre, a cluster of white cottages around a church with a tower, and two quaint inns. There were no clues to be had there, in Fairleigh, about her bigger ugly sister only three miles to the west along the Watling Street, a wench who had been coarsened and corrupted by railwaymen and factory owners in the late nineteenth century.

Later, after dinner, we sat half-watching a house make-over programme.

"So, Eleanor, you've managed to describe the symptoms. What's the cure? Or is the poor beast past curing?"

"What? Earlstone? Well. Search me. The people who *do* go in have so little to spend. And there's so little to spend it on anyway. The wealthier ones avoid it like the plague. And there's no *industry* to speak of any more."

"There are the big warehouses on the industrial estates, A few engineering firms...."

"Hardly mass employers. People only come to live on the new housing estates because the council tax is so low. *They* commute.....to Birmingham and such. So, for a start-off, they

should improve the links to the motorway. And pull down the old factories-”

“Some are listed.”

“*Listed*. How absurd! They should build more flats and cheap homes, shrink the town centre and make it more residential.”

“People aren’t going to want to live near the boozers.”

“Close half the boozers - half of them are up for re-lease anyway. Relocate the shops which are viable to a new mall just off centre. Lay on decent bus services to take people from the estates there.”

“But there’s The Wharf.”

“That’s only a glorified supermarket with a few tiddly retail units attached, And its ugly. *And* it’s hard to get to. Typical plannin’ balls-up. Pull down the horrid buildin’s - have a competition for which is the most hated - I’d vote for that terrible buildin’ society cuboid, smack in the middle. I ask you, what an advert for the town! Somehow, it’s all got to be downsized. The centre is like expanded polystyrene - there’s no compactness, no.... *substance*. When you analyse it there’s only one shoppin’ street - the rest are deserted - and even there some shops are closed.”

“A lady I was speaking to yesterday reckons a bomb would do the trick.”

She thought for a while.

“It’s not so fatuous a comment. Think about it. If some disaster occurred there - a plane crashin’, a huge gas explosion....a small meteor strike, and it left a big crater where the centre is, ask yourself, would they rebuild it...or fill it in and grass it over?”

“That’s what the woman’s husband said, more or less. If industry causes a place to exist and the industry disappears, then maybe the place should too. We live in a post-industrial age and yet so much of the old landscape still dominates.”

“Not just the old landscape. What went up fifty years ago - all that cheapo build - is so utterly foul - like that bloody building’ society. It all needs to come down. Why do we tolerate it? It’s so depressin’. If someone stood for the council on that agenda they’d have my vote. But now they’re going to spend millions and millions on givin’ that old bus station a once-over. It’s *criminal* - I mean it! The councillors will be fillin’ their boots with backhanders! I just can’t bear to go into Earlstone any more. What’s left of the town is grim and ugly andpointless. And what’s left of the population too. Foul. I’m sorry if I shock you. But it’s true.”

“Don’t judge too harshly. I know we’re not the loveliest -”

“And you pick up the bloody paper and people are actually *defendin’* it. And get all *upset* to hear it criticised. I mean, where have these bloody people *been*?”

“*Don’t* judge too harshly! Aren’t they typical of many small townspeople in England? They’re not healthy, Eleanor. A lot don’t work. They read crap newspapers which slowly poison their brains, and eat crap food which does the same to their bodies. They drink too much and smoke. They’re unfit.”

“They’re a disaster! They’re depressed because they’re overweight and overeat because they’re depressed.”

“They live in a squalid environment.”

“Did *they* make it so shit, or it *them*?”

“It’s the young ones I feel sorry for.”

We tacitly decided to close the debate before we fell out. Eleanor mainly blamed the people, but I was not so sure.

On Friday, to my surprise and immense satisfaction Graham Blower ran my recreation ground

piece on page 2, and even invited readers to ring in and vote as to whether youngsters had a future in the town or not. But the front page was a triumph. Graham had changed the headline from EGGED! To FRUSTRATION HATCHING? My grinning face featured in an inset above two photographs, one showing Pev in the act of throwing an egg as one, already smashed, trickled down the window pane; the other showed the moment of arrest as a craggy old face in a flat cap gaped on amazed. They complemented my report perfectly and at the bottom a large bullet point introduced an invitation to read my analysis over the page.

On Friday afternoon I received an unexpected email.

Dear Andy,

Thank you for writing about us in the paper. What about our lotment (sic)?

Demi

PS I don't really want to do nails.

I don't really want to do nails. On Friday evening, the sentence kept repeating itself like a song lyric you cannot get out of your head. In the end I emailed her back.

Dear Demi,

I'm glad you enjoyed the report. And I'm even gladder you want to do more than file and paint nails. You're a bright kid. But you and Briony need to go to school. Just do it. As far as the allotment goes, I haven't forgotten. . The reccy could be turned into a mini-farm, but we will need a lot of support. Ask your mates what they think. If they're not bothered, it won't work.

Andy

I thought I would put Earlstone and the newspaper out of my head after that, but Mrs Peveley phoned, angrily saying that I had let them down.

“Why did you tie in what William did with those *truants*? His action had nothing to do with them. You have completely changed the emphasis! It's the blessed *police* he wants to expose!” I tried to placate her, saying that her *husband* had mentioned the nuisance of graffiti and harassment. All I was doing was following it up a little. I promised that his story - whatever it was - was going to make more waves than a dozen eggs.

“The kids are part of a bigger problem, Mrs Peveley. You said yourself that Earlstone needs a bomb dropping on it. I disagree only in one respect. It needs a bomb *under* it. I intend to put it there. With Mr Peveley's help, I hope.”

On the Sunday, in warm sunshine, surely the last of the autumn, we went walking in Bradgate Park. I thought it would take my mind off my embryonic project. However, the ruins there of the Grey house, family seat of England's nine-day queen, surrounded by its deer park, its granite outcrops and ancient, lightning-riven oaks, its acres of steep gorse land and a quiet, unhurrying brook, set me thinking again. Of no agricultural value - its topsoil was far too thin - the estate

would have fallen into total neglect had it not been bought from the heirs of the Greys by a philanthropist, one Charles Bennion, in the 1920s and donated in trust for the city and county. Ever since, it had provided a wonderful day-out for families with no amusements to offer other than fresh air, a little net-fishing, climbing and chasing games, exercise and the prospect of spectacular views. I secretly observed the children out with their dogs and their parents. They were, as far as I could judge, not sullen, not resentful and not bored. A family were playing French cricket. Many were enjoying a picnic on large blankets. I thought suddenly of Demi, her pout, her resentful eyes – and of the gleam which had come into them at my mention of the *'lotment*.

On the other side of the stream were notices forbidding further public access to the territory of the deer, the fields where they roamed behind dry-stone walls, some singly with very impressive antlers, others in small groups and, in one meadow, serenely nibbling the mossy grass - generally oblivious to the curiosity and cameras of humans - a herd of about a hundred youngsters and females. I tightened my grasp of Eleanor's hand and we walked steadily towards the café-museum past the ruined chapel where Jane Grey, hapless victim of her father's stupid ambition, had no doubt said a last prayer before embarking on her ill-fated journey to have her head removed in London. I stopped thinking and asked Eleanor in a whisper if she was happy. "Deliriously. But you've got a bee in your bonnet. I can tell from your distant eyes."

"No. I'm fine. I'm a lucky fellow."

"But you love your job more than me. You write reports in your head!"

"No. That's rubbish! Stop teasing."

I drew her in so close she could hardly walk. How I loved her! - Her tall, slender body, her creamy skin, her startling, green eyes, her provocative pout, the prominent teeth she was conscious of, her tousled, red hair, her candour - which bordered on the outrageous, and disconcerted many people. Her shrewd intelligence disguised by her half-yokel accent. My passionate, loyal Eleanor.

We sat drinking coffee on a picnic bench and picking over a salad.

"You know," she said "I've realised something. And you can't see it. All this about Earlstone and makin' things better - it's the doctor comin' out in you. Those two schoolgirls you mentioned..."

"Demi and Briony?"

"You want to rescue them somehow, don't you?"

"*Rescue?* No. Help them, yes. It's such a waste. When you see kids playing here, like kids should, it makes you realise how impoverished so many are - in spite of all - no *because of* all their worldly goods. They're prisoners of them. Where did they lose their sense of wonder - at the sky, at trees, at flowers....Look at those little kids fishing over there. Can you remember the magic of seeing a fish in your net...or picking berries? Collecting caterpillars? How many kids are there who never experience the joy of simple things? They just seem utterly wrapped up in their tiny world with their mobiles and i-pods. They are the creatures of commercial interests. Business cannot afford to leave them as children for too long. It revolts me."

"*You* can't cure it. Affluenza, as they say."

"I would hardly call the kids on the Eskdale affluent. But whatever it is, affluenza or something else, it *is* a chronic kind of sickness. Perhaps on my small patch I can try to make it an issue. People have to cure themselves but need help."

"Oh, I thought it was the environment. Are you changing your tune?"

"It's both. Take smoke. It killed millions in the cities until the Clean Air Act. That's the

environment. Smoking kills millions, but that's more a personal choice, if you discount advertising and a feeling of "what's-the-point-of stopping?" She had only been half-listening. She was staring at the spinney of oaks on the hillside. "Andy, it's just occurred to me what's missin' in the centre of town. Trees! There's *nothing*' growing there. - apart from some half-dead hangin' baskets. It's a brutal slab of tar and concrete. Humans aren't wired up to live in that."

* * * * *

It was the following Wednesday. At lunch time a large brown envelope arrived on my desk, simply addressed to ANDY. Out dropped several sheets. On the first, at the top, neatly printed out, I read the following.

We the undersigned want an urban farm to be developed on the site of the Eskdale recreation ground, a resource and opportunity for young people of the estate to occupy themselves usefully, to learn life-skills, to have contact with the soil, with plants and animals, to benefit from fresh air and exercise and co-operation, to understand the fundamentals of production, marketing and selling their produce, and, last but not least, to release not only their own potential but also that of a derelict and useless piece of land.

I saw of course at once the hand of a teacher, a likely ally, whom Demi and Briony had recruited to the cause. And I rejoiced. It showed me that they had gone back to school. Below the rubric were pages of names, well over a hundred. Many signatures were those of members of staff. I phoned Jim and asked him if he had other photos of the Eskdale, but he had only the one he had already attached to his email.

"Could you go out and take a couple more? Focus on the sheer direness of it - the swings and the ruts."

Within an hour he had returned and I had all I needed to approach Graham Blower again.

"It's a petition, Graham. From the kids on the Eskdale."

He glanced through it and at Jim's superb captures of the dismal park.

"An urban farm? Whose idea is that?"

I shrugged. "Probably a teacher, the same one who wrote the rubric. Or maybe one of those who signed it. ...Who's the councillor for Westfield and Eskdale?" I added casually, though my heart was bumping in my ears. He clicked a file on his Desktop.

"Hold on....Ah, one of my favourites. Skidmore, Sheila Skidmore. Tory. Talks a very good game. Give her a ring, Andy. Put her on the spot. I'd love to trip her up."

"Why?"

"She tries to come across as the archetypal grassroots politician, Andy. Campaigns hard, promises the earth, then can't deliver because she's so "snowed under". But I can tell her heart is not really in it. I mean to say, just **look** at these awful photos. Why isn't **she** doing something?"

The power of Jim's photos had had a quite unexpected effect. They had made Graham rather angry. I thought immediately of what Mrs Peveley had said about the broken ASBO promise and mentioned it to him. He drew in a long breath through his nose and let it out in exasperation through his mouth, shaking his head.

"That is **just** her. Mind you, the Liberals were not much better when they were in charge."

"What about Labour?"

He laughed. They had had barely more than two councillors in Earlstone since the seventies, he said. Where had I been? Was it not obvious that Earlstone voted Tory?

“Can’t you tell from looking at it, what a right-wing stronghold Earlstone is, with its tree-lined avenues, arcadian villas and expensive shops?” he added quietly without a hint of irony.

The absurd truth of the comment irritated me as much as mine had irritated Eleanor about the listed factories. I was not a political animal although my father had been mildly on the left.

“*Why* haven’t the councils here been more dynamic? Why is Earlstone the same as it ever was, or worse?” I exclaimed.

“Dynamic? They just keep the rates low for themselves and their big buddies. That’s their agenda. They’d close the schools if they could get away with it.”

I dialled the number I had copied from Graham’s file and spoke to Mrs Skidmore about the petition. This made her stutter. I told her that many adults and parents had signed it (well, aren’t most teachers parents too?). I read out to her slowly what it said.

“That’s very interesting.”

“So I take it you would support it then?”

“If it had the....support of the estate....then I might....”

“Can I quote you on that?”

There was a pause and she asked me if she could call me back. I told her another little fib - that it was urgent as we about to go to press.

“Shall I just say you had no comment to make?”

“No, no! Er...if there were no objections and it was...lawful.... Then, yes.”

I thanked her and called the head teacher of the Eskdale school. She really had no idea about the petition and sounded quite annoyed. I told her that two of her girls had approached the newspaper and read out the terms of the petition again.

“Two of my girls wrote that?” she asked bewildered.

“Yes.....hold on.... A girl called Demi.....Would you like to add your support?”

“A girl called *Demi*, organised it? *Demi Tatton*?”

“I dunno. Just says Demi here - oh hold on yes.. She’s signed it Tatton. And there’s a Briony?”

“*Briony*? Briony Sweeney?”

I concluded that she had not read my report from the previous Friday. She was utterly dumbfounded. I read the statement to her again and asked her to comment.

“I think...I think it’s an absolutely brilliant idea!” she said when she had recovered. And she allowed me to quote her. I looked at my watch. I had a court report to write up about a fight outside the Dog and Weasel. I just about had time for both jobs. I got typing. Under the heading WE WANT A FARM! I copied the aims of the petition and added the following.

Not seen since Anglo-Saxon times, there could be farming once again in Westfield, on the Eskdale estate, barely a mile from the town centre, if the children of the local school get their wish. Responding to my article last Friday about the run-down recreation ground, hundreds of pupils, as well as many members of staff at Eskdale High have signed the above petition. It could mark the first turn of a spade in that scuffed turf, leading to a market garden and creating a space for small livestock. Headteacher June Storer has given the project her whole-hearted blessing, while Councillor Skidmore offered her

qualified support. One parent, who preferred to remain anonymous, rang and told me "If it stops the yobs gathering there and churning it all up with their scooters and motorbikes, and gives our kids something to do, then I'm all for it."

The parent did not exist but might have done. Graham Blower read it and smiled.

"You crafty so-and-so! Skidmore will be furious for being spread so lukewarm in a sandwich between two enthusiasts. *Qualified* support? It sounds as if she's against it. Well done. You're learning. And the picture will make her reservations seem even more ridiculous. One more thing that needs to go in, is the poll result."

I had forgotten completely about it!

"Twenty-eight per cent," he said glumly.

"What? Only *twenty-eight per cent* think there's no future? That's just bloody perverse!"

"No. Seventy-two per cent think that. Out of nearly a thousand responses. That's got to be significant. We're onto something here, Andy. So why not add...hold on...where's that pencil?.....Right..." This petition comes hard on the heels (avoid the cliché if you can) of our poll result, which showed nearly eight out of ten Earlstoners agreeing that the young had no future in the town. That should put a stoat up Mrs Skidmore's fundament."

I almost kissed his shiny head. I told him I would get the court report about the street affray written up and reminded him about it. A brighter gleam entered his bespectacled eyes.

"Make it sound as nasty as you can. We'll stick it on the page facing the petition. Juxtaposition is worth a thousand words, young man."

"So what made you change your mind? About the kids, and all that jazz?"

He looked at me and shook his head in mock disbelief.

"The poll result! What do you think? Your golden prose?? Listen, you can't start a war without an army. Kitchener said that. But don't get too carried away with yourself. The chances of winning are slim. You don't know who you're up against."

Back in my office after three thirty, another trick occurred to me. I emailed Demi, hoping she was online. She was. I asked her if she had a digital photograph which she could attach, stipulating she ask her mother for permission. Not long after I was looking at a charming snap of her and her mates sharing a joke. I forwarded it to Jim for cropping and enhancement. As she was a little younger on it than her fourteen years, she looked thoroughly wholesome and angelic. And her face fitted perfectly by the wording of the petition. I carefully composed the page again and sent it back in its finished format to Graham.

The next morning, Thursday, I called on the Peveleys. I needed to tell them what course I was steering, as well as get whatever advice might be going. Mrs Peveley seemed a little frosty but under his sunny influence she quickly melted.

"Have you got a date for the hearing, Mr Peveley?"

He handed me a letter with a picture of the Crown at the top. Tuesday December 3rd 2 p.m. We published on Fridays. I would have to think of a way to sideline the Mercury reporter or our thunder would be stolen by their Tuesday evening edition. From the side of his armchair Mr Peveley produced another envelope.

"This is not to be opened until I have appeared in court. It tells the full story behind my actions. You must promise me not to read it before I have my day - I doubt if I will get the chance to say

it all then. So there it is.”

It was quite a hefty envelope. He told me not to worry - it was not as verbose as it weighed. “You’ll have to précis it, no doubt. But woe betide you if you harm the content!”

I smiled. This was exactly the mock-stern warning he used to issue when he gave us précis exercises at school.

“And I want you to borrow this, Andrew.”

He got up and brought back a scrapbook of press clippings. He told me to look at it later.

“And look after it. It gives the background to my total disillusion with the police.”

We turned to the report I had written and he declared that he had quite liked it.

“The link with the recreation ground made me angry at first. But when I thought about it, it did affect me.”

I judged it the right moment to pass him a copy of my copy for the following day. His eyes grew wide as he read.

“Is this all your doing, Andrew?” asked his wife as she read it in turn.

“Not entirely. I needed the help of two girls. Demi there is one of them.”

“She looks charming.”

“Well, after I left you last week I walked across the park to talk to a group of them. They’re not bad kids you know. They’re just bored and resentful. And a bit anxious. Some admitted they came up here. I didn’t mention your name though. Do you recognise Demi?”

“No, but she looks a sweet, intelligent girl.” said he.

“She is. But she’s a truant. Did you read last week in my piece what her ambition is? To do nails. And her friend aspires to a teenage pregnancy. I ask you - what has gone wrong? Why are so many content to be no more than ignorant, vulgar chavs? Or to get falling-down drunk on a Friday night? Don’t you see, we’re all in this mess together? Can you think of a better way to do a little good on our doorstep? I want to give these kids some pride, a sense of achievement and...*hope*.”

I asked them if they had had any trouble from kids that week. I was relieved when they said not at all. I took a deep breath.

“You know, this *farm* will be a barrier between you and them if it comes to fruition. *Or* it could be something much more positive. A link.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Why don’t you get involved, Mr Peverley? Throw your weight behind it!”

He laughed. I told him I was serious. They would need encouragement as well as a practical advice. If it worked out, it would be the end of the pests. It would be in his own interest. I realised I was lecturing him, but he did not appear to resent it.

“It’s out of the question! I never want to stand next to a child again, let alone advise one.”

I murmured what a great shame that was, in view of what a great mentor he had been.

“You know, I can’t stop thinking on what you said about the town, Mrs Peveley. How it doesn’t need another concrete makeover on the old bus station. If this project was a success then the bus station could be a second farm, green space or whatever. We could tear all the old concrete up and liberate the soil! All the people in the streets around would benefit. Trees instead of lampposts. Plants instead of litter. You’re a gardener. I need your support. And there must be other corners too for spinneys and walkways. The more I think about it, the more I want to change this place! Earlstone could become a truly decent, green community. But it’s going to take determination, vigour and wisdom. I have the first two, you definitely have the second.”

“Me? Wisdom? The egg-thrower?”

“No. It shows you care, Mr Peverley!”

He shook his head slowly and sadly, abruptly got up and left the room. We sat in an awkward silence.

“Andrew, I think you have some wonderful ideas. I admire your commitment. But you must understand. William was left very scarred by these last few years. He is demoralised. When he was in his twenties he wanted to change the world just as badly as you. He never wanted to be as cynical and as angry as he is now....Do you mind if I ask you something? Well, *tell* you rather....That I can’t believe what you did. That evening in Southampton. Whatever.....*possessed* you?”

I felt my whole body go very hot. She was a lovely, earnest woman. Her grey eyes were steady upon me. I saw there no idle curiosity but a genuine desire to understand. I glimpsed with surprise the depth of her sadness and something else which I was able only later to define: the torment of living with a disappointed man. She had asked me to discuss a matter I hated even to catch myself thinking about and had never spoken about, even to Eleanor, since we had come home. Why should I tell a stranger? She looked away in embarrassment to see what turmoil she had caused in me. Almost inaudibly she whispered she was sorry.

“Mrs Peverley...if I tell you, might you promise me something?”

She looked at me eagerly.

“If I tell you, will you try to persuade your husband to change his mind? I can’t do this on my own.”

“I think it would do him - both of us - good. I’ll try.”

So I began to tell her of a night-out which had ended my career.

“William said it was your friend’s birthday.”

“No. It was his stag-do. We finished up at a night club and persuaded the doorman to let us in even though we were pretty drunk. One of us, Terry, had patched him up in casualty after he had been assaulted by a drunk and he remembered him. So he did us a favour. What an irony! Anyway, there was one man, Mahesh, in our party who was half-Asian and two characters started to racially abuse him when he went to the toilet. The rest looked to me because I’m such a tall guy. We should have left at that point but “Mash” said he could take it. Why should we leave, he said, because of *them*? At the bar I had a friendly word but one turned on me and said we should piss off and take the effing Paki with us. I saw red. I lashed out. He hit his head on a pillar. More because he was trying to avoid me than because I’d hit him. But it was my word against theirs. And as well as a fractured skull he had a fractured jaw. Game, set and match. Grievous bodily harm. Suspended sentence, but only just in view of my previous good character. I resigned rather than face a GMC hearing. Who would want a neuro-surgeon with that in his past to operate on them?”

“And how much of this - can I call it a campaign? - is to do with that shattered dream?”

“My girlfriend Eleanor asked that. I just need to do something useful. Reporting what a bad state things are in is not enough. I’ve come to realise I need to help change them.”

“But - and pardon me asking this - how can you report the events objectively if you are helping to create them and are committed to the change?”

I shrugged. “That’s precisely why I need others to make the running. If it turns out not be controversial then it should be OK.”

“It will be. Controversial. Probably in ways you can’t imagine now. You could always ask your editor if you can cover other matters.”

“Maybe. Perhaps I could become the paper’s arts critic. That should keep me *really* busy and out

of trouble. Is that the time?? I need to get going. Is Mr Peverley.....?"

"Probably in the back garden. He was upset. Best leave him. I'll tell him you said goodbye. Good luck."

That evening while El was at her yoga class I looked through Pev's scrap-book.....with mounting anger and disbelief. It was a veritable treasure-trove of snippets from various newspapers, illustrating the sheer perversity, the sheer bone-headedness of the police, the CPS and the judiciary. A man had gone to prison because he had ventured out late at night with a knife into his own garden where it turned out youths were about to burn his shed down. He just happened to have a police record for assault in his younger blood. A woman had disturbed a burglar in her conservatory, and, seizing an umbrella in her panic, she had struck him and broken his glasses. A civil court had awarded the crook damages against her. A mother had gone to the aid of her fragile twelve-year-old son and pushed a sixteen-year-old bully onto the floor. She had been forced by the police to write him a letter of apology in return for charges being dropped. A teacher, incensed that the bedroom window of his young daughter had been broken, showering her with splinters, had gone round and knocked so hard on the door of the culprit that he had broken a pane of glass. He had admitted criminal damage in court and had been issued with a final written warning by his Head. For lack of evidence the culprit was never charged. There were instances where officers had failed to attend at incidents, forcing victims to take the law into their own hands. Many who had effected a citizen's arrest on hooligans had been charged with assault, one even with false imprisonment.

I began to feel the exasperation which that decent, law-abiding compiler felt. It was awful enough to be the victim of criminal behaviour. To be subsequently arrested and charged when the offender escaped, struck me as the most terrible and perverse of ironies. How could an innocent bystander or householder prepare themselves for the trauma and shock of an encounter with such people? .And yet, what allowances did the CPS make for their inexperience, fear and sense of outrage? None. It occurred to me that these frightened, confused people were in fact an easy target for idle officers keen to fulfil their "quotas". Being honest, they would readily admit a retaliation, a slip of the hand or the tongue, in the mistaken belief that their distress would be understood and taken in mitigation. Not a bit of it. In their statements were they even being encouraged to incriminate themselves? I thought grimly of my own experience, and the more of these outrageous cases I read, the more revolted I felt. The very girders of commonsense, compassion, decency and - last but not least - of justice itself seemed to be, as in some hopelessly collapsed structure, entirely dislocated and beyond repair. No wonder, I thought, as I closed the scrap-book, that normally placid people felt such fury, particularly when they read stories such as the one pasted on the inside back cover, about policemen having nothing better to do late at night than play hide-and-seek in the side streets and cul-de-sacs of city centres in their squad cars. I felt like going to the fridge and looking for eggs. And yet. Was not the decline of the police and the criminal justice system just one more symptom of our ailing society?

* * * * *

Friday's edition looked great. The word *exclusive* is the most powerful in a newspaper's armoury of words and I was proud, I admit, to see it appear by my grinning face on page 2. And Demi was the perfect advocate for the cause. If pages two and three were lively, the Letters Page sizzled! A few deplored Pev's actions and one or two questioned his fitness to have been a

teacher. (That, I knew, was an invitation to many parents and colleagues to wax lyrical on his behalf the following Friday!) Some came up with other targets for eggs, notably the tax office. Many did not “condone” (horrid word) what he had done, but went on to express or imply their sympathy.

If the paper had had a voice that Friday morning it would have been the roar of a lion.

I sent Demi an email and asked if she and Briony could get more names on their petition from residents and shoppers on the Eskdale, adding as ever the stipulation that she should have parental permission. I rang the numbers of the Liberal and Labour candidates at the previous ward election. The former was not in. The latter backed the plan to the hilt.

“You do realise that quite a few noses will be put out of joint by this?” he said.

“I don’t want to upset anybody,” I said rather disingenuously, although I did hope no serious opposition would materialise for the very reason I had given Mrs Peverley about avoiding controversy.

“Well I do!” he said mysteriously.

“Why?”

“I’ll talk to you later - as long as you don’t mention me by name. You don’t realise what a cat you’re putting amongst the pigeons. Watch your back.”

My developing “nose” twitched. But perhaps he just enjoyed melodrama.

Mrs Skidmore rang, panting with anger. Why had I denigrated her?

“Denigrated you? In what way?”

“*Qualified* support. You might as well have written *half-hearted!*”

I smiled. I had not had the pleasure of meeting Mrs Skidmore, but her reedy voice put me uncannily in mind of the desiccated figure and the hatchet face of my censorious history teacher who had not taken quite to my boyish exuberance.

“But you did sound very dubious and rather lukewarm. *Qualified* was, I thought, being very fair to you. What should I have said?”

“What I **told** you. Is it not normal journalistic practice to quote *verbatim*? The Gazette is, I’m afraid, adopting the same sensationalist tactics as the gutter press. It used to be an organ of plain reporting. I shall complain to your editor and ask to speak to other reporters in future!”

“That is your privilege of course. I’m very sorry if I’ve upset you. Genuinely. I’d like to make amends by doing a little piece exclusively on you with your views and reservations set out exactly as you wish. About the recreation ground and the petition. You are the elected representative for the Westfield ward, after all.”

This was met with a long silence and I could picture her weighing her options and looking for pitfalls. Such a feature had obvious attraction to a politician, and as far as I was concerned a Mrs Skidmore offering a *less* qualified level of support would be a welcome addition to the bandwagon I hoped to set rolling. Her next statement was unexpected as it was unwelcome. She wanted to go off the record.

“I would rather speak to you privately than over the phone. Can you call in to see me? Say in an hour?”

I did not relish the visit. She lived in Sowerbutts Lane, the prosperous enclave overlooking the woods to the north of the town. Hers was an immense place, a white mansion with balconies and neo-classical pillars. I compared this to the humble dwellings of her supporters and heard

Eleanor say again “Where have these people *been*?” A very severe looking hawk-like lady opened to my knock and I congratulated myself on my intuition - until she proved to be the personal assistant, house-keeper even. Mrs Skidmore, perched on the edge of a huge leather settee in light grey which ran much of the length of the wall, dressed in a very feminine low-cut dress of red silken material which begged to be touched, was the very antithesis of my prejudice. She saw immediately that I was stunned and smiled privately to herself before smiling upwards at me. Her expensive blonde bob set off her almond-shaped face perfectly. Her lightly tanned arms and legs were thirty, though her weathered hands gave the game away. But she was a very impressive fake. She bade me occupy the pneumatic seat beside her and it received my weight with a delicious hiss. Beneath her assured exterior I thought I detected a little nervousness. She apologised graciously for telling me off and I apologised in return. She handed me a printed statement.

The Earlstone Conservative group fully recognises the enthusiasm of those, particularly of the children, who wish to see a decent environment in Eskdale. It cannot however acquiesce in such a dramatic change of use to its recreation ground as has been demanded, considering that its amenities are for sport, play and recreation as the bye-laws demand. In addition the concerns of residents regarding smell and noise must be respected.

I looked at her, bothering little to disguise my annoyance until Mrs Peveley’s injunction about the importance of objectivity restrained me.

“Mrs Skidmore, why do you wish to speak off the record? You could have faxed this to me. Does this reflect your view too?”

She said nothing. She *was* uncomfortable. I asked her if she was at all concerned that this might lose her party the next election in Westfield. She dodged the question.

“You must understand, Mr Clayfield that I do personally support the scheme but there are, as is usual in politics, bigger issues - or rather *other* issues - to bear in mind. I’m going to be perfectly frank with you, as long as we are off the record. Right? The truth is I was persuaded to stand in Westfield at the last election. The main parties - forget Labour - were so close that Giles Butterworth, our group leader reckoned the only way to gain control was to win back control of Westfield from the Liberals. Westfield used to be Tory safe seat until Eskdale was built. If the Labour voters on Eskdale- around two hundred of them - had voted tactically for the Libs then it would always go their way. But they wouldn’t, hence it’s tended to be neck-and-neck. So I was....*deployed* to attract a few floaters, even Libs, over - men to be honest - and lo and behold, it did the trick. My majority was thirty and our group regained control. You must understand, Mr Clayfield, my party and its supporters quite like Earlstone the way it is. We are not really a bottom-up party. We like change to be our idea for the good of the *whole* community. If people want their kids to grow vegetables then they must look to their own back gardens.”

I kept my cool. “So could you explain how *not* making better use of a derelict park can benefit the whole community? I can’t quite see it.”

“Right. It’s a fact that the rates here - council taxes I mean - are amongst the lowest in the county. That almost always suits the majority. Even the Libs when they have their turn don’t put them up, preferring to run the balances down a bit. We take a different view. Assets do sometimes need to be realised to increase the balances and improve our income stream from interest. The more there is to invest, the more interest and the less the pressure on the rates. Take the bus station. Most of the land belongs to the council. (The periphery is private.) To sell it to a

developer will raise millions and benefit all the council tax payers of the borough.”

I began to understand.

“So, Mrs Skidmore, the recreation ground is not seen as the exclusive preserve of Eskdale but as an asset of the whole community, which may or may not need to be sold some time.”

“Precisely! If a child from, say Northfield, came to play on it, it *could*, because it has just as much right to play there as any child from Eskdale. But there are no plans to sell the land - *as far as I am aware*.”

As far as *she* - this glamour-puss paraded round, carnival-queen-like, to win a few grubby votes - was aware. Would her Giles Butterworth necessarily share his private agenda with her? I felt my heart beat a little more strongly.

“But do you think that might explain why its play facilities and turf have been allowed to deteriorate? To make people less likely to protest if it needs to be sold off?”

She smiled.

“Nothing so sinister, Mr Clayfield! It’s run down because of vandalism - often carried out by the very people who live there, whose parents are too idle to keep them in order. But let me assure you - there will be new equipment installed. It’s in the plan.”

“A few swings? A climbing frame? How happy are you *personally*, Mrs Skidmore, that the fabric of the town is so shabby while the estates look, in the main, so prosperous? Does your group think that private affluence and the decency of public places are mutually exclusive? The Germans and the Dutch seem to think not. Might I suggest to you that, yes, it is cheap here and that that is precisely how it looks. Cheap.”

I took a deep breath. She looked abashed. She asked me to confirm again that we were off the record and then said. “There you touch on my personal reservation about the Tory policy here. I was persuaded to stand - as a personal favour - but ideologically I am not what you might call a dyed-in-the-wool Conservative. I have a lot of sympathy for those people on Eskdale who want change.”

“Some might argue” I replied, choosing my words very carefully, “That you should resign and force a bye-election if you feel unable to stomach your party’s view.”

“I wouldn’t and couldn’t, Mr Clayfield. I have...other important obligations in this matter.

Believe me, if there was anything I might do to help - behind the scenes of course - I would.”

Was she actually upset? Other obligations? To whom? To what? She stood up and went to the large window which looked out past her neat lawn and borders over the woods beyond the end of the property.

“Mrs Skidmore? Why have you told me all this if I can’t print it?”

She beckoned me to the window.

“When I spoke to your first on the phone, Andrew - may I call you Andrew? - I recognised your voice. Or rather that voice. I couldn’t place it for a while. Then when I read your name and saw your mini-pic in the paper, the penny dropped. Andrew Clayfield. I knew your dad, Jack. I could not believe it when he passed away. Is your mother.....?”

“Fine thanks. She remarried three years ago and moved to her beloved Dorset. Did you know they divorced? I was twelve.”

I examined her profile. *Off course* she knew that, my intuition suddenly told me. She said nothing for a while and seemed to be fascinated by the view.

“I just wanted to tell you in person that I found your story about Demi and the other one very...touching. I only wish there was more I could do. Your father was a very likeable, a very handsome man. He reminded me a little of Gregory Peck. A lot of women fell for him.”

“Oh, I knew all that!”

Including you, Mrs Skidmore. I wondered if she had been one of those on my mother’s “*last straw*” list.

“*That’s* my husband!” she said with a little too much eagerness,” One of those men over there!” She was pointing with a shaky index finger to the left of the woods. Tiny figures were standing near a bunker on the golf course.

“Is he a councillor?”

“Goodness me, no. Hates politics! Has his business to run, an engineering works in the town. I expect he’s doing a deal right now.”

She turned to look at me directly. “And you. I hear you’re making quite a name for yourself.”

“So you invited me here just to see me in the flesh. Is that it? Disappointed?”

“No. You resemble your dad a bit but he was easy-going. You’re not. You’re very serious. I expect you take after Mrs Clayfield for that....”

Suddenly reddening with embarrassment, she turned and hurried out of the room, leaving me to stare at the golfers. I looked at the perfection of its greens and saw in my mind the churned up turf of Eskdale. The severe woman reappeared and conveyed her mistress’s apologies. She had just recalled an engagement and needed to attend to something. She offered to show me out. At the door I said “Tell Mrs Skidmore, I understand. Just that. She’ll know what I mean.”

I drove away sampling a cocktail of feelings. There was annoyance and yet a strange sympathy for Mrs Skidmore, but an intense loathing for the likes of Giles Butterworth whom I had yet to meet. As I turned a corner towards the centre of town, past a disused factory gaping darkly through smashed windows, a new insight overtook me. One of delight. If there were secret plans to sell off the Eskdale park for development then had not the petition thrown them completely into disarray? I glanced at the statement she had given me which I had tossed onto the passenger seat. If Eskdale needed play and recreation space, then the Tories could hardly turn round in the near future and sell it off! I remembered what Graham and the Labour candidate had said about cats and pigeons and wondered what they knew and were not telling me. It occurred to me as well, as I sat waiting for a bent old lady pushing a shopping bag on wheels over a zebra crossing, that I had enough to discredit Mrs Skidmore politically. It would be totally unethical but I pictured a banner headline

COUNCILLOR DOUBT OVER TORY POLICY -*Exclusive* Andy Clayfield reports

I could write it, resign, sit back and watch the fur fly. It would surely be enough to reinstate the Liberals in Westfield and bring them back into overall control. But would they be any more sympathetic to the cause? The car behind me hooted for attention and I drove off. A chat with the Liberals to pin them down one way or the other was the next step. But it bugged me that Skidmore had mentioned “obligation.” Her tone of voice had been wistful, as if she was a captive of something or someone. Had she been forced by Butterworth or her husband to stand in Westfield - to *prostitute* herself almost? It had obviously gone somewhat against the grain. I decided to check out her record of attendance at council meetings. That might be the way! We had exposed one idle Liberal councillor in Wolverley and Didcombe. Why not publicize the records of the whole council in the spring to show who were the best and who the worst attenders? Then, if Skidmore was a culprit she would only have herself to blame if she lost the thirty or more votes which kept her and her party in the driving seat.

Here was the entrance to the car-park adjacent to the old bus station. A hunch made me pull in, further annoying the car driver behind for lack of a signal. I stepped out into the mild air and looked around me. Not even the bright sun could gild the squalid ugliness I saw. I walked along the chain link fence back to the road and walked onto the precinct where plastic bottles rolled to and fro and bags flapped a little in the breeze. On the right was the disused chapel whose torn poster half-advised caution with the gift of an eternal soul. I surveyed about a dozen brick shelters all now silent. To their left, on the car park, were an old youth club and three little shops, a newsagent's, a sweet shop, a model shop. Somebody's dashed dreams, all boarded-up. Who owned them? I walked further in. There were benches - or rather the remains of benches, one even consisting only of its concrete ends, the wooden spars having all disappeared. It was an intriguing, if unintended sculpture which might have won a controversial prize in a very bad year. I sat down on one bench that seemed just about capable of supporting me and tried to imagine how it had looked thirty years before, spick and span with a continual - *not continuous* - inflow and outflow of single and double-deckers in pillar box red and all their scurrying passengers. I turned to look at the toilet block whose doors and windows, like those of all the other square, flat-roofed structures around me were boarded up. The hardboard covers were spattered with the squiggles and hieroglyphs of the nothing-better-to-dos, a ghastly work of post-modernism. Who would one day decipher these if our civilisation went the same way as the Pharaohs'? Might the shithouse even catch the eye of those who listed public monuments, this one being a mini-cenotaph to the broken spirit of urban optimism on the cheap? I laughed out loud to think of the pyramids built by our technological "inferiors". On every surface there were graffiti, as if they were the signs and symbols of the place's inherent ugliness, to which the previous generations had been wholly blind, now fully emergent from within onto the drab, grey surfaces, like secret writing. I thought of the darkness sealed inside each building and the soil trapped under the ribbed concrete floors and it disgusted me. Grass and weeds were escaping through the cracks in the gutters. I pictured Mrs Skidmore's perfect lawns and Mr Skidmore's perfect links and greens.

I walked on through a gap in a low wall onto the car park of a cheap-end supermarket, which, thoroughly ashamed of itself, had whitewashed its windows. Seven or eight old cars were moored outside and a few people were about. The scream of a wheel-nutting device came from a tyre-place next door, and then there was a road. The long building opposite, on the other side of the road was MIDLAND FIXINGS. Its owner was one B. Skidmore. I felt almost queasy to see a hunch confirmed. Two men were standing by an open door drinking from mugs and having a smoke. I went over. The acrid smell of hot oil assailed me. And then the din.

"Hi there," I said cheerfully. "Can you help? I'm looking for the offices of The Gazette."

One of the men looked up the road past a garage to a row of properties on the right.

"They used to be up there, mate. But then they moved into Castle Street."

He was vaguely pointing to a square building I knew of, which was now also boarded up.

"Pretty grim round here," I volunteered.

"Shithole, mate. Nobody bothers." said his friend.

Here was the grubby basis of Skidmore's palatial affluence, the scrubby edge of his paradise.

"Ah well," I ventured. "As long as you've got plenty of work, eh?"

He looked at me, squinted, took a last drag and tossed the stub on the gravel.

"One more year, maybe two then...." he drew his finger across his throat and stamped on the ciggy. He looked back around the door.

"Better get back in case old Mardy Arse shows his face..."

The other man grinned, threw out the leas in his tea mug and followed his workmate back inside. The door shut. My question had been answered. But now I had another. How much did Skidmore et alia stand to make in compensation for the purchase of their land and, in his case, loss of a business? I walked back to my car, picturing the new concrete and brick cubes springing up around the new consumerist cathedral which was envisaged there. I looked over the road towards the real church near the failing heart of the old shopping centre. One or the other was possibly viable, surely not both. The whole project made no commercial sense - and I was no economist and no town-planner. It had to have another, less overt, rationale.

I returned to the office and told the Peveleys by email that the council would be opposing the farm. I also calculated Mrs Skidmore's attendance record on the council website via the minutes taken and posted there. Disappointingly it was over ninety percent.

I showed Graham the Skidmore press release. He allowed himself a wistful smile.

"It opened my eyes this morning, boss. It seems so bloody naïve now to have expected them to allow such a thing. I feel quite daft. They have vested interests."

"Do they? Really? You astonish me!"

"OK! I have a question. You know the bus station? Will the council publish a list of property owners who are bought out whenever it comes to pass? And how much they get?"

"I've no idea. I suppose we're entitled to ask for one. Why?"

"Mr Skidmore will be on it."

* * * * *

"I had an interesting experience this morning, El," I said as I tucked into the smoked haddock pie she had made. She said nothing so I went on. "I bumped into a woman who had an affair with my father."

She put down her wine glass and stared.

"Did she just come out and tell you she had?"

"Not in so many words. But she made it pretty clear."

I had spoken little to Eleanor about my father - other to say that he had been a commercial traveller in educational textbooks - and she had never shown much interest.

"Well, what was she like?"

"Fifty going on thirty, facelift, blonde, very appealing. I can see why he would be tempted - not that he needed much tempting."

"Were you tempted?"

I laughed. "Not my style - and too right-wing, even more right-wing than you."

"I'm not right-wing! I'm not anything."

Mrs Skidmore's politics had obviously been no impediment to my father, who, as I said was left-leaning. I doubted that they had had many debates on that score. How appealing had she been fifteen years earlier? My poor mother. In the end she ran out of last chances and he left her to join up with a woman he had bumped into on a train from Scarborough where he had attended a book fair. They had settled in that pleasant town and one windswept week, late that summer, I had travelled with my elder sister to spend an excruciatingly jolly week with him and her - a secretary with colossal breasts - during which he spent most of the time trying to coax my sister into breaking her record of saying just three or four words per day. Within a month of our return he had been diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer and had succumbed inside a week.

Doubtless Mrs Skidmore had known him - my own dad - far better than I had.

I was cradling a grateful Eleanor in my arms after we had turned out the light and she was drifting into sleep when a thought occurred to me and kept me awake for ages. Who owned the land on which stood the old offices of The Gazette?

On the Saturday morning I decided to email Demi.

Demi,

You need to persuade your Head, and the teacher who helped you before, to hold a vote in the school (called a referendum) about whether a farm is a good thing or not. Don't say it's my idea. Keep me out of it. Say your mum suggested it. You also need to write what's called an open letter to the leader of the council, Mr Giles Butterworth and send it to the editor, Graham Blower, as soon as you can, direct by post, not email. It needn't be long - just a few of the points from the petition in your own words if you can. I'm sending the petition back to you so I'll need your address. Put it with the other names you collect and I'll arrange a time for you and as many friends as you can to take it to the council offices. Jim, our photographer can take a great photo of you all.

*Demi, the council are opposing our little scheme, I'm afraid to say. So we need as many friends as we can get. There are two teachers on Priestley Road - both retired - who I think will help. Be a good girl and spread the word amongst your gang that **all** the people up there are on your side. It's important that the few who have given them a hard time in the past - with graffiti and all that - are not allowed to spoil things.*

Remember. Don't mention me!!!!

She did not reply until the afternoon and what I feared, that she would lose interest, seemed to be the case. But her reply gave me heart.

Dear Andy,

I'll send that letter. And I'm sure I can get the vote you said. Me and Briony are doing a project in PSE and a year assembly on Tuesday about it all. Tell them teachers I'll mention them to my mates.

Buy for now

On Sunday night there was a terrible murder which shocked everyone and dominated our week. A Mercedes was discovered burnt out on an industrial estate with a young Asian man inside stabbed to death and the police soon established a drugs link. Of course it shoved our little project violently to the side. The press release given to me by Mrs Skidmore appeared that Friday on an inside page by a charity report. I had been running around so much that I had not had chance to preview the letter which Graham gave star billing to on the readers' page.

Dear Editor,

Is it not a scandal that so much of the Good Lord's earth in Earlstone lies squandered beneath dereliction? Those who sit on this unused land, speculating that its value might rise, are akin to the stupid servant in the parable who buried his talent.

Do we not need a council which is prepared, like the angry master of that slothful servant, to punish such offenders by compulsorily purchasing their land with the intention of putting it to productive and eye-pleasing use, as God intended?

It has come to my notice that this present council even opposes the proper conversion of the ruined Eskdale recreation ground for such purposes. Scandalous!

*I call on those in Earlstone who are disgusted with the staleness and futility of our local politics **and** with their practitioners to join with me in forming a ground-breaking party - literally!- to put up candidates at the next council elections. The agenda? To make Earlstone a shining example to other derelict towns - a green and pleasant place to live.*

Contact me on 443672 or at caro.pev@aol.com and if there is enough support I will call a public meeting to discuss financing and to elect officers.

Let us not just sing Jerusalem! Let's build - or rather "unbuild" it!

Caroline Peveley

It brought a tear to my eye, I admit. In it I could detect the elegant hand of my English teacher too. It also provoked a sly thought. I typed out the following to the editor of The Leicester Mercury, hoping it might appear in its Earlstone edition.

Dear Editor,

On a practical note, may I say that with the price of vegetables as high as they are in the shops, and with world food shortages, wouldn't it be great if we could grow our own stuff in Earlstone! There could be a real abundance if the dereliction could be swept away, bringing benefit to young and old alike. People unable to garden for themselves could buy cheap shares in the freed-up land and have access to fresh, organic produce. The money generated from shares and sales could be invested for the good of the whole community.

I've been on the waiting list for an allotment for ages and am raring to go. Come on council! Get your green fingers out!

*Eleanor Beckworth
15 The Courtyard
Fairleigh Parva*

(please withhold my name and address and sign me Green Giant)

I laughed at my own impudence. She would kill me if she knew. She hated gardening and hated jokes about her height. I clicked on Eleanor's email and sent it. To my delight it appeared in the Saturday night Earlstone edition and I showed it to her.

"So what?" she asked, throwing the paper back.

When I told her she shouted at first and then saw the funny side.

"You can just be a shareholder if you won't do your bit.....*Green Giant*," I said panting, trying to shift her from on top of me where she had wrestled me onto the carpet.

"*You are a very shady character, Andrew Clayfield. I had no idea I was throwin' in with such a fraud.*"

"Oh, come on. Let me up. It's all in a good cause."

My conspiracy theories intrigued me for most of Sunday but I tried not to let her see that as we walked the canal to Market Bosworth. I decided to go and see the Peveleys on the Monday to try them out on them. The week after was his big day, Mr Peveley's court appearance, I realised, as we climbed up onto the road over the stile to go for a pint. Later, while Eleanor grilled some pikelets for tea, I sent them the following mail.

Loved the letter! Hope you have had a good response. Will call tomorrow if that is OK.

I heard nothing back so I assumed it would be.

*

"Our phone has not stopped ringing!" she declared as I entered the hallway. "And William spent most of yesterday and Saturday acknowledging emails."

"They're still coming in" he said as we entered the sitting room and sat on the cosy old sofa. She made tea. He told me they had had a chat and decided it was time to do more than moan.

"I bet we've had nearly a hundred responses" she said, returning with a tray. "One or two abusive ones - but you expect that."

"Abusive?"

"A man who said he owned a bit of land on the corner of the bus station - "*'ow would we feel if our land were compulsorily purchased for a song?*" - called me an effing bitch and hung up!"

I saw my chance "You know - it's dawned on me that there are more people than we think who have a vested interest in the town staying exactly as it is, and even deteriorating. Like you said, Mrs Peveley, they're bargaining on making money when the price is right."

I told them of my conversation with Mrs Skidmore, omitting her honest reservations.

"I think you were away, Andrew, when the Tories sold off some green space to a builder a couple of years back for flats," said he. "It caused quite a row at the time. And it would have been bigger if it had been a proper play area. As it was, it was a bit of left-over land all overgrown with brambles near the Northfield council estate - or rather ex-council since Maggie's delicate wand transformed it. They got away with it because they were maisonettes for singles and couples. But we wondered - what sweeteners were on offer for planning permission and the sell-off to that particular developer."

This made me sit up and nearly unseat my cup from my saucer. Something else had been bugging me since my chat with Mrs Skidmore. Altruism. Why would the Tories want to keep the

rates low? Answer: to get elected. Why would they want to get elected? Answer: to keep the rates low. It seemed as pointless as aphids sucking sap to churn out more aphids to suck up sap. Granted, they and their friends had shops and other businesses and a low commercial rate was to their advantage. And Mrs Skidmore had mentioned the importance of maintaining healthy, productive balances. But there was something missing from the equation. A constant, a catalyst. Was a few hundred saved per annum on a butchery or a bakery really worth the effort of getting and staying elected?

“Do you honestly think that some of them are on the take? Is that over-cynical?”

“Of course they are! Your naivety almost does you credit. Think about it. Would they want to be councillors if they had no power? The golf club, the Inner Circle and all those other charitable foundations, that’s where they all get connected and deal behind the scenes. All in a very gentlemanly English way, scratching backs and greasing palms. Where there’s muck there’s brass, and where there’s brass there’s bribery and corruption, depend on it. Look at stocks and shares - similar thing. The foxes frighten the rabbits with rumours and then gobble up their shares cheap! Councillors have a lot of power and make decisions involving big sums. You’ll never prove anything, though. You’d need a whistle-blower - or somebody with a grudge.”

Unaccountably, Skidmore’s group of golfers flew, driving off from the tee, into my mind. I told them that Councillor Skidmore’s husband owned a works on the bus station.

“*She*’ll have to declare an interest when the time comes, and not vote - that’s all. Her buddies will do it for her - in the same way as they’ll come to the aid of the others who own land there - you can be sure all their paths criss-cross *somewhere* behind the scenes, probably at the nineteenth hole. And the developers will have all sorts of goodies in store you’ll never get to hear about, ranging from bottles of champagne, through weekends away at posh retreats, to weeks at sunny villas with private pools. They’re just about clever enough not to get caught out, so forget about an exposure. Let’s just concentrate on getting their fat faces out of the trough - the May after next!”

He told me that once his court case had come and gone they would call a meeting in the back room of The Red Ox which was large enough to hold two hundred people. I was cordially invited to attend and report on it and I readily accepted.

* * * * *

“To put it in a nutshell, Andy, I’m on the carpet.”

I stared at Graham Blower in total shock.

“What? Whatever for? Is it the park?”

“Some members of the board are very unhappy about our coverage, to put it mildly. They think we’ve given it too much prominence - “*We’ve gone too far*” ”

“So they want you to censor the story? Are you going to?”

“Not censor. Downplay.”

“Same difference!”

“They hated Peveley’s wife’s letter about the bus station. And a couple of them think *you* are too pro. They didn’t like your Demi and Briony piece. You’re off the story.”

I struggled to suppress my rising anger.

“They can’t dictate to you what letters you print! That’swell...*honestly*.....”

Fine! I’ll just do the write-ups for the Inner Circle and The Steering Wheel.....and Lord and Lady bloody Bountiful.....”

“No. You’re much too good for that crap. I want you to do some digging. How big is the drugs problem in Earlstone? Find out who was behind the late, cremated Joginder Ashraf. He was only the pusher. Who has taken over from Simon Brierley? Go and talk to Ashraf’s parents.”

I suppose when I thought about it, I was quite relieved. If my adversaries could pull strings from above and behind the puppet-theatre, then so could I. I thought of criss-crossing and imagined those people all of a sudden as a complex web at whose centre sat a black spider, like a grasping hand, twitching and testing the threads with its tips. Earlstone sat at its periphery like a trussed-up fly.

“OK Graham. But can I still cover Peveley’s court case?”

He said it was nothing to do with the park so he agreed.

“Can I have a list of our directors and shareholders?”

“I anticipated that you might want to have a little look.”

He opened a drawer and slid over a sheet to me. I took it, got up and left. I had no inkling then of what I was on the verge of uncovering.

I phoned the Liberal candidate, got no reply and left a message. Then, remembering the cloak-and-dagger manner of her Labour counterpart, I phoned him and requested a chat. He was retired, he replied, and had nothing much planned after lunch. He lived not far from Priestley Road. I dropped into The Eskdale Arms first, for a jacket potato and a pint. I decided to sound out the landlady, who was obese with pronounced ladies’ dart-team wings. I was gratified to hear her, and others on the bar stools, give the farm scheme the thumbs-up. I told them I had been reporting on it and reminded them that their views would be welcome on the letters page of The Gazette. (Up to that point very few letters had come in from that quarter.) I mentioned in passing that I had heard about a referendum being done at the school.

“Your pub could even be the polling station for the estate,” I said to the landlady. Her little eyes opened wide - seeing pound signs, no doubt. One of those at the bar - a little worse for wear - told her immediately that he would organise it and print the votes.

“You’ll need to put posters up as well, I reckon - shops and the pub window,” I ventured. “I bet the school kids would deliver the votes, as long as it was in daylight.”

I left them in an animated discussion and walked over the empty recreation ground past Priestley Road and turned left, right and left again.

The first thing I noticed about Geoffrey Langham as he opened the door of the modest terraced house was his massive high forehead. The second thing was his ice blue eyes glinting with mischief. Unexpectedly he greeted me like an old friend and even clapped me on the shoulder “I wanted to talk to you about the council, Mr Langham. You seemed to know quite a bit you weren’t telling me.”

“How long have you got?”

“All afternoon, if you like. Were you ever a councillor?”

He laughed. I judged him to be in his early fifties, but the way he went on forced me to revise my estimate upwards. He spoke without any attempt to soften or embellish his local accent.

“I’ve lived all me life in this little town. I remember when all the estates were fields after the war. Earlstone was quite a tiny place. Think about it - apart from Castle Street and the old factories there’s not a lot to it. But there were two cinemas, *and* even a lido till the fifties when Pete Franklyn bought up the land for a song and built that bloody great knitwear factory by the railway bridge. Basically, Andrew, four or five families own and run this town. They do business

through their cronies, their flunkies, cousins, second cousins, in-laws and *their* families and in-laws.”

I remembered my list and handed it to him. He nodded and chuckled at most of the names.

“Take, for the sake of example, your Arthur Cox here. Now the Coxes are related by marriage to the Hursts who ain’t on the list. Remember Hurst’s Coaches? Old Daddy Hurst - Jim - had to resign from the council because he’d had double yellow lines painted on both sides of Kings Road. Why, you might ask. Well it was so his coaches could get up and down easy - Kings Road just happened to be the best route from the bus station to the main road into Fairleigh. It’s not just about money, you see - well not directly. It’s about power and abuse of power. They get elected and if there’s any way to make life easier for themselves and their buddies, they’ll do it. “Somebody giving you a problem, chasing you for a debt perhaps? Don’t worry! I’ll have a little chat with the Chief Constable - keen golfing friend of mine. “He’ll send around a bobby to have a quiet word. A police car outside the house - once, twice, maybe three times - and what might the neighbours think? Does the trick, more often than not.”

“They use the *police*? “

He frowned and then smiled broadly. “Off course they do! Superintendent X wants special membership of the golf club, Detective Inspector Y is keen to join the Inner Circle - or his social-climbing wife is....Look, it’s not BIG TIME corruption mafia-style. Nobody’s making six-figure sums. It’s a very nice milk-cow. Why drain it dry in one go? It’s just wheels within wheels - and if somebody does get a nice back-hander for services rendered, they’re not stupid enough to flaunt it, say like goo-ing from driving a Reliant Robin to an Audi overnight.”

“And when you were councillor and when Labour were in power?”

“Ten million years BC, you mean? Yeah, it went on. Favours were done and gratitude shown. It might be a case of bubbly or a dinner vouchers.”

“And what about *you*?”

“I’ll give you one example of what happened to me. In my ward - Bragwell - there was a garage and the owner had a very awkward next-door neighbour. Some ancient dispute about sparkplugs as far as I remember. Sometimes, just to be bloody-minded he would park his car so as just to narrow slightly the access to the garage. And refuse to move it. Police weren’t interested - it weren’t causing an actual obstruction and there were no yellow lines. So the proprietor of the garage rang me up and asked me to try and sort it. I told the neighbour that every Christmas he would get two bottles of champers if he pulled the car back. I went back into the garage and told the owner the deal, but exaggerated just a bit. Reluctantly he agreed. Me, I got a whole case out of it, from which I handed over two bottles to Mr Mardy-arse. Trouble was, one of the mechanics got the push and out of spite he told him - Mardy-arse - what *my* Christmas box was. He threatened to tell the council so he ended up with the whole case! And then there are the little presents. You help constituents out and hey presto, a giant bunch of flowers arrives for the missus (long since bugged off with a chap from Sharnstoke, thank God) ...as a token of their gratitude. What are yer goo-ing to do? Send um back? Chuck the buggers in the bin?”

“Well what about the bus station project? Big money to be made there, though but?”

He shook his head. “Everything will be scrutinised. Sealed bids from developers. Cheapest tender wins it. It would be almost impossible to start any funny business at that stage. But later on, say one owner of a key bit o’ land got awkward and wouldn’t sell up - Councillor X meets up with a rep of the contractor in a quiet country inn one Tuesday night and offers to persuade Mr Awkward for a certain consideration. Of course the councillor and Mr Awkward have been planning this together from the start.”

“That happens?”

“All the time - and it will with the bus station.”

“What about compulsory purchase?”

“Very complicated and long-winded, and only used when there’s nothing in it for anybody.”

“What do you know about Giles Butterworth?”

He drew in a breath, held it, then blew it out with a br-r-r-r-r through his lips.

“Solicitor, sharp as a knife and twice as nasty. He’s on the committee of all the organisations which count. If you want to join the golf club and he doesn’t like your face you don’t get in. If you printed anything against him, you’d better have your proof or he’d sue you extinct. He’s also the brother-in law of Arthur Cox on your board of directors. I could write a book about these people - a WHO’S WHO and a WHO KNOWS WHAT and WHO in Earlstone. And as far as that Eskdale idea goes, it’s a non-starter. They’d never let it happen. They’d have to alter the bye-laws and get the old orders repealed by the Secretary of State for local government. I’ve heard a rumour that Dawkins the builder is after some of it. Nobody plays there and the kids are a bloody nuisance, riding round and churning it up. And they do drugs on it. It’s a mess. Nobody gives a toss about it - and then *you* take an interest.”

“I was only reporting what the kids told me.”

“Oh come off it! Your article was not exactly unbiased!”

“Is Hawkins Butterworth’s mate?”

“*Dawkins*. No idea. But you can be sure he’s a friend of a friend of a friend.”

A question popped unexpectedly into my head.

“Is Butterworth what you might call a lady’s man?”

He laughed. “Butterworth? He’s as fat as a pig! All he cares about are his offices and ’is happence. He’ll be mayor in the finish. Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered how well he might know Councillor Skidmore. I met her recently.”

“Quite a honey pot, ain’t she?”

“Have you met her husband?”

“Ar, at the count when she got in. He looks and talks as hard as the nails he makes.”

I mentioned the Liberal candidate - whose name escaped me - and wondered what she was like.

“Valerie Preston? Ha-ha! Good old Val! In public she’s impeccable - makes all the right noises. But behind closed doors, when she’s had a glass or two o’ Blossom Hill out it comes. *She has nowt against immigrants but....one of that sort. I told her once I’d rather live next to a houseful of asylum seekers than one racist. Shut her up good and proper.*”

“And what do you think the Liberals would do about the playing field?”

“Talk and talk about it - get the ruts filled in, spend on equipment, put up a fence to keep out all the boy racers and *then* sell it off. They’re the most right-wing liberal group in the county. I used to be active in CND. I had more flak from Graeme Wallis, their previous leader, than from good old Charlie Davey - fat Charlie - who led the Tories. He used to say to me - “*Geoff - I know what **you** stand for, you bloody **Marxist** - but I’m buggered if I know what these Libs are about. The people at number seventy complain about them at seventy-two and they promise to sort um - **then** they goo round to seventy-two and **they** moan about seventy - “Right you are” say the Libs “Vote for us and we’ll get um sorted fo’ yer” . Good old Charlie. He weren’t right about much but he were about them. “All things to all men”. Never spoke a truer word. I tell you what, I wouldn’t put it past ‘em to introduce a motion about changing the reccy to a farm just to put the Tories on the spot. When it’s defeated they will get the credit even though they’re just as much against the idea as the Tories are.”*

On the way back to my car I noticed kids were streaming out from the school. I asked one where Scaffell Rd was and within a few minutes I was parked opposite number 16. Something that Geoff had said about the playing field was intriguing me and I thought I could see a way of killing two birds with one stone. I waited. Demi and another girl eventually turned the corner and lingered by her gate. After she had gone in and the girl had drifted off, I gave it five minutes and then knocked the door.

“Hi, is your mum in?”

“No” said she with a mixture of pleasure and surprise. “Why do you wanna speak to ‘er?”

“I don’t - it’s you I want to see. I’d better come back....”

“No, come in, she won’t mind. She’s round at her mate’s. She’ll be back in a bit. Perhaps. Is it about the farm?”

I followed her through an untidy hallway and a stale smell of tobacco into the lounge. A huge telly was blaring and Demi turned it off. She sat down on the sofa, lodged her knees under her chin and held her feet in her hands. She blinked at me. Upstairs a child was crying.

“School going OK?”

She nodded.

“How did the assembly go?”

“Pretty good...Briony messed up a bit, talking too fast. The referendum’s on Friday. And we’ve been collecting more names for the petition door to door. A couple of us are going out later again.”

“There’s no need to.”

I told her about the referendum at the pub. I gave her the landlady’s number.

“If you post the voting papers make sure you go round in pairs and before it gets too dark. Now then - the petition. The council meets on Wednesday at seven thirty. Can you take it to the Council Offices? Go to reception and ask for Sophie Philips. She does the agendas....”

“The what? The genders?”

“No, *a*gendas, the list of topics to discuss. When you hand over the petition Jim our photographer will be there....Demi, we’re mates aren’t we?”

“Sort of, yeah.....why?”

“I need to talk to you about another matter, but I’d never let on to anyone.....”

“What about?”

“Drugs.”

She looked at me wide-eyed, put her feet to the floor and sat back, cradling a cushion to her chest. I asked her if she had known Joginder Ashraf.

“I can download a picture from our file and show you.” I took out my mobile.

“It’s alright. I know what he looked like. Jog they called him.”

I felt the back of my neck tingle. I asked her if she had known him personally.

“Only by sight.”

I sensed she was being evasive.“Did he push drugs? At the school gate? On the park?”

“No, he weren’t no pusher. He used to hang around with Natasha Dyer - Tania’s older sister - you know, the girl you mentioned when you come down the rec? Briony’s sister Leanne has a flat near hers on the Hill? Natasha sold the drugs. Jog supplied her.”

As simple as that.

“Who else knows that?”

“Just about everybody? It’s no secret.”

“Hard drugs? Bad stuff?”

“No. Tablets. Ex. Shit.....”

“Are there any hard drugs on the estate?”

She went very red and for a moment would not speak. Eventually she said.

“Somebody said they found a needle by the benches? But I haven’t seen none.”

“Who said?”

“Just kids. It’s a rumour. Andy, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“OK. Any idea who might want Joginder killed? Any rumours about that?”

She shrugged. “Briony’s sister might know something. And that Natasha?”

I asked if the police had been to the flats but she did not know. She had had a bit of a fall-out with Briony. I asked for the sister’s flat number. I had to promise Demi that I would not let on who told me. She thought about it, decided she could trust me and told me it was 20. The child upstairs began to scream louder and Demi got miserably to her feet.

“Your sister?” I asked.

“No. Half-brother. Bradley’s son, Jake - named after *him* on Eastenders...”

“Bradley your mum’s partner?”

“Yeah, sort of. When he feels like it.....When he’s sober.....And not too spaced out.”

As she went wearily up the stairs, I left, got into my car and scribbled a note.

Dear Leanne,

I’m Andy, a reporter. What can you tell me about Joginder? There’s £200 in it for you.

I added my mobile number, walked up the pathway to the flats on the Hill and put it into her letter box by the security door. In the evening I received a text message *How do I no oo u r?* I texted back *£300?* and a while later my phone rang. I left Eleanor in the living room and went into the hall.

“You’re from Ajay, ain’t yer? Testing me out. Who gave you my number? You tell Ajay I don’t know nothing and I’m not talking to nobody. I’ve got a little daughter. Just leave me be!”

She rang off before I had a chance to say a word. I rang back but the phone was switched off.

“El, I’ve got to pop out. I think I might have a lead on that killing.”

“I bet that was your new girlfriend!”

She insisted on coming with me. The two towers loomed up in the moonscape and I quietly parked in front. The pavement sparkled with frost. Only a few hooded shapes were out and about. A couple of hardy smokers sat on a bench outside The Eskdale. I put £100 into an envelope and scribbled this message.

I promise you I am who I said I was. You are in no danger. It was me who featured Briony and her friends in the paper. Ask Briony if she knows Andy Clayfield. Better still, go to www.earlstonegazette.com and click on reporters. My face is there so you know me when we meet. By the way, it wasn’t Briony or any of her mates who told me your address. It was someone who knows Natasha Dyer.

I watched Eleanor stride up the path, press Leanne’s bell and post the letter. We waited quite a while but she did not come down. So finally we left. On the way back to Fairleigh, Eleanor said “You’re getting’ out of your depth, Andy. I think you should tell the police. That girl must be

terrified. So am I. What if that Ajay gets to know you know his name?"

* * * * *

I asked Graham if we should go to the police after he had scanned my notes.

"What with? Just one name? And what sort of a name? Is it Asian or just somebody's initials?"

"I got more than that! I know whose flat the drugs were being sold from. And who was selling them."

"Have you phoned that girl again?"

I had - several times - and left messages without any reply. He told me to drop everything and go round again.

"She's a single mother. Go and offer her another £300. Here. Two hundred. Get another ton from Mildred. Make sure you sign for it."

When I got there I rang her bell again but there came not a sound on the intercom. By number 24 there was the name N. Dyer. I rang but got no answer there either. In the end I rang number 21. A jolly voice answered and in the background a baby was crying.

I put on my poshest voice. "Hello! I'm trying to contact your neighbour, Miss Leanne Sweeney. Could you let her know?"

"She's gone away. Went early this morning with her new partner?"

"Do you happen to know where?"

"No idea mate."

She had hesitated for a second. She knew alright. I thought quickly.

"Only I've got some money for her. She's won £300 in our monthly draw. Salvation Army." (I cringed.) "I don't suppose you could look after it until she comes back.....?"

There was a thoughtful silence and the buzzer sounded. The door opened. I walked up to the second floor and found myself looking down a corridor on which there were four white doors. The air smelt of tomato soup. The door of 21 was ajar and there suddenly appeared a large ruddy moon face with blonde hair weighing me up.

"Thanks for letting me in."

"Well, you sounded alright. I'm Tiler. I can keep the money for Leanne. Till she comes back?"

A toddler waddled out past her and was scooped up. The mother was obese. She told Jodie to say hello to the "nice man." I looked along at number 24 in the left corner. I was about to knock on the door when Tiler laughed and asked if Natasha had won a prize too. It did not seem to occur to her what an obvious lie I had told. I shook my head and came back.

"She's gone off an' all, with Leanne and her kids. Just a holiday I think. In a caravan somewhere. Her and her new bloke."

"A caravan holiday? On November 29th?"

She tittered, went even redder and put her hand to her face. She asked me to come in. It was a pretty cramped and a rather smelly flat.

"I'm not from the Salvation Army. Who is Ajay?"

This time there was no hint of guile or self-consciousness when she asserted to me that she had no idea. I told her that I wanted Leanne to get me a certain item.

"Oh yeah? How come I've never seen you here before? Look, just give me the money and -"

"Sit down."

She was so surprised she did as I said, clutching the child to her.

“Look. Don’t worry. Tell me what you know and you’ll be fine.”

“Police?”

“I’m investigating a matter.”

“Show me some ID.”

“Here.” I laid five twenties one by one on the arm of the sofa near her pale, flabby shoulder. I wafted the other notes like a fan. “I’m not the police. This is all yours, Tiler. Forget Leanne. I believe you about Ajay. I’ll be able to tell now when you’re telling me a fib. So keep to the truth. Then I’ll leave you to get on with your day. And I swear to you I won’t involve you. How did Natasha operate?”

“OK” she breathed. She began to tell me about Nat’s flat. On the second floor, on a corner it looked out north and east and gave a great view of the estate and early warning of unusual traffic, such as police cars. She told me how Nat’s younger sister et alia had been sentries in the blind spots in the streets behind, mobiles at the ready to sound the alarm. After a certain time, late in the evening trade had stopped and the goods were distributed amongst Leanne and two residents on the third floor in case Nat was raided. She herself had never been involved, she said. She had just got to know about it all over time.

“Why was Jog murdered?”

She gasped when I mentioned his name for the first time. She swore to me on Jodie’s life that she had no idea and implored me to believe her. I asked her if she kept a key to Natasha’s or Leanne’s flat. She went to lie, blushed and then got up to fetch them. I let myself into Natasha’s place first, and then Leanne’s. Drawers and wardrobes were pretty empty. Neither would be back in a hurry.

“Have the police been here, Tiler?”

She said they had not and promised to contact me if they did come.

“Buy yourself and Jodie something nice.” I gave her the rest of the money and left. I felt depressed. There were many on the nicer flanks of Earlstone - like Eleanor in Fairleigh - and Peveley in Westfield who could not help but despise the likes of Tiler. She was very fat, ugly, none too clever and unemployed. Hers was a precarious existence from one day to the next, from hand to mouth. Once outside that first tower I was struck again by the impoverishment of the existence she and others trapped inside it were leading. Like the bangles she wore, hers was a cheap imitation of a life, as predictable as a clapped-out engine on rusty tracks going nowhere. Was this the only way for people like her to while away their days, sealed inside those airless boxes, fattening up like battery hens, hypnotised by the flickering screen and its conditioning messages? *Buy yourself something nice.* How futile! I surveyed the scruffy grass on the slopes around me and thought again of those immaculate greens at the golf club. Could this wasteland not be terraced? And on those terraces could not vegetables be grown? I imagined a community around pens of crooning chickens and bleating goats, tended by children and adults with something to share and celebrate at long tables on warm evenings. *A community.* How great would their need for handouts be then if they grew most of their own - healthy - food, and even had surpluses to sell? How fat would they be and how often would they call at the surgery for their anti-depressants and anti-this and that? It struck me forcefully that our culture of consumerism, based on unpayable debt was doomed. Here, close at home was the solution, so close we had been overlooking it. Now that the industrial revolution had petered out, we did not need renovation, new planning and all the rest, but instead a *second* agrarian revolution within those very towns and cities which had first swollen up rapidly and since collapsed. Dependency

culture? What were the right-wing tabloids talking about? How independent were any of us? How many of our own needs did we meet *ourselves* and not by proxy? In an arctic winter how many of us would starve or freeze to death if we had to depend on our own stores, on our own energy? We were a disaster unfolding in slow motion.

* * * * *

I tossed Graham my revised report and asked him if we could print it. He skimmed it first, then read it properly, half aloud.

DRUGS LINK TO JOGINDER

Mention Jog to the average teenager on a certain Earlstone estate and the first thing they call to mind will not be an overweight person of a certain age puffing, panting and poddling along. They will say drugs. Not the hard stuff but weed, ecstasy and other poppers. I am no Sherlock Holmes but within seconds I had the name and the address of a young woman - I shall call her Martine - who was the shopkeeper. Her flat was the shop and the look-out point. Now she and her neighbour have fled Earlstone, fearing retribution from an individual called Ajay.

“I told you, you can’t mention Ajay. For one thing it would be prejudicial if he was ever charged and tried. We had better inform the police on this one. I can’t believe you got so far in so short a time, young man.”

It was meant to glow with pride at this accolade, but I could only glow with anger.

“It was easy. What I can’t believe is how little progress the police have made.”

“How do you know they haven’t?”

A while later he phoned me at my desk. He had spoken to a “contact” at the police station who had confirmed most of what I had found out to be the truth. I went to his office.

“They know more or less what we know. She says we might as well print it because there was no way anybody would be brought to book. For one thing, there’s no DNA or other forensic evidence because of the blaze, and for another no-one would ever stand up in court to testify against Ajay - Ajay Singh. Apparently he was trying to pedal hard drugs and get Joginder out of the picture. It was a turf war.”

“So you’ll print the name?”

“Are you kidding? He would know it must have been the girls who gave you his name. How long do you think they’d last? And how long do you think it would take him to find out where you live - and me for that matter? We’re dealing with a ruthless bastard here. We’ll just say the girls have cleared off and leave people to draw their own conclusions. This won’t be your exclusive, I’m afraid. You will be a staff reporter for your own safety. By the way,” he added, tossing me a letter “The opposition out there is starting to stir.”

Dear Editor,

There are strange creatures emerging from the woods near Earlstone. They wear animal skins and cover themselves with woad. They seem to imagine they can turn the clock back to

prehistoric times and halt progress...

“PROGRESS?” I exploded. “Another half-baked batch of squat buildings destined to fail! Hasn’t he noticed that half of Castle Street is boarded up? What chance -”
“Read on,” he murmured.

What Earlstone needs is not an impossible dream of some Golden Age which never was, but a modern development in keeping with the expectations of the twenty-first century. Within ten miles of the church live a hundred thousand people, the town’s natural catchment. Very many of those now look outward for their shopping and entertainment. With its blend of a supermarket and other retailing, restaurants, bars and a cinema The Mead, as it is to be called, will reverse that trend. Three models will soon be on display at the Council offices and will be viewable on line at earlstone.org . The model receiving the most votes will be the one adopted. Here is local democracy in action.

It was signed by Councillor Butterworth. I threw it back onto the desk with disgust.
“Nobody voted on whether the project should actually go ahead!” I exclaimed. “The bloody hypocrite! Has the contract already been awarded?”
“No, not yet. I want you to go and interview Butterworth about the timetable.”
“I don’t think I’d be able to conceal my dislike of the man.”
“You’ve never met the man, have you?”
“No, but what I hear does not impress me.”
“More good training for you. I’ve had to interview some right tossers in my time and bite my tongue. Here, here’s another letter I’m putting in this Friday.”
I took it from his hand and read

Sir,

As if business was not already bad enough, now some people want to turn the town into a farm. My profit margins are already paper-thin. A load of cheap vegetables would make the Saturday market a thing of the past. Caroline Peveley ought to think a bit more of consequences to others before she puts pen to paper,

John Armstrong (please sign me Market Trader and withhold my name)

I went back to my office to write the following. I would send it to Graham via Eleanor’s email on Saturday.

Sir,

To put derelict land back into food production is not, as Councillor Butterworth asserts, to turn the clock back, but forward. Much of urban Britain stagnates in post-industrial squalor. Retail parks, with easy access and free parking have made the traditional market town centre redundant. Of course we need to purchase most of what we consume but is it healthy to have consumerism and ever-increasing debt at the heart of our economic culture? What could we produce ourselves? What would be the health benefits - spiritual, mental and physical - of

working again with the soil, left behind by our ancestors for the factories, and of coming together on a shared project?

It is Councillor Butterworth who labours under a delusion, for broken landscapes in Earlstone and elsewhere will never again be thriving little commercial centres with butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. If Earlstone were a mine it would have closed years ago. How ironic that someone from a party, the Tories, which stood back in the eighties and watched clapped-out industry go to the wall, feels able to advocate pouring good money after bad into a defunct, bottomless pit. His precious Mead will close Castle Street. Can he not see that? And who in their right mind would take his family to a restaurant or a cinema there after dark and risk an encounter with Earlstone's "café culture" staggering out of the Dead Ferret?

I could not help but add

Are there any motives behind this multi-million pound project which we are not privy to?

I knew that Graham would edit that out. I signed it *Green Giant* again.

On Friday, Graham had the perfect riposte to Butterworth's spurious optimism. He had given pride of place to his letter with a millennial headline **A Brand New Beginning**. But on the opposite page was a colour photograph of a postman who had been beaten up by two thugs the previous Friday after a night out with friends in a town centre pub. His reddened eye looked dreadful. And to make matters worse, a photograph of a police car by an alleyway was posted by a report of a sexual assault on a teenage girl there that same night. I could almost hear the pop of a pin in a balloon as I turned the page.

But the handover of the petition was a disaster. A council officer complained of being jostled by the boisterous group which Demi and Briony headed, and a wing-mirror was ripped off a car by a hooded youth and hurled at a security guard. This detracted absolutely from the point of the exercise and I emailed Demi to tell her so. Within an hour she replied.

Andy - it was not our fault. We bumped into some lads who were drinking and they followed us up there.

More bad news. I phoned the landlady of The Eskdale. Barely thirty votes had been registered in the referendum. I realised that my big ideas were pie-in-the-sky. The image of Tiler trying to bend down and pick a pea pod was, well - ludicrous.

* * * * *

William Peveley in a dark suit and holding a briefcase would have been taken for a senior solicitor or prosecutor, had it not been for him standing hand-in-hand with his tall, elegant wife. He looked especially distinguished amongst the sweatshirts, the earrings, jogging bottoms, and baseball caps, the livery of his fellow defendants, the guild of the unemployed and unemployable. Depressingly, the tableau made me think again of a grunting Tiler bending down. The youths were slouching against walls or slouching on the most basic of chairs. Archetypal. Were these youths redeemable - or were they archetypal slobs?

A posh woman in a dark gown was circulating with a clipboard and ticking off names. Her grim lips seemed well practised in sealing up her disdain but her eyes could not help but flash it around like a lighthouse beam. Her mouth dropped open when my teacher approached her and showed her his summons and announced in a clear voice that he was William Joyce Peveley, summoned to appear at two o' clock. I was amused, but then thought of the Mercury. I caught Peveley's eye, winked and went on the prowl. At the hatch I took a PRESS badge and asked who else was there. Apparently nobody. The large clock showed one fifty. The doors of Court I burst open and a group of people, young and old, evidently an extended family emerged in a great chatter with a spotty youth at their midst beaming foolishly. Either he had been found Not Guilty or, more probably, had escaped with a rap on the knuckles.

I slipped into the courtroom and found the press box empty. The bench was empty too. There was a scatter of people in the gallery. The Earlstone coat of arms, a red and white shield, secure in the hooves of a stag and a ram both on hind-legs imbued the oak-panelled chamber with gravitas and a stranger might have surmised from it that the town outside was a half-timbered world heritage site. It entertained me to picture the shield held instead by Tiler on one side and one of those wretched youths on the other. The gowned usher, the grim lady, entered - followed by Mr Peveley, confident, and his wife, apprehensive. To my surprise there were brief shouts of encouragement and a ripple of applause. Were these relatives? Neighbours? I made some notes. His wife mounted the steps to sit on the bench in front of me. She looked around and smiled weakly. I winked. He had climbed up into the dock, a tower in miniature, and sat straight-backed and shoulders square, like a stout defender of his domain. We waited some minutes in silence. I prayed no reporter from the Mercury would come hurrying in.

A door in the back panel opened and two men led by a grey-haired woman with a large rump entered and took their seats at the bench. It struck me then that the whole exercise - from magistrate, through prosecutor to usher, was a ritual in which the middle-classes, readers of the Deadly Excess and The Daily Malice, sat in self-righteous judgement of the very lowest of the low, the inadequate, the unschoolable and the incorrigible - the former in their finery, the latter in their scruff. And that the whole process was as futile as it was expensive. Hang on - wasn't the grey-haired lady the very same as had walked past the police station four weeks or so ago, before Pev had shown up? She certainly looked formidable and contemptuous, and as cold and severe as steel. Perhaps she was her sister. "They all know each other" I heard the voice of Geoffrey Langham say. I saw her now give the slightest nod like a bidder at an auction and a tiny man with glasses who reminded me - and clearly others - because they tittered - of Ronnie Corbett - shot up from nowhere at the front, like a worm from an apple, and declared in a clear voice "Regina versus Peveley, your Honours. William Joyce Peveley of 25 Priestley Road Earlstone is charged with Disorderly Conduct, in that he did, by deliberate design throw a dozen eggs at Earlstone Police Station on Bragwell Road at about 10 a.m. on Saturday 8th November in direct contravention of section one of the Public Order Act, 1875."

He turned to the defendant and asked him to confirm his identity and then asked him how he pleaded.

"I plead Not Guilty your Honours, to the charge of Disorderly Conduct...But I am guilty of Criminal Damage which the CPS, in spite of many requests, refuses to charge me with..."

The chairwoman seemed rather startled by this long-winded plea but she did not comment, other than, having pointedly stared at the empty defender's desk, to ask him, in a gentrified version of Earlstone English, why he was not represented.

"I intend, your Honour, to conduct my own defence."

The three heads consulted and after a few nods and whispers she looked up to ask him if he thought that was wise.

“Are you absolutel-eh sure, Mr Pevel-eh? I could adjourn this hearing if you wish to apply for legal eed...”

“I am quite able to take care of this matter myself, thank you. Besides, I am a wealthy man and would not qualify. What I have to say could be no better said by legal counsel.”

“Real-eh? Then we will proceed. *Mr Brascombe-Jones...*”

Mr Brascombe-Jones the prosecutor, a portly man in a creased pinstripe suit which had seen easier, less pressurised days, got to his feet, adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat and began. He soon demonstrated an irritating and ultimately infuriating tendency to lose his voice after a sentence or two and to have to pause to clear his throat with increasing violence. He referred to statements which had been copied for the bench to peruse and soon to everyone’s relief called his one and only witness, Sergeant Cropp, the officer who had arrested Mr Peveley that dismal morning, to the witness box. He began nervously, taking the oath and confirming his identity and then warmed to his task. He told the court how he had been talking to a colleague at the counter when another, WPC Morris, had alerted him to the “repetitive” sound of objects making contact with a window in the back office.

“I said to her, “That sounds rather odd” to which she after a moment’s thought replied, “Yes. I think someone has just possibly thrown an egg at our window...””

Someone chuckled briefly at his woodenness which made him stare murderously at the public gallery, in an effort to identify the culprit.

“So what did you do next?” asked the prosecutor.

“We went outside just in time to see a middle-aged man take an egg from a carton and throw it at the aforementioned window.”

“Can you identify that person, Sergeant?”

“It’s him - the defendant” he replied pointing a shaking finger at him.

“You saw him in the act of egg-throwing?”

“Yes, and he freely admitted that he had thrown all the others and even demanded to be arrested.”

“As you can see, your Honours, the statement of WPC Morris, and indeed that of Mr Peveley himself, fully corroborate Sergeant Cropp’s evidence.”

The prosecutor thanked him and sat down, looking very pleased with himself. He was thinking, no doubt, that it was the easiest fee he would earn for a long time.

“Doo you wish to question the weetness, Mr Pevel-eh?”

“Oh indeed I do! May I?”

She nodded and he stepped out of the dock to stand to his left at the vacant desk.

“Sergeant Cropp, it has probably slipped your mind that this is not the first time we have met. Very briefly - on Saturday 1st of November. You mainly had dealings with my wife on that occasion. But let that pass for the moment.”

The officer was making an effort to track down what had indeed given his mind the slip but soon gave up and shook his head.

“Never mind. Sergeant, I am accused of Disorderly Conduct as you know. I would therefore like to ask you a series of questions appertaining to my demeanour that horrid morning. I trust you will answer truthfully.”

.”Of course.”

“Officer, did I smell at all of alcohol?”

“No.”

“Was I shouting or screaming?”

“No.”

“Swearing?”

“No.”

“Gesticulating, throwing my arms - or my weight about, dancing around or adopting any posture which might be construed by any reasonable person as threatening?”

“NO.”

“So in other words - apart from the eggs - put those to one side for a moment if you can - I was behaving in a normal way, in a proper, civilised manner - would you agree?”

“Well yes, I suppose....”

“Officer, have you ever come across the word “synonym”?”

He stared and looked a little baffled.

“Well yes. It’s a word that means, has the same meaning as something else....”

“Exactly. A word that has the same or a very similar meaning as another word, such as “policeman” and “constable” - or “idiot” and “imbecile”.”

There was laughter, soon stifled by the stone-face of the Chair.

“You just agreed, did you not, officer, that my behaviour was proper and civilised. A synonym of those terms in this situation would be “orderly”. Do you agree?”

“Ye-es....but...”

“In that case I behaved in an *orderly* manner. So why was I taken inside and charged in the end with disorderly conduct?”

There was clapping and laughter. The sergeant blustered, reddened and looked up at the bench.

“SILENCE!” shouted the magistrate, forgetting herself a little and pronouncing it “silunce”.

“Now,” continued Peveley after a pause, “To the matter - literally - of the eggs. Had I thrown ping-pong balls at the windows, would you have arrested me then?”

The policeman went to speak and then, as if a light had dawned in his head, stopped.

“Would you kindly answer my question. Would you have arrested me?”

“No...I don’t know...It depends how....It’s *hypothetical*.”

He appeared to be rather pleased to have found this word. Peveley went to his briefcase, took something out and threw it at the window. It was a ping-pong ball.

There was more laughter and then a general “SHUSH” including from me.

“There,” said he. “No harm done. Is that an arrestable offence?”

“Mr Pevel-eh,” warned her Honour, “*That* is a contempt of court...”

“Please Madame Chairman, it is germane to my defence. And as far as contempt of court is concerned I would be less than honest if I were to say I am entirely predisposed to be without it.” She had either not understood this tortuous insult or had preferred to ignore it.

“To wHat, “ she asked “Is this line of argument tinding?”

“I am waiting for the witness to answer my question. Would he have arrested me for throwing nothing more than ping-pong balls, YES OR NO?”

Still there was silence.

“Your Honour, is this not a contempt of court? Please direct the witness to answer.”

“NO...I wouldn’t have,” he shouted, then said under his breath “I remember you now....”

“I’m so pleased. Now, could you please explain what it is *precisely* about eggs which led you to arrest me. Their shape? The noise they make? The possibility that they may break the glass?

Their colour?”

“No,” he muttered. “The mess they make.”

“I don’t think some of us heard that. You said the mess they make. True?”

“Yes”

Pev went to his briefcase again and took out photos for the witness and the bench.

“These pictures were taken by me on the morning of November 1st about an hour after you turned up at my house. They show a window and a wall at my house streaming with egg yolk. I had phoned the police crime-line at about nine thirty a.m. to report this act of vandalism which had taken place the previous evening - of Halloween. Here is the crime number - I’ve written it large on this piece of paper for everyone to see. Now, can you recall what you said to my wife when you turned up, officer? (I was in the bathroom) - I know you were only able to *spare* us a few minutes but do you remember?”

“Not my precise words, no. I’m a very busy -”

“Well, allow me to remind you. I’ve written it down here. You said - and if I might say so, in a rather unpleasant sort of manner -”*“We can’t go round arresting kids for throwing eggs - it’s not criminal damage - it’s probably not even a criminal offence.”*

There was more laughter and applause. The prosecutor looked dumbfounded.

“*Did* you say that? I shall call my wife as a witness if you deny it. Remember, you are on oath.” He conceded wearily that he had said words to that effect. The poor man had probably thought he would be back inside the station enjoying a cup of tea by now. My teacher went back to his briefcase and supplied the witness and the bench with more photos.

“These exhibits I have labelled A and B. Photograph A is a close-up of the brickwork between my porch and my window which bore the brunt of the attack. I took this one as you can see on November 3rd - having scrubbed and scrubbed with every cleaner in our cupboard in a vain attempt to remove the staining. Brick is porous of course and absorbs grease. As you can see the discoloration is very marked. Now to photograph B. Do you recognise the bricks and the window, officer?”

“No.” He wiped his brow with a handkerchief

“Well you should. It’s your police station.”

A great roar went up and was quickly shushed. Then magistrate looked evil.

“I shall clear this court and hear this case in private if there is one more outburst. Proceed.....Mr *Pevel-eh.*”

The name was clearly as palatable to her by this time as a cough sweet.

“As you see, there is also a marked deterioration in the appearance of your bricks. This was taken on November 10th, presumably after attempts had been made to clean it all off. Now this brings to my concluding argument. I contend that these stains are consistent with any understanding of the word damage. And because they are not possible to remove, they are more serious cases of damage than, say, a dented wing on a car which can easily be beaten out or replaced. Most damage can be made good. This damage, like the metaphorical damage to reputations, say to the integrity of a public institution - perhaps a hospital, a university, or maybe even the police or the judiciary - is far less susceptible to amelioration and perhaps even impossible to put right. I rest my case. I ask the court to dismiss the charge of Disorderly Conduct and to recommend that I am re-arrested and charged with Criminal Damage, a charge to which I will humbly plead guilty. Thank you.”

He sat down to cheering and applause. The three magistrates rose and returned to their consulting room. The hearing had taken just eleven minutes. It was two fifteen. As the minute-hand approached the half-past, they returned. We all stood and then with the exception of Peveley- the

epitome of rigid dignity - we sat back down to await the verdict.

“We find the case proven.” she muttered.

A great NO went up and there was booing. There was a shout of “scandalous!”

“We fine you fifty pounds with costs and bind you over in a further sum of fifty pounds to keep the peace for one year. You may go.”

In a clear, calm voice he said “I will not pay you.....ONE PENNY.”

“Then I find you in contempt of court.”

“I AM in contempt. I have nothing but the utmost contempt for you, him, him...him....and him.....and this absurd charade of justice.”

Mrs Peveley stood and blocked my view. “I too am in contempt, your.....*Honour.*”

Others looked and one by one stood to declare their contempt likewise. I had to grip the back of the bench to prevent myself leaping up. I remembered the camera I had brought, sneaked it out and hoped for the best. In the uproar the flash seemed to take no-one by surprise. The chairwoman shouted for the court to be cleared. No-one budged. “No, no, we won’t go,” chanted a sprightly old lady and immediately this was taken up all round to the stamping of feet. At the top of her voice, now in unfrocked Earlstone tones, the magistrate issued an order to the sergeant - “Tek ‘im to the cells“.

The noise abated at this and we all listened in horror as he was told that he would be released once he had “seen fit” to purge his contempt. He did not protest and, looking downward within the dock, he descended to an unseen door through which criminals under arrest were brought up from the custody. In his absence his support melted away and only Mrs Peveley remained. I went to sit next to her. She was making a determined effort to hold back her furious tears. She was absolutely lovely and I could not help but take her hand, which she did not withdraw. The magistrate’s bench was empty again and the usher had come up the steps to hover uncertainly nearby.

“It won’t do him any good at all...His heart.” she sobbed.

“He has a *heart* problem? ”

“A leaky valve.”

Having managed to con my way into the custody suite I was soon with Mr Peveley in that bare green cell. He was startled to see me.

“Caroline - Mrs Peveley - told me about your heart. You can’t stay here. Come on, you’ve more than made your point. It will come across brilliant on Friday. I’ll go and tell the desk sergeant you want to go back up - and apologize.”

He sniffed and continued to stare, then shook his head.

“Have you learnt nothing, young man.? I cannot believe you said that.”

“Well, your wife is worried and upset -”

“No, I mean “brilliant”. It should be “brilliantly. It’s an adverb.”

I threw my head back and laughed. He only raised his fly-away eyebrows very slightly. He told me he was going to have the cup of tea which the lovely WPC was making and then go back into court. I took my leave to go back to his wife.

“Andy,” he said “I’m proud of you, one of my best ever pupils.”

“And I’m proud of you, Mr Peveley.”

“No. I’m just a silly old fool.”

He turned his eyes away and I left him to it.

* * * * *

DISORDER IN COURT! read the headline on page one, sending my drugs report onto page two. The photograph I had sneaked was a real piece of good fortune. Eleanor found its quality incredible in view of the number of snaps I had taken with my thumb over the lens or with subjects leaning to left or right. That letter he had given me proved to be an invaluable help in reconstructing the whole event. It did not add significantly to the content of what he had argued, but the conclusion - which I did not use - explained perfectly the frustration which had led him to throw the eggs.

We have made innumerable calls to the police to report the presence of unruly youths in our street. In spite of our presence in the front porch on October 31st eggs were still thrown. We took photographs of those responsible and they were openly contemptuous, even standing unhooded to pose.

Sergeant Cropp was dismissive of these photographs, saying they were not evidence. Is it any wonder that these children have no respect for that toothless old hag of the Law? What on earth will become of our civilisation when all of its institutions have broken down? The ringleader of these hooligans was Tania Dyer. Apart from DNA and a common language there is only one significant thing I now have with her in common: an utter contempt for authority. Authority has gradually been undermined by those foolish, misguided liberal do-gooders who do nothing but harm; those well-meaning souls who live many miles away, geographically and metaphorically, from the grim estates where their ungrateful protégés wreak pitiless havoc on the innocent.

I was putting the letter back in my drawer when Graham rang.

“I expect you’ve too busy admiring your own handiwork to find time to read page 14.”

“Why?”

“Well, have a look. You’ve got a very important new ally, I reckon”

“Who?”

“The Almighty.”

I must admit, the weekly Church Comment was as unappetising to me as the reports of local league football. But this one had my whole attention and gave me considerable food for thought. It had been penned by the Reverend Bill Clarke who was the rather eccentric, gangling, cycling vicar of the mediaeval church of Saint Anthony’s, the parish church which stood grey on sunny days and black on rainy days at the heart of the town like a tall shepherd sadly surveying his scruffy flock.

At last I hear the stirrings of something new, like a rustle amongst the dead litter on the winter forest floor. Hark! Can you hear it too? It began with a report about the Eskdale estate, then there were letters to the press, an opinion poll and a petition from youngsters. Swelling to a chorus of what? Dissatisfaction - that is what. Is not dissatisfaction always the prelude to change? Oh, I know that we are always urged to be grateful, to be satisfied, to count our blessings, to take nothing for granted, to think of all those worse off than ourselves etc, etc. These are truisms we almost dare not question but they can, I contend, be the arguments of scoundrels whose private agendas are not suited by change. Of course there are billions of our

fellow humans living in degradation and poverty, but is it not shameful to use their predicament, as scoundrels do, to argue for the status quo to be maintained in our own backyard?

I am from the leafy lanes of Surrey and I have always been, I must admit, rather taken aback by the complacency of an Earlstone constituency which cannot see too much wrong with the town.

***It's a nice little town** might be their motto. But how nice? Granted, there are few homeless people, few unemployed and little serious crime. But there is violence linked to alcohol, there is drug-dependency, great loneliness, spiritual and cultural impoverishment, low aspirations amongst the young, dereliction and alienation. The churches reach out to help, by example by providing street-pastors, but most people avert their gaze and turn away.*

Jesus offers a spiritual path - I am the way, the truth and the light, He said - but many cannot follow, and fail to find their way down the dark, blind alleys, through the maze of urban decay.

Might His light now shine? I urge other ministers to help nurture it by supporting any plan to improve the town environment and any measure which would provide purpose and direction and re-unite a lost people with the soil, the very earth which sustains all life! For it is my firm belief - and data showing a steep decline in church-going in the nineteenth century bear this out - that the dislocation of people from close communities into dark satanic mills, the loss of contact with nature and the countryside did much to undermine faith in a good God.

Witnessing at first hand the generosity of sun, soil and rain and involvement with the many mysterious ways of nature, would rehabilitate the sons who wandered off in search of wealth and luxury - the fools' gold which makes pockets bulge but the spirit diminish. I pray for these seeds of new ideas to grow in our hearts - ideas which are really as old and as good as the hills.

I felt moved by these thoughts. I was not a religious person but his words spoke a potent truth to me which I could not deny. I thought of Mrs Peveley at her piano and of that hymn had heard her singing with fervour that November morning. I began to compile a list of people, Bill Clarke included, who might join the campaign she and her husband were launching - and I made another note to ask Demi which of her teachers had worded so beautifully the petition. I showed the article to Eleanor, but instead of being softened as I had expected (she had adopted a position of great scepticism about my pet-project) to my dismay she laughed.

“He paints a picture of rural life as some rosy-cheeked idyll - Lark Rise To Candleford! Ask yourself this - *why* did all those peasants flock into the towns?? Not for better wages and living conditions, perhaps?”

“*You* did History A Level. Weren't a lot of them evicted? Anyway, what say did any of them have in their lives? They owned no land - or not much - and had to toil for landlords. When were people ever free to be in charge of enough land to sustain themselves?”

“Exactly! The vicar's talkin' romantic bollocks. The peasants were forced to go to church decades before the first factory was built! They had to pay a fine if they didn't. I can't believe you can be taken in by such.....shallow rubbish!”

“And I can't believe that you can't have a bit more....faith in people - or belief that things can be better - if we put our minds to it. *Yours* is a counsel of despair.”

“Oh, come on! Do you honestly think that people obsessed with their hair, their nails and all that are going to grab a trowel and start gardenin'?”

“Not *them* perhaps but maybe the younger ones -”

“And what about all the fatsos? They'll bend down once and split their differential! It's pie in the sky!”

“Why are you such a bloody cynic?”

“*Why aren’t you? That’s the question you should answer! Career ruined by a couple of drunken racists! Because of them I’ve had to move to this fuckin’ shithole - crammed full of the same sort of utterly depressin’ people - drunkards, hooligans and fuckin’ scroungers!*”

We had strayed onto territory we had always tacitly agreed to skirt. On impulse I retorted that if she hated it so much in Fairleigh then she should head back down south. I immediately regretted it. Later we said we were sorry and made up in the best way possible. Afterwards she joked sleepily that we ought to fall out more often. But I still felt troubled by her dislike of those struggling people and her antipathy to what was becoming by the day so important to me. I thought of the court usher, marinated for so long in a scummy pickle at the courthouse, that it had twisted her pretty features. Was the same happening by degrees to Eleanor because of her chosen career with the Law, that chapter and verse of skulduggery? Yet nobody, I reasoned, as she began to snore lightly in the dark, could expect to find total compatibility in a mate - in humour and outlook; wasn’t a certain amount of tension in fact vital to relationships? But another voice whispered the word “wedge” and I decided it was really down to me to ensure that Earlstone did come between us. Why should I waste my time on a town that seemed to have no desire to help itself? I thought of the failed referendum, the fiasco of the petition, the ruined bus station and the pall of apathy which cloaked the Eskdale estate. Carstairs, Cowlam and Statham had had no qualms about moving far away and were busy making their fortunes without giving their hometown a second’s thought. But finally as sleep overtook me I saw Demi’s eyes shining with enthusiasm, and Caroline Peveley turning in tears from her ornate piano.

William Peveley, after much coaxing, besides purging his contempt through clenched teeth had also agreed to pay his fine, his costs and the fifty pounds which he would have returned as long as he could keep his temper for one whole year.

I would almost certainly have had to spend a day in prison and it would not have been fair to Caroline - he emailed me to say.

I think I could just about have put up with the smell, the language and the company, and had I been a single man I would have done so. I am pleased with the postbag the paper received. And out of the blue I received a letter from the Chief Constable, apologizing for the way we were treated by that cretin Cropp. (My description - not his!) So maybe it was all worth it. We will have to put off our public meeting until the New Year, as Christmas will soon be upon us and Caroline has a chest infection. Maybe - not least for symbolic reasons - it would be best convened in the spring. Otherwise, more good news to report: we have had no further trouble from little Tania and company and have even seen bobbies on the beat in Priestley Road!

For the last council meeting before Christmas, as my “Marxist” friend Geoffrey had predicted, the Liberals did indeed table a motion to debate the Eskdale recreation ground. The Gazette always received agendas a few days in advance and on this one it read “We deplore the state of the Eskdale field, the equipment and the failure of the council to make remedy and repair.” It stopped short of calling for it to be transformed into what we wanted and in my head I heard Geoffrey toss off a cynical laugh. Paulette Warner had been given the task of reporting the proceedings - me having been taken off the Eskdale case and assigned other duties - and her face looked as if it had been force-fed sour plums when I turned up at seven fifteen in an entirely private capacity. When she saw me she was startled.

“Are you mad?” she whispered. “Have you never been to one of these? An argument about a

lamppost on the blink is about as interesting as it gets.”

Eleanor’s reaction to my half-hearted suggestion that she come as well with the promise of a drink afterwards had been met with the same sort of incredulity, albeit a little saltier, in the vernacular and style of her ex-docker father.

The council chamber was dominated on the back wall by a grander version of the coat of arms than the one in the courtroom, only the ram seemed to bear a slyer expression, as if he knew a secret and was not prepared to tell. Below it was the mayoral chair - enclosed in a box with a side-door - which, from stage left, a grizzled old man with a stoop now duly entered and took his seat. I am not normally given to low parody but in his low wooden case he reminded me of Davros, leader of the Daleks. From his vantage point he surveyed a political oval of three concentric pews constructed of the same tan wood as his niche. Across the marble floor dividing them, the two factions faced each other, on my left (for I had sat down in the public area at the back) the Conservatives and some Independents, on my right the Liberals and, sitting aloof, adjacent to and just below the mayor, a trio of Labourites from three rugged, ex-mining communities to the north of Earlstone. Mrs Skidmore looked up from her papers, saw me and gave a tiny wave. She was very pretty.

The Peveleys were not there as they had promised to be. But it was a cold night and Caroline had been quite ill. I sat at the front, only quickly glancing at the four or five citizens behind me who were demonstrating how bright the flame of local democracy was. To my right at the press table, Paulette, who was my senior by about two years and quite an attractive if slightly tubby woman, sat tapping her teeth with her pencil. The large man in the dark suit who had been flitting to and fro and bending over one colleague after another now had my undivided attention. He had a round, podgy face and wore glasses. The glossy head of hair, like a dried spill of tar, could only be a toupee. It was Giles Butterworth. As he straightened up now he seemed to stare at me - yes, there was no doubt about it - first with an expression of surprise and then, it seemed, of indignation. The mayor was clearing his throat and calling the meeting to order when the chamber door opened and a uniformed council officer appeared - the one I had passed on the way in - bowed in apology to the chair and ushered in a slender young woman wearing a cloak and a beret and urgently pointed her in my direction. The whole assembly followed her nimble progress to sit two chairs away from me and then watched her remove her beret to shake free a bob of dark brown hair. She had evidently been running and her wide eyes were both startled and startling. Her cheeks and narrow nose were red and she gave a brief sniff amongst her rapid breaths. She brought with her a cold, earthy smell of the parkland around the building and her own citrus smell which her shaken hair had imparted to the waxy polish aroma of the chamber. I looked down at her tiny boots on which an oak leaf had pasted itself. This helped to put me further in mind of a lovely elf who had stumbled in on the affairs of mankind. She removed a small rucksack from her back and quietly took out a pen and notepad. She looked at me full-on, no doubt conscious of my interest, smiled and tucked one side of her hair behind a pointed ear and stared intently at her blank page. Paulette looked and shrugged in my direction, signalling God-knows-who-she’s-from and then turned back to the arena. The mayor said an opening prayer and began the meeting. My interest soon flagged as matters arising from the minutes were discussed. I would have been distracted anyway, as from the corner of my right eye I could not help but watch my fragrant neighbour’s pen whizzing backwards and forwards across the lined paper. Her fingernails looked bitten short and she wore no varnish, rings or bangles. What on earth could she find in that droning tedium worth making notes on? Now she stopped suddenly, looked at me glancing at her, gave me a quizzical look which said “Have I baffled you enough

yet?" slid across one chair nearer to me and passed me the piece of paper, immediately making the back of my neck tingle deliciously. I opened the page.

Hi Andy Clayfield! I recognise you from your picture in the paper. I'm Lydia Fuller from Eskdale High. I teach French and I've been helping Demi and her friends with the petition. I promised them I'd come tonight. Chat to you later.

I turned to her, smiled and winked. Every so often, as something ludicrous was said, I turned to her to roll my eyes in my head. How - or whether - she reacted I did not linger to see. Well, the meeting had gone on for nearly an hour before the business we were interested in came up. The proposer of the motion, an informal man in his thirties in a Tigers rigger shirt, managed to make rather melodramatic work of it all, describing the recreation ground in such terms as to put me in mind of scenes of mass destruction. If this was meant to needle the Tories, it failed because many began to look at the ceiling or yawn. Perhaps they were used to his bouts of hyperbole.

"When will the party opposite make good their commitment to put right this shameful travesty of a play area?" he demanded with satisfaction in conclusion of his peroration.

Councillor Butterworth, with pomp and circumstance, got slowly to his feet and in a voice ridiculously high for such a big man denounced Councillor McAdoo (his Liberal adversary) for playing "to the galler-eh" - (by which I supposed he meant us.) He added a pleasantry which had his friends and even, behind their hands, some of his enemies found very entertaining.

"As we have come to expect from the Councillor for Northfield, it is yet again a case of *McAdoo about nothing!*"

He waited for the laughter to subside, grinned viciously and carried on.

"He knows perfectly well the renovation of recreation facilities - so sadly neglected by his, the previous administration - is well in hand. Heav-eh rolling and selective reseeding will take place in the spring and a soft play area with swings and slides will also be installed. For older children there will be a basketball court. This only awaits the less inclement weather than we have so far been subjected to this autumn. Kindl-eh allow me to ask Councillor McAdoo a question, Your Worship....Does he and the part-eh opposite support*(and he paused to stare at me - and glance quizzically at Lydia)*....support the *misguided* campaign for the whole area to be churned up and converted into an urban *farm*?"

Lydia stopped writing and stabbed the pen into the paper to make a deep full stop, imagining perhaps that it was Butterworth's pompous fat lip or nose. Or tiny eye.

McAdoo leapt to his feet and seated his glasses firmly on the bridge of his nose.

"Your Worship, not for the first time the leader of the council is attempting to *Butter* us up with his glib assurances which are in fact *Worth* nothing."

He waited for a crescendo of laughter and when only a few polite haw-haws materialised he carried on.

"If those opposite had kept their word, and got cracking with the job during one of the best summers for years, then there would be no such campaign, borne as it is only out of Tory foot-dragging."

Butterworth stayed seated and, ignoring McAdoo, only remarked loud to the chamber "So I take it that the answer to my question is NO."

Another Tory, without awaiting the nod of the Mayor, shouted "Foot-dragging? Mr McAdoo knows perfectly well that a whole number of local amenities have already been improved which the previous Liberal council allowed to fall into decline!"

“Oh, we’re not having that!” shouted an opponent above the hear-hears and jeers “If the Tories had not sailed so close to the wind with ridiculously low rates in the ten years prior to our time then we could have done far more to address the neglect we inherited. They rely on the electorate having a very short memory - and we always get the blame which should be theirs!”

Uproar. Here it all was in a nutshell. Low rates, apathy, neglect. Above the din Butterworth urged McAdoo to answer his question which only “required one word - or another - both monosyllabic“. This McAdoo could not manage and he had been going for a few evasive words when to everyone’s astonishment Lydia Fuller shot to her feet and - in an almost comic Birmingham accent - began to speak. The wheezing mayor tried to interrupt her, but she was determined and the chamber, agog, had fallen under her spell.

“I am a teacher at Eskdale High. We have sent this council a petition which, to date, no-one has been courteous enough to respond to. Tomorrow I shall have to tell my pupils that you are more interested in scoring political points of each other and making childish jokes about your names than doing something positive about their wretched playing fields. Shame on all of you.”

She sat down in an absolute silence. Someone behind us tut-tutted. She turned and said with a smile “I’m sorry if I woke you. You can go back to sleep now. I’ve done.”

“Let’s go” I whispered, seeing all hostile eyes still trained on us. “You can see what we’re up against.”

As we were leaving a sneering voice from the Tory benches told us we could not leave until a break in the proceedings. I looked up and could not help but retort

“We’ll do as we please, just as *you lot* do.”

The official seemed disinclined to move from the exit, blocking our path.

“I’m nauseated. Do you want me to vomit here, or *outside*?” asked Lydia of him without a trace of anger. He moved briskly to one side and we left.

I offered her a lift. She seemed so vulnerable and small. How did she manage, I asked myself, to keep control of teenagers much bigger than herself? She adamantly refused my offer and pointed in the direction of the church and mentioned a flat. She told me she had been teaching at Eskdale three years and seemed wholly committed to those she referred to us “our kids”. She knew, she said, how much I had helped them and she was grateful. But where did we go from there?

“Do you know the Peveleys?” I asked. “Did she see Caroline’s letter in The Gazette about forming a new party to take on those deadbeats? Nothing will change here until they’re history.....What’s your email address?”

She took out her pen and wrote it down. She copied down mine. We shook hands. I watched her walk into the darkness beyond the trees towards the graveyard and church, and only when she had completely disappeared, did I get into my car and drive off.

Once home, discovering that Eleanor had already gone to bed, I emailed Demi to say I had met Lydia Fuller. The next afternoon she replied

She’s well nice. She really cares. She even went to the allotments to ask if we could help out in the spring. One of the old guys said we could help clear the ground and stuff. He keeps chickens and he says we can feed them. Lydia tole us about the council. I won’t vote when I’m 18. Their useless.

I searched every pocket for the slip of paper with Lydia’s email address on it and a part of me was relieved when I could not find it.

* * * * *

Graham Blower was more angry than I had never seen him.

“You’ve got me in big trouble! Cox thinks I’ve defied him. Butterworth has obviously been on to him.”

“Who the fuck does he think he is, that fat bastard?” I yelled back.

To seal us in, he shot up and slammed the door which seemed to conduct some of the lightning in the air away.

“Our boss, or one of them, that’s who!”

I pictured the glossy-headed man in his manor house just outside Dadlingcote, taking the decision to turn up the fire underneath my editor. I immediately felt sorry.

“Look, I’m sorry, I was there in an entirely private capacity“. Then another wave of indignation hit me. “I’m an employee and a council-tax payer, not a bloody serf! Butterworth’s not even on the list of directors you gave me!”

“He doesn’t need to be *on the board*. He knows them all. You upset one and you upset everybody. They think they own this town. And in a way, *they do*.”

“He thinks he can pull a string and make me jump? I’ll resign!”

“Well, that sounds much like jumping to me! *Can’t* you be just a little bit more subtle? I can try telling Cox you weren’t there for The Gazette. But that won’t cut much ice - because of what you said when you walked out.”

He picked up the note on his table and read from it aloud. “Your reporter Mr Clayfield defied the Chair and left, retorting that he would do just as he pleased and implied that honourable councillors were equally dismissive of their obligations...”

I felt my face go hot. I spluttered that I might have been a little annoyed but denied I had been abusive or insulting.

“But *the councillors* thought you were! That’s the point. These are the very people you have to interview week in, week out. How will some of them have confidence *now* that you’re impartial? It was getting bad enough *before*. I told you about keeping your distance. I’ve felt angry about loads of things I’ve had to investigate, but I’ve had to keep it to myself. If you were a newsreader, you’d be banging the desk every five minutes! Yes, you *would!*”

Of course he was right. My temper again had gotten the better of me.

“I’ll write to the mayor and apologize to him and the council. Ask him to read it out. If that might help....”

He shrugged as if to say the damage was done.

“Do you want me to resign?”

“You might not need to. You might get the push.”

The word froze me and he smiled. He had his result. I had been schooled again.

“Old papers need young people like you. I’m going out on a limb for your sake - so mind what you do with the bloody saw!”

* * * * *

We spent Christmas on the south coast but the first symptoms of the cancer which would kill Eleanor’s mum a few months later overshadowed the celebrations. And Eleanor seemed depressed anyway. She certainly seemed in no hurry to return to the Midlands. We had been

back a couple of days when Demi sent me a worrying email.

Andy,

I've heard there have been pushers round the school. Another Indian guy. Briony says she saw a needle under the park bench. I didn't see anything, and Briony exaggerates, but Tasha Dyer came back at Xmas. The rumour is she's working for someone else now.

So had the drugs store re-opened? Was it Ajay? A case of *come back and work for me!*?

Friends? I told Graham about the email and on the next school day - a chilly Tuesday just after the pupils had returned from their break - I found myself parking a street away from the school gates. Instinctively I looked for a Mercedes, an Audi, a BMW or a 4x4. There were three or four of the latter parked away from the yellow zigzags but they contained young blonde women - as they almost invariably do. Then I thought - Ajay would hardly come in person; he would send out someone else to recruit new victims, a runner, probably a youth who was already an addict. Like Dracula's Undead. In daylight, in front of waiting parents, as the children came running, pushing, yelling and skipping out, it seemed utterly absurd that anyone in a smart suit - or old anorak - would approach a child to offer a twist of paper - or whatever they package their loss-leaders in. I wondered if someone who would be taken for an older brother waiting for a sibling might be my target. A car containing two youths pulled up and two girls who obviously knew them clambered in. I memorised the number but decided they probably had things other than drugs on their immediate agenda.

No. If the rumour were true, corruption would surely be taking place on the scuffed edge of activity, away from credible witnesses. I mooched around the street until it was almost empty, walked to the reccy where some boys were having a kick-around, looked under a bench, causing them to pause and stare, had a stroll around The Eskdale, past the benches where a solitary woman smoker with a pint sat reading a magazine, ventured down a few darkening streets near there, and, satisfied there was no substance to the rumour, I went back to my car. Just in case I might miss the vital clue I crept slowly past the school gates and, as I drove away I looked in my wing mirror. A slight figure in a cloak and beret was just coming out of the gate. And as I turned off the estate to descend the steep hill past Elmcroft Park I realised that Demi had not been amongst those emerging from the school.

Were you away today?

- Yes. I had to look after Jake.

Why? Was your mum ill?

- Sort of.

Later, after dinner, I returned to the Eskdale and as I walked through the fog on the other side of the road from the flats, I wondered how I could keep them under surveillance, **a)** without being seen and **b)** without freezing to death. On my left was a row of slender modern starter homes. A brief flash of gold caught my eye. A curtain had twitched in a window.

I had decided to come here and see for myself whether Natasha was indeed back. I had made up my mind to *show* those bloated powers-that-be what an indispensable asset I was to their blessed Gazette! *Then* I would leave - no doubt head-hunted by a more august organ of the media. I would say nothing to Graham Blower about my plan. To Eleanor I told a white lie - that I was

interviewing a few residents on the Eskdale who could only be at my disposal after six.

“I’ll be back about ten. Ten thirty at the latest. You don’t mind?””

“I’ll probably be in bed. Don’t wake me.”

“OK. You don’t mind? Shall I sleep in the spare room?”

“You might as well.”

Another golden flash in the window interrupted my fourth or fifth replay of that brief tableau with Eleanor, and on an impulse I turned down the path of the tiny, neat garden (in contrast with which the gardens on either side seemed particularly neglected) and gently knocked the door. To my surprise a rather elderly lady opened up as far as the chain would allow.

“I’m a reporter,” I said but had no need to add my rather lame pretext - I forget now what it was - for knocking her door because she said immediately that she knew I was. She even smiled at me.

“I know your face. I’ve seen your photo in *The Gazette* so often you’re like an acquaintance.

You were outside the flats before Christmas. I like your stories - particularly about the estate.”

She was a Scottish lady with shrewd, kindly eyes. I had a fan club. She took off the chain and asked me in. While she made tea I stood in her front room which looked obliquely across at the main entrance of the tower I was interested in. I took the liberty of turning off the main light and switching on a table lamp at the far end of the room. I parted the curtain and looked out on a ghostly scene of fog gilded by the street light. She came back in and quietly put the mug on a coaster in the windowsill.

“I suppose you know they’re back,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Who?”

“The girls. It’s all started up again.”

“You know about it?”

“Anybody with a couple of eyes in their head would!”

“I hope they don’t know you...er.....keep your eye on them.”

“Spy on them? I think I have a good cover. I’m just a lonely, nosy old lady if anyone wonders.

Drugs sicken me. My husband was a probation officer.....”

“Who have you told?”

“Nobody. There’s no point. They couldn’t get in through that security door even if they could be bothered. But of course you know that the police here are less than ...what’s the new word?...*proactive*.....?”

I pictured Pev nodding vigorously in agreement. I studied her eyes and her brow and she smiled genially - as if she had guessed that I was thinking how little she conformed to the estate stereotype.

“I moved here when my dear husband Bert died in the late nineties. I got so fed up at the bungalow with nothing to look at, except for fields out the back. I’m a people person. I just love looking at them.”

“Isn’t it noisy - I mean with you living with young couples either side...?”

“I don’t mind noise given the choice between noise and silence. I think we’re silent for long enough, in the end. I like my neighbours and they respect me. They’re mainly fine. They’re young. They should have a good time! I did.”

I asked her what she had seen over the road recently.

“Give it half-an-hour. You’ll see. Who tipped you off?”

“Have you seen an Indian there - maybe in a large car - a black Mercedes or similar?”

“He wouldn’t be so stupid! One of the girls - the taller one with the dyed blonde hair - she’s started going off in her car again and coming back with hold-alls. Just like when the other guy,

who got cremated, was around.”

“But she’s just been on her holidays. That would account for the cases.”

“Not for twice in a week it wouldn’t.”

“When was the last time?”

“Last night.”

She went to a cupboard and took out the most enormous pair of binoculars I had ever seen.

“These were Bert’s. He was a fanatical birdwatcher. You can go upstairs and look out of the spare room.”

In the total dark of the room, the murky glow of the night posed far less of a problem. The light over the entrance to the flats and the amazing strength of the glasses afforded me a clear view of the brass plate on which the door bell buttons were arranged. I focused on the corner flat, Natasha’s, and saw large shadows moving about on the brightly lit pink blind. They were so close that I felt I should be able to hear their conversations. I moved the binoculars to the right and confirmed to myself that the flat next door was indeed in total darkness. I focused again on the door bells but could not read the names in the slots. It did not matter. I knew that Briony’s sister’s flat was the third button of four on the second row from the bottom. Her fat neighbour’s was the fourth. I had to conclude that Natasha’s was the first on the left. I opened my notebook and laid the pen down next to it. A glimmer of light from the lamppost on the corner was enough to write by. I looked at my watch. It was 19:17. Two figures with a pushchair struggled up to the door and used a key to get in. After them there was no activity until 19:42. Then there began a steady stream of visitors and their fingers invariably pushed the button on the extreme left, Natasha’s button. Was the shop open? As the customers left I could see their faces. They were older teenagers or twenty-somethings, mostly with pinched features. But the face emerging at 20:27 shocked me. It was a child’s face. And it looked straight up at me appealingly as if it knew, though it could not possibly know, that I was looking down. It was Demi.

Once home, I wrote several messages to her to ask what she had been doing there. I deleted them all.

*

There began a period of instability in my life which I hated. In mid-January confirmation of the mother’s serious illness came. The emergency journey south this required us to make, caused me to miss the Peveley’s long-anticipated public meeting in The Red Ox. Beneath the pall of winter the debate about the town’s future had gone rather dead and Graham Blower took the decision (or had it taken for him) not to send a reporter. The Liberals’ motion about the recy had of course been defeated and that seemed to have concluded matters for a while. Even so, the email awaiting me when I came home alone from Southampton a few days later was enthusiastic.

The turn-out was a bit disappointing - less than thirty, but those who did come were keen. We’ve elected officers and William has the job of writing a constitution and rule-book for the next meeting in February to vote on. A young woman teacher who knows you - Lydia Fuller - has agreed to write our manifesto and to be Press Officer. We are debating what we should call ourselves. One option is the CNE - Committee for a New Earlstone - but one man thought it sounded a bit too much like CND. (We don’t want to scare the horses now, do we!) Have you any ideas? We are definitely going to fight the key marginals in the elections the May after this - ten

seats. We will have the funds. Even if we fail to win one seat we will give the other parties cause to rethink their tired old ways and means of doing things. Who knows? On the most optimistic reckoning we could even hold the balance of power! The Tories have a majority of just one. Did you know that? Could you help write our election address? Would you even be a candidate? You have the looks!

We are putting an advertisement in The Gazette to appeal for members at only five pounds. We are a tiny acorn destined to grow into a mighty oak!

Caroline

Eleanor would be coming back the next Sunday. Her dad was pulling himself together and he had assured her he would be able to cope. And his sister was coming to stay for a while. Friday's edition was full of the new project on the bus station site. Three models had been on display at the Council Offices since the New Year and now they were featured in The Gazette. To my cynical eye they looked like LEGO trays with the same pieces rearranged differently. Residents had been invited to vote by dialling one of three numbers. A wag had already written to us to enquire if there was a number to ring if we did not want any of them. I made a note of his email address to add to my list of potential allies. Graham had decided not to print his comments on the Letters Page. My plan to interview Butterworth had not been mentioned again. I got the feeling that Graham wanted me to stay well away and I was not in the mood to protest. In addition, a final decision to give the project the go-ahead was unlikely before the autumn.

I had mentioned the drugs store on the Eskdale to Graham but he had shrugged.

"Why aren't you interested?" I asked.

I was tempted to tell him about my surveillance but something in his manner warned me it would not be wise. I had the distinct feeling that something - maybe a power-shift behind the scenes - was "persuading" him to steer the old bucket back into safer waters. He handed me a couple of routine jobs and left me alone for a while in his office. Whether deliberately or not, he had arranged a letter on his desk in such a way which made it impossible to ignore. It was typed on the official stationery of Earlstone Social Services.

Dear Editor,

I have been struggling with my conscience and can no longer keep silent. I am a social worker in Earlstone, and have, of course, to deal with many problem families, particularly on the Eskdale and Wycliffe estates. Like the SS in other places ESS must fulfil its targets, and is under pressure, mainly for financial reasons not to remove at-risk children from the home. One child on my books, a boy of eleven called Tony, has to hold the ligature on his elder brother's forearm tight so that he can inject heroin into a vein. He regularly finds his mother unconscious with drink and drugs on the kitchen floor. Her latest partner has struck her. Yet Tony is not considered by my superiors at-risk enough to be taken into care.

The children I list below are, I am certain, in moral and physical danger. It is only a matter of time before a tragedy occurs in Earlstone

The letter was not signed. There were seven names. The fifth was Demi Tatton. No doubt my

face told Graham I had read the letter when he came back. He gathered it up and firmly closed his drawer on it, thereby reminding me forcefully and, I gathered, intentionally, of that Friday the previous November.

“I’ve told one or two people, so I might as well tell you.” he said. “I’m retiring in July. I’ll be 59 in June. They’ve made me an offer.....Lorraine isn’t so well....I’ve got to put her first.”

So this was the explanation for his new reluctance not to rock our little boat.

“I think I’d better start looking myself, then. I’ll be a bit vulnerable. When you’re out of it.”

He did not try to dissuade me.

“You’re a good writer but you’re not cut out to be a journalist, Andy. I only took you on as a favour. I soon saw you were too....*passionate.*”

“As a favour? Who to?”

He shook his head and smiled. “*To whom* you mean. *He* would be upset...”

“You don’t mean?”

“I do. He wrote to me. After your conviction in Southampton. I swore to him I’d never tell you. So please don’t let on.”

“But why did you take notice of him?”

“I’ve known him for years. Let’s just say we were in the same party many years ago when we were both keen and idealistic. Not a party many would vote for. Do you get me?”

Back in my corner, I thought all this over and finally returned to those children at risk. His kindness and humanity did not square with his decision to bury the list. Now I understood what he wanted me to do.

Sitting in my office I could not concentrate on the footling assignment he had given me - right-wing villager outrage about some old mansion on the Watling Street being taken over by some mystical sect. I could only think about Demi. It all began to add together: her truanting; the absentee mother; the neglected, screaming child; the dirty house; Demi, the reluctant surrogate mother; and not least of course her visit to the drugs store. For whom? The mother? The partner? Both? Was the partner abusive? I had seen in those eyes a knowledge and a world-weariness a child’s eyes ought not to have. How could I give her the chance to open up to me? After much deliberation I wrote her the following email.

Dear Demi,

I am sure you know how great an interest I take in you. I told you last year how pleased I was you had set your sights higher than just “nails”. That first time we met on the reccy I saw straightway - no insult intended to Briony and the others - that you had something special.

Demi, you emailed me about drugs and, as you know, I followed it up the next day. What I didn’t tell you - and I have tried to many times - is that that night I went to the flats and did a spot of spying. At 8:20 who should come out of Natasha’s flat but you, Demi. I was shocked. But I have decided to tell nobody even though, no doubt, I should.

I must admit it has been bothering me that you might not be happy. Things you’ve said, how you’ve looked, how you seem to take responsibilities that a girl your age shouldn’t. Please don’t think I’m being nosy and I wouldn’t blame you for telling me to mind my business. But if you

want to tell me anything that's on your mind you know you can. Or maybe tell Miss Fuller. I know she really cares about you.

Days passed but she did not reply.

Eleanor was very weary when she returned to Fairleigh on the Sunday afternoon. She had been shopping, cooking, cleaning and caring almost non-stop for her parents. Chemotherapy had left her mother very weak and ill. Her father had been in a state of near paralysis with despair. He had depended on his wife for most domestic services. She had even run their finances and paid their bills.

Once we had talked over all that Eleanor had on her mind to tell me, I began to tell her about my week and inadvertently upset her.

"I'm sorry Andy, I can't really get my mind around your *New Earlstone*."

So I had the brainwave of asking her what she thought I ought to do about the list of children I had seen.

"What makes you think it's your responsibility?" she asked. "The woman didn't write to you."

"Graham doesn't want to deal with it. He just wants to sit it out for a few months. He won't print it."

"Well, what can you do? Why do you think you have to carry the burdens of the world on your shoulders? I need you to be here for *me*."

A bit later on as we watched the news there was an item about people in social housing. One in five was unemployed. One in four was in receipt of invalidity benefit. One in three was a single mother. I sensed her indignation swell.

"How on earth can we keep on for much longer carryin' all these passengers?" she suddenly burst out. "How many billions do families who can't cope cost the people who can - who have to cope? Social workers, health visitors, counsellors, police, educational psychiatrists, case conferences, fraud investigators, courts, prisons?? How much is the government borrowin' to fund them all? "

I chose to remain silent.

"And you feel sorry for them! Why don't you feel sorry for all the hard-workin' people whose taxes subsidise the idle bastards? There was somethin' on the radio about which way children should face in a pushchair - lookin' out at the world or lookin' up at their mothers....."

I looked at her when she did not continue. There were tears in her eyes. She took a deep breath and composed herself. I took her long, slender hand but it remained limp.

"Do you know what I think?"

I said no, but quietly added that I was sure she would enlighten me.

"*Up* at the mother. So she can tell them all the ins and outs about claimin' benefit!"

I barely smiled at her grim joke. I was not meant to laugh.

"My mother works **hard** all her life and this is what she gets rewarded with."

She sprang up and slammed the door.

The next morning I waited until Graham had left his office, walked in and took the whistleblower's letter from his drawer as I assumed I was meant to. Having put it back, I sent one of the copies I had made to the editor of *The Leicester Mercury*.

The Gazette was rediscovering its easy function as a mirror on the town and when I examined how I felt about that, I realised I did not care one bit. Graham had once used the word "subtle".

From then onwards I decided that my job would be a job and I would use it as a cover for what I intended to do.

The scandalous story I had anticipated in the Leicester paper on Tuesday afternoon failed to appear. And on Wednesday as well. I could only conclude that the editor was holding it back as a weapon with which to belabour the head of Social Services, should the whistleblower's warning be borne out. I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was "allowing" news to happen - just as we had in respect of Peveley's eggs.. Did newspaper editors have a duty of care to anyone? Did I? To ease my conscience I sent other copies to the Chief Constable and the head of Eskdale High. Still Demi did not reply to the email I'd sent her and I decided she had taken offence at my intrusiveness.

The morning after her outburst, Eleanor had apologised and I had assured her that she had absolutely no need to feel sorry. We made up though not in the way I had looked forward to and I left it to her to make the first move, whenever the mood took her. On Friday evening she looked at me strangely and said after a deep intake of breath "Andy, I've got to move back down south. I sent in my notice the other week and they've allowed me to do just two weeks in the circumstances. There's a job going at a solicitor's. I need to be at home - for my mum."

"But what will I do down there?"

"I don't want you to come."

"What?"

"I think we should see how much we need each other. After a few weeks...."

"You haven't.....?"

"No. I wouldn't! Do you HONESTLY think I've had time to pull in a bit on the side as well? Get real!I just think we want different things out of life - at the moment at least. You've changed. You've got this bee in your bonnet....."

"I'll drop it!"

"No, Andy. I don't want you to. It's *you*. Let's just see how things pan out. We'll keep in touch." So the next afternoon I helped her load up her car and we embraced. In the end she seemed reluctant to go and I was alarmed to sense something akin to impatience within me. As I walked down the path, having waved her off frantically - perhaps too frantically - I pictured, partly to my guilty dismay, Lydia Fuller in her cloak disappearing into the darkness cloaking the church.

* * * * *

"Andrew Clayfield?"

"Yes"

I recognised the refined voice but could not place it. Was it the magistrate?

"It's Sheila, Sheila Skidmore. I need to talk to you."

"What about?"

"It's rather personal. I'm a little...I need your help and advice....Could we meet somewhere out of town? Do you know The Covey Duck in Bittersthorpe just off the Watling? They have a curry night on Wednesdays. I'll treat you....I'm told it's good and it gets pretty busy. So I could tell you what's on my mind and not be overheard..."

I refused her offer to pick me up and said I would make my own way there.

The pub was busy though not uncomfortably so, and not unbearably noisy. The curry was pretty

tasty but what she had to tell me was even tastier. When she had finished her confession, I said under my breath “Why have you told *me* - a stranger *and* a reporter - about *that* ?”

“Because I want to resign from the council. You know my heart was never in it. And you know I have a lot of sympathy for what you’re trying to achieve - not that it’ll ever work.....”

“What *I* want to achieve? I only reported it.”

She laughed in spite of her evident despondency. “Oh, *come on!*”

She looked sensational and I noticed many clandestine glances straying her way as I sensed envious ones on me. I felt astonished and not a little embarrassed to have been so confided in by such a woman - old enough in spite of appearances to be my mother.

“But how can I help?” I asked, feeling my cheeks glow, though not wholly with the heat of the Prawn Madras.

“I don’t know. But you’re a newshound. A good one. If you could dig up something on Giles *Bloody* Butterworth I could get off the hook. I’m so desperate, I’d even be willing to pay you.....”

I had no experience of counselling, not even people of my own age.

“You *could* just confess it to your husband....” I whispered.

She shut her pretty eyes and slowly shook her head.

“He forgave me once many years ago. I swore it would never happen again.”

“Is it true, he has a bit of temper?”

She smiled wanly and stared at my shirt as if contemplating some appalling tableau she was projecting there from her recollection.

“So how did *Butterworth* find out about it?”

“His brother Simon told him.”

“His brother?”

“Yes. He was the *man*.”

All at once I saw it all. I whispered that she must have been set up and she did not disagree. She raised her glass. In the pale green wine her scarlet lips swelled to twice their Botoxed size. I felt very sorry for her, although a lot of me said I should not.

“It was something and nothing. I could tell Barry it meant nothing, which is true. Like I said the first time he found out. He said back then, it was *such a nothing* that I had decided to break my wedding vows for it. There’s no answer to that. What would he say this time?”

I wondered how much pleasure - genuine pleasure - she derived from her little adventures. She sighed and let out a long breath.

“It was just a New Years Eve party. Nearly three years ago. In Dadlingcote.”

“At Butterworth’s?”

“Yes. He had been on at me - again, like he had been for months - about standing in Westfield. Getting the other guests to agree, putting the pressure on, flattering me, complimenting me - all the smarm, all the *bullshit*. Much later on we were all pretty wrecked - I don’t usually drink that much. There were arms and legs everywhere - and Barry was out cold on a sofa. Gone three ’o clock. Not the best time to sign your life away. Upstairs. All over in five minutes. Never felt a damned thing. *Pathetic*. And all down to *flattery*. It’s my weakness. I’m just terrified of growing old gracelessly. *He* had been all charm, that Simon. One thing he has in common with Giles.”

“So he’s not like his brother?”

She threw back her lustrous blonde mane and laughed bitterly.

“You’ve seen Giles?” she asked.

“Only once. At the council chamber that night.”

“His brother is everything he is not. I think old Mother Butterworth must have been given the wrong bundle on the maternity ward. It *happens*....”

She went out to the toilet and came back a while later obviously freshened up. I looked around. No-one was paying us any attention now. Quite a large group of revellers were taking delight, as alcohol took over, in out-laughing one another. She smoothed down that tempting red dress of hers straight and sat down again, revealing a good measure of her well pampered thighs. I felt tempted to take her hand but thought that my concern would be misconstrued.

“Why don’t you just threaten to tell the police? You’re being blackmailed!”

She stifled a laugh in her throat. “Butterworth plays golf with the Chief Superintendent. My word against his anyway.”

“It would be your word against his if Giles told Barry.”

“Barry would believe it - and I’m not good under pressure. I get upset very easily. Don’t get me wrong - I get on pretty well with Barry. We have a sort of...truce...in the bedroom. It’s a case of *whenever*, an *as and when* sort of thing. I’m luckier than most women *in my situation* I reckon. I put up with...things....because I just couldn’t face losing my wonderful home. My lifestyle. The view from my lounge window. Barry plays his golf, runs his business and counts his money. I play whist, do flower-arranging and enjoy my house and garden. Since my.....*encounter* with Simon, I’ve been absolutely discrete.”

She stared at me now in such a way that I physically shrank back. To cover my alarm I got up and went to the toilet. In her airless box, with her view of jagged factory roofs, was Leanne Sweeney more secure and more content with life than Sheila Skidmore?? I felt certain that of the two lives, Leanne’s was the more straightforward and the less stressful. Had I heard Sheila correctly in the noise? Was she still taking risks?

It had dawned on me in the bar that her distress was a clear opportunity for us. Caroline had said that the Tories had only a majority of one seat. If Sheila could resign Westfield and Eskdale with impunity and if the Liberals could regain it in a bye-election - or if even the CNE could steal it - then there would be no overall control of the council and the Bus Station project might be shelved and the Eskdale farm might be achievable by some skilful politicking.

“How can I get at Butterworth?” I asked quietly as I rejoined her. “What vices does he have? Where’s his Achilles heel? Do you know him that well?”

“Not *well*. We socialise. He’s one on our dinner circuit. Parties and receptions, that sort of thing.” She shrugged. “All I can tell you is that there was something not quite right about a land deal two or so years ago. A small housing development.”

“How not right? Do you mean the new development in Northfield?”

“Yes. Northfield. A bit of wasteland left over after they built the council estate there in the fifties.....Listen. There were ten or twelve of us for dinner, including Butterworth and his *insufferable* wife Anne - with her fat behind and lardy-da ways. If Butterworth has one weakness, it’s brandy. He can never have just one if he starts. And of course, it always turns his taps on. He can’t help boasting - that’s his other weakness - his favourite topic of conversation is his bloody self - and so down our end of the table we had to hear all about their planned train journey across the Rocky mountains - again. That’s another vice - they think they’re the only people to have ever been anywhere, and are sure you’re just dying to know about *their* holidays...But this time after another brandy we had to hear how hard he’d been working on a very “lucrative” conveyancing for an “important” client - oh, it had taken up *so much of his time*, (*hadn’t it Annie?*) and now he deserved a special treat, a long holiday in Canada. I would have forgotten all about it if it hadn’t been for Barry - who, when he has a few, is under the impression

that booze makes him witty....So anyway, out on the drive, when their taxi has come, Barry slaps him on the back and says something stupid about how he really deserves to “head west after Northfield” and Butterworth makes a big thing of putting his finger up to his fat mouth and making ridiculous shushing noises, then laughing like a bloody drain. Middle-aged men are so *ridiculous* when they’re drunk. Yuk. Nobody else seemed to notice - but I did because I hadn’t been drinking..... A few days later I asked Barry what he meant about Northfield but he said he couldn’t remember saying it. Well, he must have remembered a bit later on because he phoned me from the factory and told me not to mention it to a soul. It had been a stupid joke - the booze talking - and it might be taken the wrong way. He told me to forget about it.”

I finished my mineral water. She had drunk two large glasses of wine, two-thirds of a bottle. I plucked up the nerve to ask her if she thought she was fit to drive the five or so miles home. She assured me she would sit and wait a good while in the car park before she went. She grinned archly.

“Andy, you’re nothing like your father, are you? In fact, you’re a bit of a Puritan. I suppose if I made a pass at you, you would tell me you’re a one-gel-guy or you’re having an early night with a cup of hot milk..... Barry’s at a stag-dinner...rugger club.....”

I thought of Eleanor and her assurance: *I wouldn’t.....*

“Actually, I *am* a one-gel-guy Mrs Skidmore. But I will say this - and I have no ulterior motive - you are a lovely woman. I can understand why my father....admired you. I’m just sorry for you.”

“Why?”

“Sorry that you have such a wonderful house but can’t have exactly the wonderful life you want in it.”

I paused while she thought this over then I added “You do realise that your husband will oppose you resigning your seat?”

“Why?”

“He needs the Tories in control - to make money from his factory and his land when the bus station is redeveloped. Don’t try to tell me that *wasn’t* your private agenda all along”

She looked genuinely embarrassed, and for a while stuck for a reply. When it came I could tell she was not being strictly honest.

“We never talk about business. It bores me. What makes you think the party would lose Westfield in a bye-election? And besides, I think you’re wrong, the Liberals would be just as much in favour of The Mead. I don’t care, anyhow. Even if he blows a fuse, I’m going to resign *as soon as I can.*”

In case she might begin to have second thoughts I reminded her that she would have to declare an interest in the Mead project in any event, and disqualify herself from voting.

“You could tell Barry *that.*”

I had given her an invitation to discuss my father’s involvement with her, but she either had no inclination to or had been distracted by my warning. I could tell from her face that she must already be rehearsing her arguments to assail Barry with.

She looked at me finally and said “You are a very kind young man, Andrew. I’m sure you’ll do what you can for me.”

I left her in the car park, having allowed her to embrace me on tiptoe and having bestowed on her forehead a very chaste kiss. I drove back determined to inflict a reverse on Butterworth; partly for Sheila, but mainly for the sake of Earlstone. Once home I emailed Eleanor and told her how much I loved and missed her. But it was late and she did not reply. Nor the next day either. But

Demi did.

Dear Andy,

Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. In a year or so I will be out of here. I'm alright. Bradley is on heroin and Mum threw him out last week. I didn't get back to you last week because we had to go and stay with my gran. Cos he tried to break back in and beat Mum up. I'm coping. She is drinking a lot and I have to look after Jake quite a bit. At least I don't have to get Brad's gear any more. He's off the scene. We think he's moved in with another woman on drugs on another estate.

Demi.

Dear Demi,

When you ring the bell at the flats how do you manage to get in? What do you say? You know what you tell me will be safe with me.

There had to be a password - but all Demi was prepared to tell me was that there *was* one, but that it changed every day. I decided to pay my old lady friend another visit after supper. She watched out every evening. I asked her if she had noticed anything odd. Did the customers stop and talk with others as they left?

“No. The only thing I’ve noticed is that they all come from the same direction. Go upstairs and see for yourself. They never come from the right - always from that corner near The Eskdale.”

Then I told her the truth, that I knew there was a password.

“If I could find out how the system works, I can tell the police and the whole filthy business could be raided and shut down.”

“They wouldn’t take any notice,” she almost sneered.

“They would if I threatened to go public.”

I trained those binoculars on the pub. There were three young men standing outside smoking. If they left to go to Natasha’s, I would know that The Eskdale was in some way linked to her. The pub connection seemed logical.

To my surprise and disappointment the three men threw down their cigarette ends and went back inside. I watched the corner. It was going up for eight. There was no-one. I put the heavy glasses down and looked at the pink blinds of Natasha’s flat. Occasionally a shadow passed across them. Mrs Shepherd, my hostess, had crept to my elbow with a steaming mug. I asked her if she thought the pub was the key but she did not know, never having had cause to frequent it.

“We never touched a drop, not even at Hogmanay!”

As she left the room I turned back and noticed immediately that something had changed in the window. A lamp had been turned on. I raised the binoculars and scanned the streets to my left. Within a few minutes I was rewarded. A lone dark figure crossed the road, hesitated on the corner then continued up to the security door. I watched a thin finger ring the bell but could not see the lips of the creature it belonged to because the coat hood was pulled over its head. A while later after her departure, for it turned out to be a very pale woman of about twenty, another hooded figure approached from the same quarter. This time I saw the mouth open once and close

by the intercom grill before the client slipped inside. If only I was a lip-reader, or knew one! It had to be a very short password, perhaps a number or a colour...Now I saw something else I had not noticed on the previous watch because I had been so preoccupied with the front door. The lamp had gone out.

And sure enough, a few minutes after the departure of client number two, the lamp went back on again. I had cracked one half of the riddle but could see no way to crack the second. One by one, in dribs and drabs, only seldom in pairs, they came and went, pausing occasionally on the corner to double-check that the lamp was on. I thanked Mrs Shepherd at ten, slipped out the back way past the garages and walked back to my car.

*

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested that I might have a very tasty lead on our friend Giles Butterworth?” I asked Graham the next morning.

“A tasty lead? You make him sound like a dog.”

“Can I talk to you in total confidence?”

“You can, but I doubt if it would do much good. Butterworth is far too clever to leave big muddy footprints. And if it’s just hearsay, forget it.”

“It is hearsay at the moment. He’s blackmailing Sheila Skidmore - over a sexual indiscretion.”

“You’re joking! He’s a millionaire! He wouldn’t risk it.”

“Not for money. For power. She’s his majority of one. That’s why they’re so alarmed about the Eskdale campaign. She wants to resign but she can’t because he’d tell Barry Skidmore she’s been a naughty girl with his brother Simon.”

“Who says?”

“She says. She told me last night. I know we can’t print it but I just thought you might be interested in knowing.”

I left him in his office for it all to sink in. I knew he hated Butterworth and would be tempted. I was finishing off a fascinating article about the fact that motorists had actually been observed putting money into parking machines, unaware that after 3p.m. on Saturdays - what a generous council we were blessed with - parking was free, when my phone rang. It was Graham again.

“Blackmail? Is *that* your lead?”

“No. Northfield. I think the new build there was called something junk-wordy...Northfield Crescent?”

“No. Northfield *Mews*. What about it?”

“Butterworth made money on it, so my source claims. On the conveyancing.”

“And how do you propose to prove it?”

“I don’t know Graham. Any ideas?”

He did not answer for a while and I thought he had rung off.

“You could read the minutes. The council minutes. If he was involved he should have declared an interest. If he hasn’t and you can prove he cashed in, he’s in trouble. He’ll go to jail. But I’m certain he must have done. He’s certainly not that stupid. You’ll be wasting your time. Go and find another tree to bark up.”

I almost took his advice but in the end curiosity won the day. The Council website was only able to provide minutes of meetings for the past twelve months. I needed to look back further to the time when the decision to sell of the land was taken. I sent off an enquiry by email outlining

what I wanted, and felt very obliged to the official when within a half-hour I was scrolling through the very proceedings of that council meeting from over three years previous. The land - just over an acre of it - had been sold to Dawkins the builder for six hundred thousand pounds. There was no mention of a rival bid and I wondered what sweeteners had been offered under the table, sweeteners which I would never be able to trace. But I wasn't interested in them. I held my breath as I expected at any second to see a footnote declaring Giles Butterworth's interest in the matter. If he had done the conveyancing on behalf of the *council*, it would of course have to be noted. But there was nothing. I emailed my friendly contact again with the request - and I had the right to know under the Public Information Act - which firm of solicitors had acted on behalf of Earlstone Urban District Council in the matter. Naturally, it turned out *not* to be Butterworth, Butterworth and Crouch but a firm well enough removed from our borough - in Rochdale in fact - so as not to raise suspicions that anything had been any less than well above board. The cynic in me concluded that by a circuitous, unfathomable route, certain local worthies had friends in that Lancashire town. I decided that one of those friends must have been a friend of Butterworth's. However, as Graham had wearily said, he would have left no muddy footsteps. I closed down my laptop and went home despondently to my empty house.

The next day, after attending to a few routine matters, I drove out to have a look at Northfield Mews. The name was a little ironic as there was hardly enough room there to swing a fat cat. It measured across, I reckoned, the total width of three decent houses. It was scandalous that those starter homes (thirty all told - generating a tidy profit for Dawkins) confronting each other across a road barely wide enough for two vehicles, should have been so crammed in; and amazing that anyone would wish to live in one. The back gardens were tiny - just about big enough for a barbecue. Without a front garden and opening straight onto the pavement, in disingenuous imitation of a traditional terrace, their habitants could almost lean out of their bedroom windows to shake hands with each other. I could imagine how uninhabitable they would quickly become in the event of one or two anti-social couples moving in. Five or six FOR SALE notices seemed to confirm that possibility had either materialised or dawned on some of the residents.

This street now occupied an area which had been one of my haunts in childhood, and upon my return after leaving Southampton, I had been rather saddened to see it disappearing under houses, particularly in view of the amount of brown land there was in the town centre which should have been built on. It lay on one of two routes between Fairleigh and Earlstone and whenever I had taken it as a more tortuous, though less busy, way to work, if I was running a little late, I was amazed to see how quickly the "mini-estate" was taking shape.

In my childhood we had picked blackberries there. By nimble footwork we were able to penetrate quite a good way in before being confronted with an impassable barrier of brambles. It was worth risking our tender skins on those thorns as the blackberries further in were huge. But beyond all reach, at the very back of the land was a high brick wall, marking the boundary of a large house which stood with its back turned on Earlstone. The house had been the post-war doctor's surgery of Northfield and Fairleigh until a new clinic had replaced it. In my youngest days it had become a dentist's and had quite unpleasant connotations for me as a site of anxiety and pain.

I got out of my car and looked along the Northfield Road. To my right, stretching for about half-a-mile were two ranks of uniform council houses. To my left, running up to the junction where a right turn led to Fairleigh, was a series of private bungalows and villas which various architects and builders had thrown up without any heed to symmetry. The wasteland had been the firebreak

between the property-owning and the renting classes, a metaphorical gap which Mrs Thatcher's determination to abolish the latter had attempted to close. On the opposite side of the road where I now stood, this apartheid had been achieved by the simple device of a wide path running up to the bridge over the Birmingham to Leicester railway line. I turned now and recalled our dare-devil walks across the narrow wall above the tracks thirty feet below. I shuddered.

The firebreak on the opposite side had now been replaced by this miniature Coronation Street. I could hardly believe that the builder had managed not only to squeeze in all those houses but had also found room at the end for quite a large car park. Areas which appear large to a child, like classrooms and playgrounds, normally shrink in the returning eyes of the adult. This one seemed to have expanded. I walked between the maisonettes up to the parking barrier and ducked underneath. The old wall had gone and had been replaced by an ugly fence with vertical wooden panels overlapping each other. On the right hand side of me stood a row of mature silver birches and I could not understand how they could have achieved such a height in two or three years. To my left, the car park carried on to the rear of the old bungalow which neighboured the development and I realized that the owner had sold half of his land, presumably to Dawkins. I looked up at the tall conifers of the old surgery and noticed how close to the fence the roof and chimney stack were. That was when it hit me. I was standing not where the most formidable brambles had been, but in the old back garden. The birches had belonged to it and now I remembered them. I paced up and then across and calculated the forfeited area to be not much less than one thousand five hundred metres. (This turned out to be equal to over a quarter of an acre.)

I was so convinced I had come upon Butterworth's secret that I stopped in my tracks. I slowly worked out a probable chain of events; the first approach to the owner of the old house; the tempting offer; the drawing up of the contract; the bill for conveyancing; the payment of a nice fat fee into Butterworth's pocket to stuff his fat face on the Canadian Pacific. If one acre of wilderness had gone for six hundred thousand pounds, then this land must have fetched nearly a third of that. Even a one percent fee would have easily bought the Butterworth's air tickets for Canada. Yet a doubt entered my head: as long as the sale of council land was above-board, of what concern to any reasonable person was the private procurement of additional land for car parking? The answer was obvious: the project would never have received planning permission without adequate parking, meaning that it would have been, at best, drastically curtailed and, at worst, unviable. If Butterworth had been involved with the sale, I concluded that there was no way he could have declared it: the motive for the whole transaction would have become transparent, exposing the Tories to allegations of selling council land only to earn money for its leading lights in a subsidiary deal. I could smell a huge rat in the garden beyond the new fence. But could I dig it out? I walked back to my car but then decided I would try to talk to the owner of the bungalow next door before driving around to the front drive of the old house.

I rang the bell and an elderly man eventually struggled to open the door. I told him I was a reporter investigating complaints The Gazette had received from a neighbour opposite about nuisance and noise from the new Mews. He looked at me as if I had two heads. I showed him my ID which he seemed to be considering eating, he held it so close to his pitted nose and stared at it so long. He gave it me back and still said nothing. I pointed at the word REPORTER and asked him very slowly if he would give me an interview.

"Who complained?" he said quite suddenly, looking murderously over my shoulder at the house opposite.

“Oh, I’m not at liberty to say....”

“Well, you can take it from me that they’re no trouble at all. We never hear a thing. The big conifers. The builder planted them. Some people just love COMPLAINING.....”

“That’s very interesting, Mr?”

“Russell, James Russell“.

“Could I possibly do a short interview - just to put the other side of the story?”

He told me to wait for a moment. He came back and opened the door wide. He had had to check with his wife, he said. I followed him down a long hallway past doors with vertical strips of green frosted glass which reminded me immediately of my aunt’s bungalow in the eighties. The anaglypta on the walls was emulsioned pale orange. She sat in the lounge in an armchair which was old and worn out like her, and him and everything else in the place. She had tubes inserted into her nose and was evidently deaf because Mr Russell had to speak loud and deliberately. A *stroke* he mimed in an aside to me. She was surrounded by paper kitchen towel, a soiled piece of which she was clutching tightly, as if it was fine silk. He hobbled out to make some tea and while he was gone I made one-sided conversation with her. There was a strong smell of drains, soaker peas and disinfectant issuing from the kitchen. He came back almost juggling a tray. I took out my notepad and while he told me how considerate the builders had been (*we ‘ardly knew they were there*) I made a few meaningless jottings.

“So, you didn’t object to the plans?”

“OBJECT??”

“You know. To the council.”

“NO-O-O fear. We’ve been a-wanting that wasteland sorted out for ages. Note but trouble...DANDELIONS! All over our lawn and garden, year after year, from the dandelions over there. And brambles pushing through. At one time o’ day you could report a neighbour to the COUNCIL for *DANDELIONS*. And then there were the KIDS causing a bloomin’ nuisance, throwing stuff over the ‘edge and stealing the apples.....Damned SQUIRRELS on the bird table - and we’ve even seen RATS! Best thing that ever ‘appened down ‘ere.”

I got up and had a look through their long window and asked him if the car parking on the other side of his fence bothered him.

“NO-O. Best move we ever made, selling that bit o’ garden. It were too much fo’ me - I’m 77 you know!”

“Ah, so you *sold* it. To Dawkins? You know him? The builder?”

“I KNOW who DAWKINS is! His dad built this bungalow! Ne’r, it weren’t ote to do wi’ *DAWKINS*. It were ‘im, ‘im at the back. The architect he called himself.”

“What in the old house?”

“Yes, the old surgery. Could do wi’ ‘im back, old Doctor Balfe. We kern’t understand what these Asian chaps are saying....”

“So he just came round out of the blue and made you an offer?”

“Ar, three years ago last Christmas. A GODSEND! Best PRESENT we could ‘ave ‘ad! It meant we could fly out in the spring to New Zealand to visit our daughter Millicent- *same year as Margaret had her stroke* - *MILlicent’S* a NURSE...(I’M JUST TELLING ‘IM OUR MILLIE’S A NURSE, MILDRED)... ‘Ere, drink yer tea afore it guz cold.”

He sank back in his chair, exhausted. Mildred stared at me and whispered *Paul??*

He giggled. “NO-O-O! *She thinks your Paul, Millie’s husband! (NO, MILDRED! THIS IS A REPORTER)*”

“So. Let me get this right. The architect bought it from you, then sold it to Dawkins?”

“Yes, he were a nice chap. Said he’d do all the legal work, register it and all, and it wouldn’t cost us a penny.”

“Look, I’m thinking of selling a bit of my garden to the chap behind me. Can I be cheeky? Do you mind telling me how much he paid you for it?”

“Ah, well, that’s quite a tale and I’d to hev mi wits about me! There are so many SWINDLERS out there! He offered a thousand for a start and I turned ’im down FLAT. So we agreed we’d call in an estate agent to settle it. HE told me not to take a penny less then fifteen hundred, so we ended up doin’ alright out of it. And we were glad to hev SHUT of it! Too much for me now.”

“Which estate agent?”

He shook his head. I gave him my card and asked him to phone me if and when he could remember the name. I looked at the ugly fence and measured it with my eye. About eighteen, call it twenty metres. I left him in the hall and reminded him to call me. “I might be able to get you an even better deal, Mr Russell. If you remember, try to look that name up.”

I went back to the car park just to make sure, I paced it out, up and across: 18x20 metres, 360 square metres. I got back in my car and scribbled out the calculation: one acre had earned the council £600 000. One acre was about 5 000m², which gave the price of a metre square as £1 20p. Multiplying that by Russell’s 360 gave £4 320. Some estate agent! Probably a friend of a friend of a friend, or the relative of a friend, or the friend of a relative. Simmering with indignation, I drove to the junction, turned right then right again to stop outside the gated drive of the house which was - *of course!* - called Birchfield. On the gate pillar was a brass plate which read COLIN PAILTON, ARCHITECT. At the top of the drive were a black Porsche and a black Audi. I heard my mother say *the more you’ve got, the more you want*. I was not in the right frame of mind to ask for an interview, besides which I had no idea what questions to ask Mr Pailton. So I drove back to the office.

What were the odds that Pailton was a member of The Earlstone Conservative Association and an ally of Butterworth? But how on earth could I prove that they had colluded, not only to cheat the Russells out of nearly three thousand pounds but to make a packet out of Northfield Mews? And the conviction grew that the asking price for the Birchfield and the re-sold Russell gardens must have been higher per square metre than the wasteland, in view of the fact that Dawkins had had no option but to buy it. There just had to be a connection - familial, political or social - between the two men. I phoned Geoffrey Langham, my ex-Labour councillor, but he could not recall ever meeting a Mr Pailton and could offer no help. I dared to ask Graham Blower but he could only shrug. He told me to look on the news data-base but there was only one uninteresting reference regarding his election to the committee of a charity. I had no idea of what he looked like and no definite idea of his age - although it was only reasonable to assume that he was in his middle years, a man of substance and experience. I thought of Jim, our photographer. He had both a phenomenal memory and a phenomenal collection of photographs. He had worked at The Gazette even longer than Mildred on the front desk. I emailed him.

Can you place one Colin Pailton for me, an architect, of Birchfield, the old doctor’s surgery in Lucas Avenue?

A short while later, he hung his genial face around my door and invited me to come up at one o’ clock and bring my sandwiches.

The premises which The Gazette now occupied in Castle Street were not new. Far from it. They had begun life as a large family residence at about the time of Queen Victoria's jubilee. Before the first war it had become The New Inn, then a book shop until well into the sixties, then an Italian restaurant before being abandoned to dereliction when fast-food had seduced the Earlstone palette, and finally, since the late nineties, the offices of The Earlstone Gazette. Jim had requested and had been allocated a small room at the top of the venerable building, a room which looked out on the pedestrianised street below. It was the former bedroom of the Victorian housekeeper, he began telling me again as soon as I sat down. I had been up there only twice before, and twice before he had mentioned her.

"I'm sure she haunts it. I come back in sometimes and I could swear my desk is different. But whenever I try to catch her out, by making pencil marks on the table by things, or running the camera, she knows. Then I forget to do it and she starts again.I can tell you think I'm fucking mad."

"I think we all are, Jim."

"Too true.....Now you wanted to get the lowdown on one Colin Pailton, architect of this borough."

He opened a file on his Desktop and clicked on EDIT, then on FIND. He typed in the name and selected OK. Immediately the name appeared highlighted, followed by three reference numbers. ND3782567 ND3870098 D2311245

"Ahah!" he exclaimed. "Very promising. We've got one digital and two non-digital. Let's look at the Jpeg first."

He scribbled down the numbers then opened another file, typed in the last number of the three and instantly a photograph of eight men and two women appeared and, at their midst, towering above everybody save one, looking jolly pleased with himself, was the rubbery face of our MP, David Trehearne. Underneath, the legend read *Adoption/David Trehearne 04/09/96*. The names from left to right identified Pailton as the tall, debonair man with very good teeth standing next to that nuclear sub-mariner who was destined to get elected the following year by a whisker. They were shaking hands.

"This was the Tory committee at the time," remarked Jim, as he finished his yoghurt. "I remember him now, Pailton. Very quiet guy, shy almost. Backroom type of man, never a candidate type. He'd have been cut to shreds. Ah, look. *Cynthia Pailton* - her on the end, his wife. Quite a looker - I'm surprised I forgot her."

In the second row behind her was the much slimmer version of a man I had not been looking for and whom I hardly recognised.

"Butterworth!" I exclaimed. "With some of his *own* hair!"

"Recognize her on the left?"

He was pointing to the gaunt figure who even towered above Trehearne, a grey woman staring murderously at the camera.

"That's the nutty woman who came striding past the police station that morning when Peveley threw the eggs. Mary Armstrong, the younger sister of our beloved employer Arthur Cox, widow of this parish since two thousand. Her husband owned The Watling Lodge. You eaten there? Overpriced, underspiced and overrated."

"What do you know about Cynthia?" I hardly dared ask.

"Pretty lady? I've got to be honest, nothing. Like I said *he* was very private. I wouldn't be surprised if they're out of the loop completely now. If you're lucky, one of the other two snaps will be a wedding photo - then you'll see who she was before she married."

He went to one of four tall filing cabinets. He checked the first reference number and pulled out a long drawer. He thumbed through the hanging files until he found the one he wanted. He searched through, found the photograph in question and let out a whinny of surprise.

“Well I never! Would you Adam and Eve it!”

“What?”

It was a picture of a charity event. A very youthful, athletic Pailton in a sports vest was handing over a rather large cheque to a grateful lady in the foreground. In the background were a muddle of others laughing and applauding, amongst them the delightful Cynthia.

“What can’t you Adam and Eve?” I asked, bewildered.

He pointed with his fingernail to a solemn face in the darkest corner on the left. I still could not cotton on.

“No?” he said. “It’s *him* without glasses.”

“WHO?”

“Him upstairs. His Nibs. Our Graham!”

I stared. It really was. I was still looking at it, trying to locate a youthful Giles Butterworth when he thrust the other photo in front of me. It *was* a wedding photo. The maiden name of the amazingly pretty bride was Cynthia Allcoat *not* Butterworth. My hopes of proving a dire family conspiracy sank. On my way back down I went into Graham’s office, driven by some mischievous impulse, I asked him again if he was absolutely sure he had never heard of Colin and Cynthia Pailton. This time he became uncharacteristically impatient, tetchy even. Did I really expect him to remember every wig - big or little - in a town so full of momentous, earth-shattering events? He told me again to consult Jim.

Why was he lying?

* * * * *

I had an idea. I typed in **Earlstone Conservative Association** and up came their website. I clicked on **accounts** and then on **contributions**. Gifts above £300 were listed and the biggest was for five thousand from a woman called Felicia Hopwood. I clicked on **previous** and saw that she had given the same amount three years running, but not the year prior to the Mews being built. I noted the name, went back to Jim but drew a blank. I phoned Geoffrey Langham.

“Felicia ? What sort of a name is that?”

“I’m grasping at straws, Mr Langham. I’m looking for a connection to Harry Dawkins the builder.”

“Well ‘Opwood *is* family. Harry’s daughter married an ‘Opwood but she weren’t called Felicia. Never in this world.”

“ He has a son-in-law called *Hopwood*? Are you sure?”

“Cause I’m sure! *Old* ‘Opwood were a tiler and roofer. Used to do work with Dawkins. Did a mate of me dad’s roof once. They lived near Naunton - on The Long Furrow - I duln’t know if they still do.”

I went onto the Naunton electoral roll typed in Hopwood and The Long Furrow. There were four of them eligible to vote: Terry, Andrea, Simon - and *Felicia*. Bingo! Dawkins had channelled a grateful contribution to his mates through his granddaughter. The blood in my ears sang.

But who was Cynthia Allcoat?

* * * * *

Dear Demi,

I'm wondering something. I'm wondering why you told me about drugs being on your estate again, as if you wanted me to do something. But now you won't help me any more with Natasha's flat. Why? If you can help with that password, I can get Natasha - and Ajay? - closed down.

Andy

Dear Eleanor,

*I hope there is some improvement in your mum. I know you're very busy but if you can find time to answer this email or just to text me you're OK I'd be really pleased. I **am** missing you. Hope you're missing me,*

Andy x

* * * * *

I copied the photo of a youthful Graham Blower and left it on his desk, but then had second thoughts and retrieved it. It had occurred to me that Blower's antipathy towards Butterworth might not just be an ideological one, but personal. There could of course be nothing sinister in the fact that he was raising money for a charity which Pailton supported. But it did not ring true. I could clearly remember my own father - who was no communist - railing against fundraising when taxes went to pay for Trident missiles: *why don't we have a flag-day for bloody nuclear weapons!?* was one of his favourite slogans. Was a young, radical Graham Blower not likely to be of similar mind? And he *had* lied about knowing Pailton; unless he had genuinely not known him by name, only by sight - or had just plain forgotten him. Colin Pailton - not a very memorable name. Whatever the case, I came to the decision to keep him in the dark about my enquiries. I asked Jim not to mention my digging and gave the excuse that Graham wanted to retire quietly. He agreed.

I did owe a huge amount to Graham, but I had always harboured a doubt, a reservation about him. Now I knew what it was. I doubted his sincerity. Had he truly been a stalwart of the Left? Perhaps he had been moving steadily towards the Centre in his middle years. In the light of that, his dislike of people like Butterworth and Sheila Skidmore seemed gratuitous, even petty.

I could not rest. In the end I emailed William Peveley.

I hope you are well, and your wife fully recovered.

I am certain that I can rely on your discretion and understanding in the following matters.

Firstly, some good news. There may well be an opportunity to test the appeal of our new party in

Westfield earlier than you think (I agree about CNE and suggest NE - New Earlstone - by the way). Keep this strictly to yourself, but Sheila Skidmore is likely to resign in the not too distant future.

Secondly, Graham Blower confided in me that you and he were, shall I say, radicals in your twenties. However, an old photograph I have seen appears to contradict that. It seems to suggest that he may have had links with the Tories. I am confused!

I am on the verge of putting that bomb we mentioned under Earlstone and I need to know who my true allies are.

PS If you or your wife can shed light on the origins or history of one Cynthia Pailton nee Allcoat I would be very grateful. She married the architect Colin Pailton in 1973. You might have taught their kids because they live on the edge of Fairleigh in Lucas Avenue. Cynthia may be the key.

Dear Andy,

Mum has only weeks or months to live at best. We are devastated. Sorry I didn't reply. I didn't know what to say, and still don't. I do miss you but I'm not sure I miss you as much as I should. I can't really tell with everything else I'm trying to cope with. I would understand if you met someone else.

Eleanor x

That Saturday, the first one in February, I nearly drove down to see her but in the end, reading between the lines, decided she did not wish me to. There was a notable absence of an invitation. I had an uneasy relationship with her dad. I would not be welcome at such a time. I did think quite often of Lydia Fuller. She intrigued me. I could not help but recall that delicious tingle in my spine when she sat there scribbling. Was that memory an act of disloyalty to Eleanor? I could not really decide; but even it was, for all I knew Lydia was gay! Anyway, such an attractive person was bound to be attached. She had never emailed me and the very last thing I wanted *then* was further complication in my life.

* * * * *

Mildred shouted me back from the stairs.

“Andy, a Scottish lady’s been trying to get hold of you since this morning. A Mrs Shepherd. Would only speak to you. She said she knew how they were doing it - you would know what she meant.”

I raced up to my office, nearly knocking Paulette Warner over.

“Mrs Shepherd? Andy Clayfield.”

“I feel sure they’re using the road sign Windermere Drive in some way. They always slow down or stop there for a second before they go up. I thought I was imagining things, then yesterday morning on my way to the shop I had a look. There was a Smiley sticker over the D. This morning there was a fresh one over the R. I bet you this afternoon somebody will put a fresh one

on another letter. Do you think I'm mad?"

"Can I come round?"

"You know you can. Come round the back before it gets dark. You can stay for your tea."

"Graham, I need to know who your contact is at the police station."

"Why?"

"I'm onto a brilliant story. I can't tell you how....it's going to be absolutely MEGA..."

He told me to sit down and take a deep breath. I tapped my watch and told him I had to get going. I told him rapidly what was going on. He frowned.

"Andy this could get somebody killed if we claim credit for a tip-off. Ajay might just lash out like last time at somebody he suspects. If he escapes the net -"

"Graham, OK, OK let's figure out how we report it later. If we don't tell the police we're accessories -"

"Just phone Leicester 2222222 - or Crimestoppers -"

"That's BULLSHIT, Graham! Shall I just go out to Fairleigh and cover the fucking W.I.? What's got into you? Who are you protecting?"

"Protecting? What nonsense! How dare you?"

"OK, I'm sorry -"

"Do you think there's another Simon Brierley master-minding the whole drugs scene? You do, don't you? You think I'm his man..."

"I don't! Look, just give me the name of the officer and I'll phone him."

"It's a she!"

He trembled, hesitated, snatched up the phone then slammed it back down.

"Look, go to your old lady and check it out. You could make me look really stupid if you're wrong."

"I'm right!"

"Bring me some proof, *then* I'll phone. Tomorrow."

I dashed back to my office, grabbed my camera and took off. The light was thickening when I arrived on the estate. I parked in front of her garage and slipped down the darkening alley behind the gardens and in through her back gate.

"You're five minutes too late!" she exclaimed. "She just did it!"

"Did what?"

She described how a "slip of a girl" had been to the road sign and stuck something to it.

"She looks as if butter would'na melt in her sweet mouth!"

I thought immediately of *angelic-looking Tania Dyer*, as Mr Peveley had described her. Mrs Shepherd made me something on toast and I tried to work out what to do. I could not use the camera with a flash. I could not bring Blower proof. My only hope was Demi.

Later, I watched from the upstairs window and watched long enough to confirm that clients were indeed often pausing as they went past the road sign. I asked Mrs Shepherd if she had a hat or a beret with which I could disguise myself and she produced a blue pom-pom hat which had belonged to her husband, a life-long Leicester City fan. I slipped out the back again and worked my way around to look as if I was heading to The Eskdale. As I drew near to the corner, walking briskly, with a purpose, I stole a look at the road sign and saw that a Smiley was stuck in one of the Vs of the W. I carried on walking and made for the pub. I went straight into the GENTS, sat in the cubicle and removed the hat.

I could not possibly go knocking on Demi's door. I would have to email her and hope. I toyed

with the idea of going to the flats and giving the password or rather “pass-letter” to see if it would open sesame. Dare I bluff it out up there and buy something? Absurd! Did I look like a drug-user? And if I only caused the door to open and then did not go up, what conclusion might they draw? As I left the pub there were two boys on skateboards. One saw me and stopped.

“Hallo!” he shouted. “Mr Reporter!”

Now I stopped. What should I do? Not to acknowledge him would be suspicious.

“Hi! You were in the park that day, weren’t you? I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Clive. You on your way to see Demi?”

“No. I’ve just been talking to a few people in the pub about the allotment idea. You still keen?”

“Me? I hate gardening! I only asked because it wouldn’t be such a good idea to go round. Ali’s been on the piss again. Ali’s her mum?”

I hurried off, circled round and returned to Mrs Shepherd’s to give her the hat back. I felt pretty down. Everything seemed so hopeless.

Demi,

I was on your estate tonight figuring out how Natasha Dyer sells her drugs. I bumped into a young friend of yours who said your mum had been drinking. I hope you’re OK. If you’re not coping, you must tell someone. It isn’t fair to you - you have yourself and your own future to take care of.

Demi, please help to shut down Natasha Dyer, no-one will dream it was you. I walked past the road sign and saw a smiley by the W. This is how they’re working it, aren’t they? Just a YES will do.

I sent it and waited. And waited. In the end I went out into my kitchen and boiled a kettle. As the frantic bubbling subsided I heard the refined computer voice announce that I had an email. I rushed back and saw Demi’s email address. I clicked on it and read *Yes. What future?*

I printed our messages out and went to bed.

I slid the copies under Graham’s nose and sat down. He read.

“Is Demi a child?”

“You really don’t recall the name? She was in my original article in November. *And she was on your whistleblower’s list. I thought that’s why you let me see it.*”

“How is she involved?”

“She’s been fetching her mother’s boyfriend’s gear from the flat. Like you used to fetch a loaf of bread, or fish and chips when you were a kid. Times have changed Graham.”

“So, if you blow the gaff, who knows? She might be hurt. Somebody will carry the can.

Remember Joginder?”

“Graham. You asked for proof. Can I have the emails back?”

He pushed them over to me. I stood up and pushed them into his shredder. We listened to the whine and never took our eyes from each other. I sat down again.

“If you don’t tell the police and if you don’t go with this I’m going to Arthur Cox with it.”

“Cox??”

“Yes, to see if he would rather see it in the Mercury. Because one way or the other this is going

to come out. Do you really bother about people being hurt? How seriously do you expect me to take you, Graham? How many people get hurt through being addicts? How many people are robbed *by* addicts to fund their habits?"

He made a few notes on his jotter and put down his pencil.

"It ought to be legalised." he muttered.

"Get real. It isn't going to happen."

"How is this girl in the flat getting her supplies?"

"She goes off in her car and comes back with cases. She must meet somebody somewhere. Maybe even Ajay."

"Probably not. Probably just a foot soldier, unless he's a chancer. If you can pinpoint the rendezvous and get his car number *then* we can go to the police. *Then* there's a chance to get to Ajay."

Mrs Shepherd told me when I phoned later to ask, that Natasha usually went off in the early afternoon to get stocked up every three or four days. She was due to go the next day.

* * * * *

I sat parked on the road outside The Eskdale with Jim Doyle in the passenger seat. From there we could see the car which Mrs Shepherd had identified as Natasha's - a red Fiesta on the rear car park. We had been there since ten, had solved various crosswords, cryptic and otherwise, had emptied a flask of tea and coffee and munched biscuits and sweets until my gums were sore. I had listened with politeness and patience to countless anecdotes of the olden days, but was now ready to begin screaming if Jim - obviously trying to find the right words and the punch line - should begin another. Then he nudged me instead. A slim girl with blonde hair had emerged from the back of the flats and was carrying two red hold-alls to the car. I looked at my watch while Jim snapped her. It was ten to two. She looked neither right nor left which I took as a clear sign she did not suspect any surveillance. It was vital not to lose her and I was nervous. If necessary I would jump red lights and take my chance. I hardly dare breathe as she drove down the service road and turned left to be in front of us. I began to follow. At the first light I had to go through on amber.

"Get up closer!" growled Jim. "Here."

He passed me my baseball cap and donned his own. His theory was that if she glanced at us in her mirror she would just think we were a pair of dickheads who fancied their chances. As soon as we were passing the woods - the very same Sheila Skidmore could see from her great window - we fell back. A lorry stuck its bonnet in our boot but the country road was bendy and whenever he looked ready to overtake and plonk himself between me and the girl I touched the accelerator. The motorway was approaching. I was so relieved when she indicated to take that exit from the traffic island. It would be easy to keep her in sight without alerting her to our continued presence. The motorway was fairly busy and she stayed more or less in the slow lane. I was dreading the approach of the end because there were so many lighted junctions near The Boundary shopping mall to negotiate. I got right on her tail at the roundabout. We had removed our caps and Jim slid down in his seat.

"What's she doing?" he hissed.

"There's loads coming off the M1. I *know* I'm going to lose her."

"Just go when she goes."

She went and I followed, causing a car to brake. Instead of carrying on to Leicester, from the

roundabout she took the M1 southbound exit and I cheered. Jim looked over the dash and smiled up at me. He began to take more photos and within a few minutes she was pulling in at the services. As she left the car she obviously had no idea she had been followed. We were a few yards behind her as she walked into the cafeteria and sat down, placing the bulky though clearly lightweight bags on either side of her chair. Were they stuffed with paper money? Jim had a photo record of all the key events up to the present. We sat at an angle to her where she would not notice us. Out of the corner of my eye I watched her take her mobile and send a text. For a minute or so nothing happened. I scanned the area for anyone with similar red bags as it seemed pretty clear some sort of swap was going to take place. Suddenly she picked up her mobile, looked at the display and got to her feet. She began to head for the toilet corridor and we followed as far as we could.

“Shit!” I breathed.

“Don’t panic, Herr Mechanic! Come on. Outside.”

He told me to get the car and drive it up to the entrance. I arrived back just in time to see Natasha emerging with two bags which now pulled her arms down with some new weight. Jim was nowhere to be seen and I cursed him. I watched helplessly as the girl walked calmly back to her car and disappeared from view.

“Bloody old fool!” I yelled at the top of my voice. Then out walked a black girl carrying two red bags and headed to another part of the car park. She stopped at a black Mercedes, the boot of which popped open as soon as she came close. She stowed the bags and clambered into the passenger seat. As the car began to reverse out Jim stood up a couple of ranks away and beckoned me on.

Luckily the motorway traffic was very slow and on the slip-road from the services there was quite a queue. The Merc was edging towards joining the carriageway and we were two vehicles behind. Jim urged me to get past them all. We pulled on our baseball caps again and, when we were papped, Jim gave the V to our quarry and I edged in front of him. As I did, I registered he was Asian. Predictably, as soon as he could, he came past us, glaring. But he could not get far away because of the congestion.

“I bet you all the tea in China he comes off at the Allingworth exit!” said Jim.

“I hope so. If the traffic speeds up we’re knackered in *this* old banger. Did you get photos?”

He patted his camera and smiled. As Allingworth approached, the Merc pulled inside, about six vehicles in front of us. I cut onto the hard shoulder and accelerated. He took the slip road and at the roundabout he was still one car in front as his turn to drive onto the roundabout came.

“We’re not going to lose him now!” said Jim. “I know a short cut. Take the first, not the second exit. We’ll get ahead and wait in the lay-by. I just know he’s going back into the city.”

He directed me off the industrial estate I had turned onto, where, on my own, I would have got totally lost. We pulled in front of a beefburger van on the main Leicester road and I made sure I could see the traffic through my wing mirror. There was a junction at which he would have to turn left if Jim’s intuition was correct. I think he was beginning to have doubts himself when the car actually appeared.

“He’s coming” I said.

“Get rolling now and make sure you get in right behind him.”

Jim whipped off our caps and slid right down in his seat again. As the Merc passed me I pulled out and closed my eyes. The car behind hooted.

“Shit. He’s bound to notice.”

“No. You’re too blatant. Just another arsehole with no road manners!”

The limit was fifty and there were speed cameras. As we reached the edge of the city the limit fell to forty and then to an unstressful thirty. We hung back and the car behind, though close and transmitting frustration, made no attempt to come past. Before the Aylestone Road finished at a busy junction the Merc turned left, skirted the new stadium and drove alongside the canal. I could see his head turning to speak to his companion every so often and I saw her responses. They seemed totally unaware of our presence. But would he suddenly turn off and roar away down a side street? No. After the Narborough Rd junction he turned into a residential avenue of tall, elegant villas. I drove on a few metres past the turn and stopped. Jim leapt out. There was a substantial tree just around the corner behind which he stood to complete his photographic narrative, as the pair closed the boot and disappeared inside a house with their takings. "Well done young man! There's enough here I reckon to hang 'em. I reckon we've earned a pint. If you put your foot down we can be at the Halfway House in fifteen minutes." I rang Graham from the pub and told him we had everything on film apart from the moment of the switch.

"And there should be enough of Ajay's DNA - if it is Ajay - on the other pair of bags to keep him out of circulation for a good while. So will you make that call now please Graham?"

Crocuses were struggling to daub a little colour on the foundations of the tower block. A blackbird was hopping around on the grass as little Tanya came out to press something against a letter on the road sign. Jim clicked his camera as I watched through Mr Shepherd's binoculars. As soon as she moved I could see the Smiley nestled snugly in the V of Avenue. And so could the police officer upstairs in the bedroom.

One by one, on foot or on bikes, a team of five had begun arriving on the estate after six o'clock, three heading for the garage at the back and two teaming up for a game of pool in The Eskdale. Darkness had fallen slowly because it had been such a fine day and it was going up for six before the last red glimmer of sun went out. The street looked an unlikely set for the drama soon to unfold, which would bring almost all the nearby residents out from their cosy hearths. It seemed an age, once the clock had turned seven thirty, before the lamp came on in the window yonder. As soon as it did, I knew the officer upstairs would be sending a text. Almost as that thought crossed my mind I saw a dark figure emerge from nowhere to press the bell and mouth the letter. The door sprang open and instantly more dark shapes sprinted for the door, jostling each other almost to get into the hallway. Jim clicked furiously. I trained the binoculars on the pink blind and saw two slow shadows jerk suddenly in an ecstasy of agitation to be overtaken by an utter confusion of shapes - wriggling, dashing, falling, pitching and rolling - but I could only imagine the din behind the dumb show. We went outside and after a short delay residents came spilling out of the door, just as a black van came screeching and wailing around the corner.

It was only much later, once the three women from the flat had been led out, shouting abuse at their neighbours - a few of whom joined in ironic applause - and once the scientific team had been busy, that boxes of stock were carried out. The shop was shut. And at the very moment when the flat was being raided, the Leicester police were letting themselves into Ajay's property to relieve him of his earnings and other stock items. A meticulous examination of his clothing would find a favourite pair of shoes with minute splashes of blood belonging to Joginder around the lace holes where Ajay had failed to wipe properly.

* * * * *

Dear Andy,

Congratulations, first of all, on a marvellous piece of detective work! This should be promoted as the first step in our campaign - when the time comes - to get you elected in Westfield. You have to be our candidate, Andrew! You would breeze in.

You asked about Graham Blower. Well, I suppose I ought to have been more candid with you from the first, although I never thought for a moment that his politics and character would become an issue. You are right to be wary of him as he could never quite put principle before ambition. In our school days we were such close friends that we chose the same university and the same course, English. We joined the CP and Graham elbowed his way into the post of secretary and then took over the editorship of the monthly news sheet.

After the Prague Spring turned sour in 1968 and Dubcek was deposed by the Russians many of our members resigned but he continued to argue, as I did for a while, that because of the Cold War, the Russians could not but help but be hard-line. If only the US would stop applying the thumb-screws and curtail the Arms Race, then the Soviet Union could become the peace-loving brotherhood it had always wished to be ever since Lenin! (We even excused the paranoia and brutality of Stalin on the grounds of NAZI aggression.)

After those events in Czechoslovakia it slowly dawned on me that the Soviet model of communism was too perverted by Stalin's ghost to be reformable (of course it now inhabits Putin!) and I gradually became estranged from Graham. I called him naïve one day and he retorted that I was the victim of fascist propaganda. We fell out. A pity. We were both Earlstoners and attended the Upper School, ex-Grammar School. We so wanted to change the world. He realises now, I am sure, as I do, that the world is too hard a rock for little people to make much impression on.

Until he became editor of The Gazette he disappeared over my horizon (the last I heard of him after we graduated, he was working as a free-lance journalist and living in Warwick) and I could not believe at first it was the Graham Blower I had known, but then an old mutual friend confirmed it. That such a firebrand would become the editor of an inoffensive provincial newspaper, astonished me. Then I looked at myself in my grey beard and my worn-out slippers! If Graham really did associate himself with Tories and Tory causes as you say, it would only have been in order to gain some advantage. He loathed them so much, you see. Could he possibly have changed his large red spots? No, and I do not think for one moment that he would betray you - I know how highly he thinks of your work - but would he necessarily go with you, now he has aged and mellowed, as far as the barricades? I am unable to gauge his present state of mind, not having had the pleasure of speaking with him (apart from requesting one particular favour) in thirty years, but can only conclude from the way that he has allowed you to put some teeth and a snarl back in the old Argus, that at heart he has not altered. I hope this helps you to decide how much to rely on him.

I was astonished when you mentioned Cynthia Allcoat. I had forgotten her completely. She was a sixth-former with us. Graham and I both went out with her - he after me. He was really smitten with her - she was a delight - and they almost got engaged. You say she is still in Earlstone? She was almost certainly not a parent of Fairleigh High School. I would be inclined to check up how long she has been living at the old surgery.

What else? Ah, yes. Lydia Fuller emailed me about a second meeting. She said she will try again to contact you about writing a constitution, a statement of aims and an election address to put before the membership.

PS Caroline and I like New Earlstone - simple and direct. Good. We can put it to the vote before March.

How long had the Pailtons been living at the old surgery? It was not an academic question. The time of their purchase would have to be consistent with the timing of the redevelopment of the wasteland, if my suspicions were correct.

Mr Peveley's email gave me that and much else to think about. Why had Graham lied about Cynthia Pailton, nee Allcoat? If he had nearly become her fiancé he would have to be suffering from advanced dementia not to recognise her. And his denial about Colin Pailton was now totally unconvincing. Before tackling him, I took Pev's advice and looked on the electoral register. I saw that they had only occupied the property for four years. I put myself in Butterworth's shoes and realised immediately that to purchase Birchfield for himself, as Tory leader, would be impossible. Pailton would be his intermediary and a deal would be struck. Perhaps B owed P a favour, or vice-versa. Was B up to his arm-twisting, blackmailing tricks? Perhaps Cynthia was, after all, an irrelevance. But what *evidence* did I have of their complicity and Butterworth's corruption? It was still all theory.

* * * * *

I took a deep breath.

"Mr Blower, you lied about Colin and Cynthia Pailton."

I kept sliding the photo of the charity event, where he and they were featured, until it was under his nose.

"I've found out that she was your childhood sweetheart."

He said nothing for a while, being fascinated, it seemed, with the sight of the ballpoint pen he had begun to tap on his desk. He finally picked up the photo and seemed genuinely astonished. And something else. Emotional. It occurred to me then that he had been quite unaware of its existence. Finally he put it into his drawer, interlocked his hands and smiled at me, though not with affection. There was a slight tremble in his voice as he spoke.

"So you *are* still in contact with our pompous correspondent. You are rather a sly young man, if truth be told."

"*Me* sly? You taught me everything I know. I note that you don't *deny* the allegation."

"*Allegation?*" He seized the nearest thing to hand - a piece of paper - crumpled it and swept it from the desk. "What *on earth* has my personal history to do with you, with *Peveley*, or anybody else?"

"But why *lie*? Why not just say "*Her? Oh yes. We were at school - even walked out together. Nice girl, married a nice, quiet bloke. Architect, if I recall.*" End of story."

"Because it's my business, and has no bearing on anything you are investigating, whatever you say -"

"It's not my fault if I'm nosy. I caught my nose off you!"

“Cynthia.....has.....NOTHING.....to do.....with.....ANYTHING. And I do not wish to discuss her. It is a private matter.”

“It *was* private, Graham, but not now. These respectable men, Cox et alia, who the townsfolk are supposed to look up to *are crooks*, and for all I know, so is Pailton’s *wife*!And so are you.”
“ME?”

He got up and wrenched his office door open. Someone passed in the corridor. I refused his invitation to leave. He stood motionless and impassive for a full minute and then clicked the door back to. He regained his seat. He smiled again, this time, it seemed, with resignation. He told me to forget it. I would be able to prove nothing against Butterworth.

“I’m not letting go of this bone, Graham. I know you’re retiring but I’m still surprised you want me to drop it - particularly surprised, in view of your politics. *They* cheated an old man and his senile wife out of three thousand pounds, for God’s sake!”

“*In view of my politics!* You are getting too big for your socks, Andrew Clayfield. And do you honestly think you can topple *Butterworth* with wild allegations? And you think you can come in here and put *me* on the spot like some little tart off the Eskdale?”

“Graham. Butterworth is probably a crook. Pailton is definitely a swindler. Dawkins has made illegal political contributions illegally received. Why are you protecting them all?”

He adamantly denied protecting anybody and asked me to tell him everything I had found out. When I mentioned the Pailtons and Birchfield he closed his eyes and held his head in his hands. And that is when it dawned on me. I could scarcely believe it. My editor - this private, reserved, impassive man - might still be in love with his sweetheart from school. Could it be true? Still “smitten” enough to wish her to come to no harm? I got up and left the room without waiting for his reply.

I was picking wearily through a luke-warm Chinese take-away that evening when that posh lady friend in my laptop told me I had an email. It would doubtless be from Eleanor, perhaps telling me it would be her last. But I was wrong.

Dear Andrew,

I think you missed your calling. You should have become a detective, private or otherwise. I’m sorry I lost my rag. Come round tomorrow and I’ll not only feed you but tell you the whole sorry truth. Do you like mussels? Take a taxi. Then we can have a few glasses of my favourite wine and get drunk.

Graham

I stared at the screen. Was there some other Graham I knew? He wanted to *feed* me? On a Saturday? Get drunk? I racked my brains. Had I told him Eleanor had gone? I had told Paulette Warner. It must have got back to him through her.

Dear Graham,

I love mussels. I also look forward to the truth washed down with your fine wine. About twelve thirty?

It was quite a shock to see Graham Blower in jeans and tee-shirt plus apron, wielding a fish-slice at the cooker. I realised I had never seen him in any other setting but his airless office. He sat me down with a glass of lager and said he would cook me his speciality: a sliced potato curry with mussels and coriander. From his CD player came the low strains of what he called a Schubert string quartet, his “favoured form of music” he confessed. That odd word - *favoured* - and a slight slur caused me to suspect he had already begun without me. I looked expectantly to the open door for Mrs Blower to appear at any moment. But she did not and the rooms beyond were silent. As he was slicing the onion he told me how he had lived in Stapleford, this little village on the canal, for twenty years; what a piece of good fortune it had been to land the editor’s job at The Gazette so close to home; how he would be so sad to leave it.

“But I thought you were only too happy to retire?” I ventured. He turned and looked.

“No. Not the bloody *job!* The house.”

The music took over for a while. I expected him to carry on and tell me that they were moving to the coast, somewhere old-fashioned, but he carried on chopping and humming.

“So has Mrs Blower gone shopping?”

“Gone, yes; shopping no - at least I assume not. She hates shopping.”

But he had told me that his wife’s health was a factor in his decision to retire early. Had I heard him correctly? I was too polite to repeat the question. But then the reporter in me told me *not* to mind my own business.

“I’m sorry Graham. Are you telling me that Mrs Blower has gone....and left you??”

“Drink your lager.”

He stood me another stubby bottle on the table and finished off his own with a flourish.

“A little bird told me that you recently joined the club too. The *deserted men club*. Prost!”

“I wouldn’t call Paulette a *little* bird, Graham. Anyway, Eleanor is looking after her mother who’s terminally ill. When it’s all settled she’ll come back.”

He raised his eyebrows then beckoned.

“Come and see.”

I stood up and watched him add sliced potatoes to the frying onion, tumeric, chilis and garlic. He put on the lid and said they had to soften and brown for about ten minutes. I told him I had no idea he was a cook.

“Colleagues are a bit like icebergs,” he said. “We only see ten per cent at most of them. You have your set ideas about me, and me about you.... Lorraine cleared off last November. Nobody on the *precious* Earlstone Gazette knows. Why should they? I trust you won’t tell anybody.”

I was left speechless. He almost threw the black mussels into a large pan and lit a huge jet of gas beneath them. He smiled at the pan.

“I never had a son, Andy. Two daughters who didn’t waste much time in moving quite a way away. She’s staying with one of them till everything’s done and dusted, as they say. I *hope* I’ve been a bit like a father to you. I knew *of* your dad slightly. He was in CND in the eighties.

Treasurer, if I remember. I kept an eye on him and the rest from a safe distance.Now when the steam starts to come out, you know they’re done. Look they’re open. Poor little devils. If they had had any consciousness, would they have ever dreamt they would finish up in a little village in Central England in my bloody saucepan? Who knows what will happen to *us?*”

He brought the pan over to the table and strained the juice into a bowl. He plonked the colander under my nose and told me to start shelling the yellow beasts once they were cool enough. He whisked the juice away and added it to the frying pan, sending up a sizzle and a billow of steam. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes with evident pleasure.

“They only have a brain when they swim. Once they’ve settled, they swallow it. A veggy acquaintance of ours eats them on that brainless basis.....The taters will thicken it all up. So you have to turn it down to a bare simmer. You add the mussels, lemon juice and the coriander at the end. But before that the secret ingredient”

“What?”

“Peas! It’s a hot, sweet and sour.”

“What about the truth you promised? When does that go in?”

“Patience!”

The food was delicious and the wine - I am no expert - managed to be dry and fruity at the same time. He urged me to drink more, saying with a wink it was only fourteen per cent. I admit it made me dizzy but I was secretly pleased he was getting more and more talkative. He issued us with sliced white bread.

“You know” he said “It’s the ideal thing for mopping up a curry - the Asians will tell you that. Useless for anything else. Forget naan bread. Bloody cardboard.....Now, let me tell you my story.Sometimes we take decisions without being aware we have until much later. Yet here we are, trying to report on other people. It’s absurd. We can’t even be sure about what **we** think. I took the unconscious decision many years ago to be the dismayed and unrequited lover. *I did* get married but it wasn’t an unqualified success. It was unfair of me to inflict myself on Lorraine, looking back. But I was all set to go into my old age with her. Don’t get me wrong - I wasn’t cruel or cold. We had a lot of things in common and I was fond of her. But I was a bit like a car that never gets out of third gear. Do you see what I mean? The girls seemed to sense it. They thought I was insincere. Lorraine just told them that was how I was made.”

“Graham, you don’t have to tell me such personal stuff. I’m embarrassed. Can’t you just tell me about the Pailtons and Butterworth?”

“But it’s relevant! The fact was - and I never realised how much until last spring - I had never gotten over Cynthia. I think the fates conspired to prove that to me.”

He mopped up the last of the curry sauce and sat back to relish the final mouthful. I did feel embarrassed in the company of this version of Graham Blower I had never seen. I imagined how he would be on Monday - shame-faced as the memories of his indiscretions came back to taunt and haunt him, and only too eager to see me make a rapid exit from his office.

“What fates?” I asked flatly.

“Out of a clear blue sky - literally - it was a beautiful day - in Naunton of all bloody places - she crosses my path again after twenty or so years - nearly sends me flying. Romantic? No. She was coming out of Boots. She had put some weight on and had wrinkled up a bit - but so what? Her eyes were just the same - clever and mischievous. My heart nearly stopped. And I realised then, I suppose, how I still felt. We had a cup of coffee, reminisced and swapped mobile numbers. I couldn’t get her out of my thoughts and then one day she texted me. Did I fancy a drink for old times sake? So we made up our alibis and met up out at Watery Cross, at The Pheasant, the first of many meetings. A friend of Lorraine told her she’d seen us and I confessed all. End of marriage. End of affair as well, unfortunately. She decided to stay with her boring architect. So, Yours Truly has fallen between two stools, as they say. Cheers.”

It seemed a bit grubby to raise the issue of Birchfield and as I tried to find a way of splicing it into the conversation, he began to stare at me with an intensity I had never seen in him.

“I’m telling you, Andrew, I’m not going to let you hurt her. If you hurt Pailton, you hurt her.” He paused, slowly shook his head, then said that God was laughing at him. I asked him why.

“Because of all the bones you could have dug up belonging to bloody Butterworth - and I have no doubt there are plenty - you had to dig up that one! It began to dawn on me before Christmas that if anybody could get at Butterworth it would be you. Then you got all wrapped up in that stupid Eskdale idea and upset people - people who’ve been breathing down my neck ever since. If you’d stayed with the Mead project and started digging like you said you would - and kept your cards closer to your chest - then you could have picked up a trail to Butterworth there. I’m sure he is mixed up somehow with The Mead and The Gazette’s sudden decision to move away from the road near the bus station.”

“OK, But what I don’t understand is this, Graham. Why Butterworth? Don’t tell me Cox, Skidmore and a load of others aren’t getting their snouts in the trough as well! And even if I had dug something up, Cox would never have let you print it.”

“I would have slipped it to the Mercury.”

“But why *Butterworth*? Why is it so personal?”

He filled our glasses and began the story he had asked me round in order to tell.

“When Cynthia changed her mind about our engagement in 1966 I was heartbroken. She said it was because she didn’t want to commit herself at such a tender age. She was seventeen and we were soon off to university. She said we would know after we had graduated whether we were meant to be.....an *item* as you all say these days. But I knew there had to be more to it than that. Her dad made it pretty clear he disapproved of me. He was a solicitor, my parents were nobodies. Family background mattered more in those days. And sons and daughters were more obedient. Apart from Mods and Rockers knocking chunks out of each other on Elmcroft Park, the permissive sixties passed old Earlstone by. Anyway, we drifted apart, but I never got her out of my system. Then, after university I got involved with the local theatre project - drama was always a hobby of mine - I’ve written plays you know and even had one on Radio 4 years ago. Anyway, who should be involved in the theatre but Cynthia and Colin. And I met Lorraine there too. We became an occasional foursome and I got involved with their other causes - one of which was the charity event you found the photo of. It had entirely slipped my mind. We had done a sponsored bike-ride for mentally handicapped children - Colin’s nephew had some disability, and -” .

“Yes, but where does Butterworth figure in all this?”

“Patience. I’m about to tell you. I knew Butterworth vaguely at school. He was in the third year sixth. It just so happened that in 1966 there was a mock election at school to coincide with the General Election and he was the Conservative candidate. I worked for the Labour candidate, a lad called William Peveley. Yes, the very *same*. I got to know what a nasty piece of work Butterworth was, and he was furious when Pev got elected, shortly followed by Harold Wilson again. He called us a pair of commies. I laughed in his fat face, not knowing he was a cousin of Cynthia’s.”

“Aha! I just *knew* there had to be a family connection!”

“I only found out they were related when he turned up at the annual dinner of that charity. He sidled up to me at the bar and said he could not believe I - such a left-wing extremist - would be involved with fund-raising. The snide bastard made it pretty obvious what he was thinking. He looked across at Cynthia and said “Nothing to do with your old flame I suppose?” What could I say?”

“How do *I* know what you could say?”

“I just said something about us all *mellowing*. Which was a lie. And I told him that my involvement had nothing to do with Cynthia. Which was also a lie. I had already asked her to

break off with Colin and come back to me. To no avail. He had money and prospects. Cynthia had above all other things her head screwed on when it came to money. I was a struggling freelance and sometime researcher for Paul Foot who did political lecture tours in the seventies and eighties. In the end, when I wouldn't take NO for an answer, she threatened to tell Lorraine. Then they moved to Warwickshire and got married. End of story. Until last year."

"So that's it? You hate Butterworth because he made a snide remark about your ex-girlfriend - which was *true* anyway! - and because he called you a Commie?? God, Graham, you must have hated a lot of people!"

"Why don't you stop interrupting and listen? (You would never make a decent interviewer *either!*) I hate Butterworth for any number of reasons. He hates ordinary people and would do anybody a bad turn if it benefited *him*. He screws money out of folk not because he needs to, but because he *can*. He is utterly without scruples in spite of his charm and smarm. But the main reason *is* personal. Cynthia confessed last year that Butterworth had told his rich uncle - her dad - what bad news I was. So he had threatened not to waste his money on a grant for her if she was determined to marry me - a nobody whose only aspirations were to cause trouble and unrest. She was seventeen. Her mum had died - she was all that poor, grieving Daddy had in the world. Emotional blackmail. If she had been a year or two older..."

So that was it. He was convinced Butterworth had ruined his life.

"You must have known about the Birchfield deal last year, Graham. You must have known she had moved back to Earlstone, if you were seeing her. Come on."

"I had absolutely no idea until you mentioned it. As far as I knew she still lived in Naunton. And we used to meet in Warwickshire. At Watery Cross. Her girlfriend's flat. You can't be sure Cynthia knows about her husband's wheeler-dealing."

"Maybe. But one thing I'm not getting is how did you manage to land the Gazette job with Butterworth around? With your pedigree?"

He laughed and shrugged. "Obviously he hasn't got as much clout as he seems to think. He doesn't sit on the board, so it probably went under his radar. Anyway, I'm a reformed character as far as anybody knows."

"Are you?"

"Communists become the biggest cynics of all. You will find that out."

"I'm no Commie!"

"Aren't you, Andrew? Really?"

I decided to walk home in the crisp February air to sober up a bit. It was three or four miles and it allowed me to plan what I was going to say to Butterworth as soon as I could. I felt elated. I could see a way to get at him without hurting Cynthia, and a way to achieve our objectives in Westfield. Some days are very special in our lives. I got in, turned on my laptop, read my Inbox and decided to send Graham this email.

Dear Graham,

Thanks for a delicious lunch. Our discussion has absolutely nothing to do with my decision to resign from The Gazette, which I hereby do. I have just found something out which makes me entirely the free agent which you decided not to be.

I promise that the Pailtons will come to no harm - neither will Butterworth - at least not to the

extent that he should - or in a way which would really damage him. I am not motivated by spite and revenge - and he can keep his ill-gotten gains, if that is what makes him so happy.

I sent the email, revealing the one beneath it on the screen I had just received.

My dear Andrew,

I do still love you dearly - but as a friend. I can't carry on where we left off. I shan't be coming back. Mum is very poorly. I can't cope with any more emotional stress. So this has to be goodbye. Thank you for some great times.

Eleanor

Before pulling my coat back on I attended to these three other matters.

“Sheila?”

“Yes?”

“It's Andy. You won't have to wait much longer. Promise.”

“Caroline?”

“Yes?”

“Can you email me Lydia Fuller's email address - now if possible? I've lost it.”

Dear Lydia,

William Peveley said you wanted to be in touch about the campaign. I'm sorry, I should have been in contact with you earlier but there has been a difficult family matter to resolve. Just say when and where you would like to meet. I have nothing in my diary, and nothing now to distract me from teaming up with you.

Andy

It was not the most subtle of messages (I regretted it later) and it was stupid of me to drive half-drunk into Earlstone, but I felt driven by impulses I had resisted long enough. I parked behind Mrs Shepherd's garage, took the spade and garden fork from my boot and strode to the towers. It was four o'clock and still mild. To the left of the first entrance I began digging. The soil was a little clay but deep, and broke up quite easily. A few people paused to watch but made no comment. I had measured out in my mind a first terrace five metres square, as a demonstration bed. After a few rows I began to level the ground out with the fork. Planks secured by spikes would hold the leading edge in place and a narrow walkway could be dug out in front of it. A succession of terraces could follow. A couple emerging from the tower paused to watch. The young man threw his cigarette down and asked if I was from the council. I leant on my spade and got my breath back.

“No. I'm intending to *stand* for the council here at the next election. I want all this unused land and that reccy to be put to good use - growing stuff and raising livestock - for the good of the

whole community. This is just an experiment - to see what the soil's like. As you can see, it's pretty good. Anybody here who wants to put something in, can take something out. Spuds here; beans there, tomatoes...whatever. I just need some planks now to make a terrace."

"Planks? Hang on."

He disappeared around the back to his van in the car park, and brought back a long plank and a tool bag. He hammered some spikes in, positioned the plank and shovelled soil into place behind it. He stood back to admire his handiwork.

"Railway sleepers would be better," he said. "I can get hold of them pretty cheap."

His partner said with a pleasant smile that she would definitely vote for me and they walked off, leaving me to get on. The first terrace was beginning to look the business when I heard a girl's voice below me say my name. It was Briony with a few girlfriends. She asked what I was doing. "What does it look like? I'm going to plant a few spuds. In April. Just getting the soil deep enough and in good condition."

"Somebody will nick 'em," said another girl. I shrugged, as if to say that was a chance you had to take.

"Show me what to do!" said Briony, putting down her bag. I said she would do better with the fork. I placed the prongs on a piece of grass, stood behind her to steady her, placed her trainer on the top and told her to push down steadily. The fork sunk in but she overbalanced and fell, causing her friends to laugh helplessly. I helped her to her feet and lifted the earth up with her. "Now you have to turn it and break the soil - pull out the roots of the weeds as much as you can..."

"Oh God! A worm!" She staggered back and fell again, this time rolling down the slope, causing more merriment.

I grabbed the spade and cut the long worm in two.

"Oh gross! That's cruel. You've killed it" one of them chorused.

"No! They don't feel a thing. Now there are two of them. Find one, get one free!"

I told them all what my plans were - for the people in the flats - and anybody else local who wanted to join in - about the terraces.

"But the police will stop you," said one shy girl, blinking the setting sun out of her eyes.

"But why?? I don't think it's against the law to dig up scrubby grass and plant vegetables!"

I had raised my voice because I was aware of a growing audience about me and of people looking down from the windows above. A young teenage boy said he wanted to help but had no tools. I put my hand in my pocket.

"Look, here's forty quid. You be treasurer! You could get a little club going - two quid to join.

You can grow so many spuds and beans - beans till they're coming out of your ears! Onions and peas. Part of this could be a chicken run. Imagine collecting your own eggs every morning for breakfast! You could have chicken barbecues out here in the summer. Brew your own beer!"

I looked up and around me. "You could be a proper community - eat good food for pennies - rely on *yourselves*....."

A sob cut me short. Eleanor had just declared to me again on that sunny park bench at Bradgate Park that Earlstone had no trees. Now a police car was stopping. Two officers emerged and one asked what was going on.

"Him," said a lad, pointing at me. "A looney."

"I'm just digging, officer."

He looked. "Do you have permission?"

"I don't think I need permission."

He came close to inhale me, turned to his colleague and whispered. He nodded.

“We’ve had a complaint from a resident, Sir. You’ll have to stop.”

I forked through the soil and a few cheered. Somebody shouted, “Carry on, mate!”

“I have asked you to stop, Sir.”

“And I have decided to ignore you.”

“If you carry on, I shall be forced to arrest you.”

“On what charge?”

They looked at each other. I turned over another spadeful. One said they would think of something - once they were back at the station.

“You have the right to make a phone call, Mr Clay.” I was told.

“Clayfield. I’m Andy Clayfield.”

My head was thrumming now in the heavy air of the custody suite. I was in the cell where Mr Peveley had sat, simmering with contempt. I decided to phone *him*.

“Mr Peveley? I’m under arrest.”

“REALLY? On what charge?”

“Drunk and disorderly, possibly criminal damage.”

“Criminal damage? Criminal damage? What have you criminally damaged?”

“I was digging up some of that rotten old turf around the flats to terrace it all.”

“Digging? They’ve arrested you for *digging*?Andrew, you do sound a bit slurry. *Have* you been drinking?”

I considered. “Not as much as I should have been. Under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“Could you contact a few people to come out and make a fuss?”

“I certainly will. I’ll email everybody!”

It so happened that after my arrest news of it began to spread around the estate anyway. The gentleman who had organised the failed referendum in The Eskdale fulminated through his froth about the police having nothing better to do than arrest folks who were trying to make a difference, while ignoring the vandals and drug pushers. William Peveley knocked on the doors of his neighbours. Briony went round to Demi in floods of tears. The precise physics and chemistry of a spontaneous outburst of indignation are never very easy to analyse, but before eight o’ clock quite a number of people had marched down the hill past Elmcroft Park to accumulate outside the police station where I had stood months before watching my teacher calmly deliver his eggs. Indignant remarks led to a chain reaction of angry shouts for my release. The sergeant who had dealt with the eggs decided he would take charge and became the bemused recipient of an egg bursting on his sloping belly. The local jobs, getting wind of an event, took advantage of this insult to authority and, under cover of the crowd, launched a salvo of anything to hand, breaking a number of windows. Mr Peveley said later, after my release, that although he deplored the descent into mob violence he could not help but smile at the thought of the sleepy dwarf of Earlstone finally waking.

“If you still worked at The Gazette, we could get some good publicity out of this: *The New Earlstone Party absolutely condemn the mindless hooligans who ruined a peaceful protest about the arrest of a young man, merely because he has a new vision for Westfield*. Like it?”

Lydia Fuller, who sat next to me on the sofa, sipped her tea and smiled. Caroline wheeled around on the piano stool and launched into an ironic version of Jerusalem, which we cheered to. When she had finished I said I would email it as a press statement - our very first - to Graham Blower

the next morning.

“Call another meeting for Friday.” I said. “By then Sheila will have resigned, I guarantee it. I say we should push our luck tomorrow by the towers and do more digging.”

We met at eleven as planned and were not disturbed. The man with the van went out and came back with more wood. A few children and some adults helped out. The lad who was the treasurer came running up in the afternoon and said he had thirty names and addresses and lots of pound coins.

“What should we call ourselves?” he asked, and Lydia, who taught him, said they would have a competition at school. I looked around at the gardeners under the warm mid-February sun.

Somebody had mashed lots of tea and brought out squash. Mrs Shepherd came over with a tray of sandwiches. A few youths yelled some abuse but, ignored, lost interest and traipsed off to hang around on the reccy.

“Do you know what, Lydia?” I said, leaning on my spade for a breather, “It’s as if it’s been waiting to happen. And now it can’t be stopped.”

* * * * *

You needn’t work your notice. I’ll cover for you. Whatever you choose to do, good luck,

Graham Blower

Graham,

*Please do us a favour and print New Earlstone’s reaction to the trouble outside the police station on Saturday. I promise you an exclusive about that **and** Sheila Skidmore’s resignation. If you only have a few months to do yourself, we would be grateful for any coverage and support we could get. I promise absolutely that Cynthia and her husband will come to no harm because of what I am about to do.*

Whatever I chose to do, good luck. But what would I do? Some sort of youth work? Teach?? No fear! Anyway, with my conviction they would not allow me to. Thankfully, the matter was not urgent, as I had quite a bit put by from my mother after she had married and sold the family house. The maisonette in Fairleigh would sell pretty quickly as anything in the village got snapped up. From my share I could earn more interest. I would find a place to rent. I had arranged to meet Lydia on Wednesday at her flat to work on our constitution. Perhaps there would be something near there I could move into.

Now I come to Butterworth. That Monday morning I sat at my laptop and worked out exactly how to handle him. In the late afternoon I began to put my plan into effect. I phoned twice but got no answer. The third time I heard the distinctive lardy-da voice of the lady magistrate, his wife. No, he was out and would be back *shortl-eh*. Who, she asked, had given me their private number? It was *ex-director-eh*. I ignored the question and told her that it was a very urgent matter. Then I put the phone down. I waited. Half-an-hour later my patience was rewarded when *he* phoned.

“Giles Butterworth. Who am I speaking to please?”

“My name is Clayfield, Andrew Clayfield.”

“The reporter?”

“The very same.”

“How did you find out my number?”

“The same way that I found out other secrets you have, Mr Butterworth.”

“I beg your pardon? What are you driving at?”

“It’s a very sensitive matter. Could I come over to interview you? Tonight?”

“Tonight? Out of the question. Say what you have to say over the phone.”

His voice had gone steadily through the octaves until it was shrill. I paused to make him think I had rung off and when he began to squeak *Hello?*

I whispered “Northfield Mews. Birchfield House.”

The phone went dead. I made a pot of tea while he thought it over. I imagined anxiety overtaking indignation. Perhaps he was making a few phone calls to others, perhaps to Arthur Cox to demand my dismissal. Would he already know I had resigned? Probably not. I was drinking a second cup when the phone rang again. I went to pick up but then let it ring and ring and ring till it rang off. I let it do the same twice more and then a while later I phoned *him*. I calculated that in spite of his fury my call-back would make him feel a kind of obligation to me. I glanced at the clock and it was nearly seven. The tremor in his voice betrayed more than anger when he picked up.

“Mr Butterworth, believe me - it is in your interest to speak to me. I have an explanation and proposition to make to you.”

“I live at The Old Rector-eh -”

“In Dadlingcote, I know. When would be convenient?”

“Now.”

“I’m sorry. I have other business until gone eight.”

“Come at nine then.”

The drive to Dadlingcote was one I had not undertaken for many years. The country lane was narrow and unlit. Rabbits dashed through my headlights and I slowed. On the right, as the village began, was a small independent school, and as I approached the church tower - the colour of pale butter in the search lights from below - into view came the village green, where in summer the locals still played cricket. Local folklore insisted it was from the battlemented tower of Saint Simon’s that those now buried anonymously around it had watched skirmishes leading to the demise of Richard the Third. Those ancient fields rolled down to a natural dip, now the cradle of the Ashby canal. The battlefield of Bosworth, six miles further north, could not even be seen from the church. The Battle of Dadlingcote was a title never spoken, but if historical renown had eluded the village, prosperity had not. It was one of the most sought after locations in the south of the county. And in one of its most picturesque and admired buildings, dignified and rambling in antique brick, with chimney pots as tall as Brunel’s famous stovepipe hats, lived Giles Butterworth in splendid isolation.

I parked by the old phone box and walked from the green until the great house stood before me, the last outpost before the black fields where occasional farm lights twinkled like stars. The Plough, low in the sky, seemed about to cut a furrow in the flat land. I pushed at the wrought iron gate and to my surprise it gave way and admitted me. There was a series of steps through the terraced front garden and I exchanged its frostiness for a vision of tall spring and summer flowers and perfect lawns. It struck me again forcibly that amongst life’s chief ironies was the fact that so much of the beauty of the world was owned by some of its foulest inhabitants, who,

in spite of their many fiddles and frauds, no doubt managed to get a sound night's sleep. I looked up at the blind, unfriendly windows and wondered in which room Mrs Skidmore had finally given in to the influences of alcohol and flattery. In the large porch I could see no knocker or bell. So in the end - seeing myself half-seriously as the personification of Fate - I hammered on the great door. It echoed. I waited.

In a sudden blaze of light, like a stout fallen angel, appeared Mr Butterworth, dressed in a silk aubergine robe and holding a large brandy glass. He peered around the door post at a metal ring set into the wall.

"You pull it out and the bell rings." he whined. He demonstrated. I apologised for overlooking it. "You'd best come in. Before all the heat goes out of the house. Chilly night."

I followed him as he tottered rather than strolled along an impressive corridor leading to the back of the house. At the far end there passed a grey figure by a stair post. His wife? But it could have been a ghost for all the heed it paid us - and he paid it. He veered off left into a sitting room and switched on the light.

"Drink?" he asked.

"No thank you. I'm driving."

"Well I'm not."

He topped up the ridiculously large glass, stoppered the decanter and swilled the spirit around in the palm of his hand. He did not ask me to sit and he remained standing. I was obviously not meant to stay long. He took a gulp rather than a sip, never taking his eyes from mine once. I felt he intended me to be overwhelmed and daunted by my opulent surroundings, but I felt confident, particularly due to the phrase which I now heard Sheila Skidmore saying; *brandy turns his taps on*. This was his Achilles heel and I had better exploit it.

"So Mr Clayfield" said he affably, as if the conversation of the afternoon had never taken place "I see you're making quite a name for yourself. Specially liked your exposé on the idle Lib in Wolverley and Didcombe. You obviously enjoy turning the odd *stone* in Earlstone over."

He had evidently rehearsed this rhetorical tour de force, as much as he had his jibe at McAdoo in the council chamber. And while he studied me smugly for signs of admiration it came to me how to respond.

"Yes, Mr Butterworth. And I've discovered quite a few more woodlice scurrying about than I expected. That's why I'm *here*."

He had played the role of the urbane country gentleman pretty well, but now it was impossible to maintain his nonchalant air after such a pointed insult. The forced smile slowly vanished and the flintiness of Tory Earlstone Man appeared in his eyes.

"I hope you are not inferring that I, the leader of Earlstone council, am of that...*ilk*."

"Implying, I think you mean. No, I'm asserting it. You and Colin Pailton are crooks. You were party to swindling an old man out of three thousand pounds."

His hamster cheeks sagged and his mouth opened. He drank. Then he laughed - or rather whinnied. He clicked his fingers and said "You realise, young man, I hope, that I could pull one string - *now* - and get you the sack for such a slander?"

I ignored the threat. "One of the non-negotiable conditions of my discretion and silence before I leave is a cheque for five thousand pounds - to take account of loss of interest also - made out to Mr James Russell of 145 Northfield Road. "

"Conditions? Silence? Five thousand pounds? This is blackmail!"

"Well spotted. A topic you are familiar with."

He grabbed the decanter and topped up. He sat down. I remained standing.

“One of your conditions? Might I dare ask how many more there are?”

“Two more. I also want a cheque made out to Oxfam for ten thousand pounds. It’s probably a lot less than you made on the Birchfield deal and the Mews, but it will do. To be honest, I’m more interested in condition number three than *money*.”

“Do you honestly think you can threaten me? Do you know who I am? Who I know? What proof have you got I have done anything wrong? Do you honestly imagine The Gazette would print one word against me, even *with* proof? Did you know Arthur Cox is my brother-in-law? You’ve got nothing, Clayfield. You’re bluffing!”

“I know about Dawkins giving twenty thousand by proxy to your party coffers, I know your cousin’s husband made a killing on Birchfield. But you’re right. I can’t prove it.”

He sagged like a balloon losing air as the tension in him was released and he laughed, pointing at me with his glass. Out of habit he patted his toupee with his palm. In gloating mode he was truly the most repulsive individual I had ever seen.

“You’re a nobody, Clayfield. I’ve done a little digging myself. A little bird at Earlstone police station tells me you have a criminal record - for GBH. Does Mr Cox know that? And I wonder what he might say about you getting involved with news you are supposed to be reporting, on the Eskdale. A *communist* project! Is that unprofessional? He might ignore that, but I doubt if he would be so tolerant of a Gazette employee getting so drunk that he starts to dig up council property-eh. And starting a near riot! Does he know? If I were the blackmailer you say I am, I might turn the tables on *you*. Truth to tell, I cannot be bothered. I think it’s time you went *if that’s all you have*.”

He thought he had the upper hand. But I was a free agent. It felt wonderful. I stood my ground. I put my hand into my inside pocket.

“Mr Butterworth. You are hugely mistaken if you believe I can be intimidated with Mr Cox. I resigned from his newspaper on Saturday. I’m a free agent.”

“Even better! No paper. No story. No deal. Get out!”

I now revealed the first of three reasons for reaching into my pocket; a piece of paper I had folded into four. I opened my hand like a magician and passed it to him. He unfolded it and read. His hand shook and he drank more brandy. I took the paper back. It contained the allegations I had made in full detail.

“So what?” he exclaimed. “You can’t print this! I’ll sue you for every penny you’ve got!”

I told him quietly that I did not have enough pennies to make much difference either way.

“Anyway, when these fliers appear in letterboxes, on pillar boxes, car windscreens etc, how will you be able to prove that I had anything to do with writing or printing them? And after your name is mud, will it matter who did it? Your wife is a magistrate, isn’t she?”

“Don’t you dare mention my wife!”

“How will she like it when her friends start avoiding her?”

“You’re bluffing!”

“Try me! I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Vice-versa for you and *her*.”

In the silence the case clock ticked louder as if it had a point or two to add. I began to move out of the door.

“Come back!” he almost whimpered as I entered the hallway. I turned. His hand was fishing in a drawer. Within a minute I had the two cheques I had asked for.

“Now GO!” he hissed. Instead of going I looked up at the ceiling until he could bear it no longer. He demanded to know what it was that so fascinated me up there.

“I was just wondering if it was in the room above where a certain indiscretion involving your

brother took place. One New Years Eve.”

He could only gape in wonder. Words entirely failed him.

“Your money is the easy bit, Mr Butterworth. My third and final condition is going to be more of a sacrifice.”

“Third condition?”

“Yes, when Mrs Sheila Skidmore resigns in Westfield in one or two days time, you will not inform her husband, as you have threatened - very ungentlemanly of you - about her five-minute-wonder upstairs with your slimy brother. You will accept her resignation most graciously and fight a bye-election in Eskdale and Westfield which I intend, as an Independent, to win. I will hold the balance of power and my price for voting with the Liberals - or even the Tories - would be 1 - the abandonment of the bus station project and 2 - the conversion of that recreation ground to a garden.”

“You’re stark raving bonkers!” he spluttered, almost choking on the brandy. “Do you think you can really hold the whole of Earlstone to ransom? You?”

“That’s the plan.” I daintily took out my second piece of paper for him to read.

I, the undersigned, Giles Butterworth, hereby freely admit to attempting to blackmail Sheila Skidmore on the basis of entirely malicious innuendo regarding a sexual act which never took place.

I further acknowledge that I am the author of such gossip. And that my motive was inconsistent with the behaviour expected of a gentleman. I unreservedly apologise.

SIGNED

“I will not sign that! You can’t make me!”

“Very well. I’ll take it up to Mrs Butterworth and ask her opinion on it.”

“Come back here.....”

“SIGN IT.”

“What use will you make of it?”

“Give it to Sheila, as insurance.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because you have no choice. Because, unlike you, I am trustworthy.”

He signed it, tossed it back and drained his glass. I handled it by the corner as I had before and put it back into a plastic wallet. He looked puzzled.

“I’m just making sure that I don’t smudge your fingerprints. In case it becomes a police matter, which I sincerely hope for your sake it will not.”

He sneered. He was threatening to boil over. He accused me of being a Commie.

“You bloody young fool! Do you honestly think you can reform that load of trash on the Eskdale and other estates? Half of them won’t work! They only learn to read and write to complete benefit forms! I suppose Blower is behind all this!”

“Mr Blower has absolutely no idea I am here and no idea of your little schemes.”

“...he was full of sentimental bullshit about the poor, downtrodden classes! “Come the glorious day!” What? Most of them wouldn’t get out of bed for it, the fat useless hounds! Most of them are drug addicts! They deserve all they get!”

The brandy had turned his taps full on. Now I revealed my third reason for reaching into my

pocket. I took out my reporter's tape recorder and rewound it a little. He listened in horror to his tinny voice lambasting the residents of Westfield.

"I think we'll play this over and over when we're out in the loudspeaker van, Council Leader. See you on the stomp. Good night."

* * * * *

On Wednesday evening it took me about three quarters of an hour to walk into the centre of the town. I had no idea that there were flats in the narrow street which ran alongside the church up to the vicarage. It contained the only vestiges of mediaeval Earlstone - cobbles and a half-timbered building which housed the museum. Above a bakery opposite was Lydia Fuller's flat and a narrow alley gave access to her door. I rang, and a moment later she stood framed in the doorway wearing a butcher's apron.

I followed her upstairs. The flat was small like her and very cosy. There were ornamental cats everywhere. On one old armchair sat a canvas bag stuffed full of yellow exercise books. She moved it and told me to sit down. She gave me some print-out to read while she fried the pancakes she had promised to do - even though it was Ash Wednesday. I began reading what she had written but my eyes were drawn away again and again by the quick, efficient movements of her body. She glanced over her shoulder, saw me looking at her and tossed back her head - then the pancake, catching it easily. I wondered if this fascinating repertoire was her reason for frying them for me. They came sprinkled with sugar and orange juice, not lemon, and were delicious. Afterwards she poured into two bowls some butternut squash soup, saying that I surely would not mind her back-to-front ways. It was equally delicious.

"When you didn't answer my email I thought you had lost interest in the project," she said.

"Email? I didn't see it. I thought *you* had lost interest in us putting our heads together. When did you send it?"

She lifted up her eyes. "Oh it must have been after Christmas."

"I'm sorry. I missed it. And I lost your address, otherwise I would have emailed you."

"Caroline said that Helen was down south looking after her mum. Would she mind you being here?"

"Do you see a lot of Caroline?"

"I pop round sometimes after school. She's good company. I think *he's* a bit gruff."

I considered telling her he had taught me and that he had a very soft centre.

"It's *Eleanor* by the way. She's been in Southampton since just after Christmas.Her mother's dying of cancer."

"How awful. You must have been coming and going so much - no wonder you missed my email."

She cleared the plates and bowls away, opened the wine I had brought and we sat side by side at the table preparing to study what she had written on her laptop. She said she was glad that William had volunteered to write the constitution and rule book, as he belonged to what she called the old school and was more "rule orientated." She was not interested in "quorums and procedures". I smiled and she noticed.

"Did I crack a funny?"

"No. "Rule-orientated." Pev would probably wince at that jargon. He used to alter the school notice boards and complain to shopkeepers about the greengrocer's apostrophe S!"

“You know, I can just see him doing that. Anyway...”

“*MANIFESTO*”

“I thought we ought to have a preamble to what we’re about,” she said. And she read it through aloud, pointing now and then with her elfin finger at the text as she went.

*“There are hundreds of small towns like Earlstone. - If you think it’s too wordy or I’ve used too big a word, just say. I’ve tried to keep it simple - They have a history which is all too evident - Or obvious? (No, evident is fine, I said) - ...all too evident: old factories with broken windows; wasteland; derelict passage-ways and backyards. Added to that, is the ugly concrete legacy of the sixties, as well as the new landscape of boarded up streets, abandoned by retailers and shoppers for the lure of the retail park - OK? - (I nodded) - So....But if that history is evident, what about the future - Make future **bold**? (“Earlstone has no trees, Andy!” I heard Ealinor declare, and could not reply to Lydia’s question- I tried to speak but could only nod)What about the....**future**? Do towns like Earlstone have a future? New - make it bold - **New Earlstone** believes they must have, but not the future which the stale old parties envisage; costly, unsightly and ultimately unsustainable - Andy? What’s the matter?”*

I took a deep breath, apologised and wiped my eye. I told her I was just a bit tired - and that I had a weak head for alcohol. I pushed the glass away and told her I thought it read very well. She stared at me and the glass. I had barely drunk more than a mouthful.

“That’s as far as I got. I think our programme needs to sound idealistic but not impractical or soft-boiled. And we need to convince people we could run a council, pay the bills...balance the budget....”

I was grateful when my mobile played *Jerusalem* and she laughed. I pressed SHOW and saw the following message.

Got ur envelope. Great. I resign 2morrow. Can’t thank u enough.

“It’s from Councillor Skidmore, look.”

She read the text and looked puzzled. She wanted to know why she was so grateful to me. I debated how much to tell her.

“Let’s just say Butterworth - the greasy, fat man with the wig you had a go at in the chamber - was a bit of an obstacle to her resigning. He’s been persuaded to relent.”

“I didn’t have a go at him. I just told him what I thought.”

She looked back over the screen and I studied her. I remembered how she had smiled so sweetly at the “tutter” behind us, how she had calmly addressed the council chamber and gotten her point over so well - and gotten the obstinate doorman to shift. How *did* she manage to keep control of those louts at school? One secret weapon had to be her obvious dedication - but there was surely something more. Her composure. I could not imagine her losing her self-control.

“So, when she resigns, it’s really going to happen isn’t it?” she said quietly. “God help us.”

“Lydia, how does French go down at Eskdale school?”

“Like a lead balloon! I have to throw myself around the room. I reckon you’d have to go a long way before you met kids with lower aspirations. A lot of the teachers even think it’s a waste of time learning a language.”

Her eyes were open wide as she contemplated no doubt the challenges of the classroom and of

the political struggles ahead. She really was a beautiful, delicate creature. I could not imagine any lout wanting to damage her. That must be her third secret weapon. She stared at nothing and finally told me what was on her mind. "There's a danger that we come across as *against* everything, Andy. The *negative* party."

I watched fascinated as her nimble fingers tapped at the keyboard and then I looked up to read

Unlike the big parties, New Earlstone is not really against things, more for things - practical changes in our local environment for the good of its residents. We are for

- *Ending dereliction*
- *Demolishing old factories*
- *Encouraging a mix of private and social housing with affordable rents*
-

"What else?" she said.

"We need to mention *more green space, replanting areas to encourage birds and insects...*"

"*Wetlands and allotments.*"

"And ...hold on....*returning derelict - NO - disused retail premises to residential ...what?*"

"*Residential use?* No. We've got *disused.*"

"It'll come to us."

"Have a sip more wine. It's a shame to waste."

I drank.

"We need to bring in somehow how important it is for us to grow more food *locally* in view of world shortages."

"Maybe mention that in the preamble."

She was daydreaming again and twisting the strand of hair which she had tucked behind an ear.

"It's not a good idea for Mrs Skidmore to resign tomorrow, you know." she said after a while.

"Why ever not?"

"Think about it. How ready are we? Who are we? We are lacking in one main area - experience. We need to recruit people who are known to Earlstoners - people they could have a bit of confidence in. To look after their money, make sure the services work properly...."

"Maybe Reverend Clarke! He's well respected. But he's no politician. There's Geoff Langham - he used to be a Labour councillor. We could give Mr Peveley a prominent role - make him our spokesman - he's eloquent. And was a well-respected teacher."

"I don't think so. I thought his protest was rather daft, to be honest. They'll just talk him down as "the man who throws eggs." This is politics Andy. We have to be squeaky clean."

"But it's all down to him that we're having this chat!"

"I know, but he'd rub people up the wrong way if he got into an argument. He's a bit dogmatic. And arrogant. Not a good listener. We need another *you*. You'll be a good candidate. Have you got a brother?"

"Well, I'm the one who got drunk and started digging up the estate!"

"Nobody will bother about that because you're good-looking and have got *hair*. Name me a bald Prime Minister! Why do you think *old thingy* wears a wig? Anyway the police won't bring any charges. They'd make themselves a laughing stock. *I was proceeding in an easterly direction when I spotted the defendant digging a vegetable plot, your Honour.*"

She stood up and looked my head over, smoothing it down at the back. She announced that I would have to have a top-class hair cut before the campaign.

“Have you got a decent suit?”

I shook my head. She sat back down and sighed in mock despair. She informed me I would have to get one and that she would be happy to come with me.

“If you’re going to say something very radical and new, say it in your best suit. Derek Hatton said that.”

She seemed to have a knack of thinking more than one thing at once.

“This Geoffrey Langham character, do you really think you could get him on board?”

“He’s getting on a bit, but he might.”

“Because, don’t you see? If we could get Skidmore to come over to us *as well*, we could show how new and non-aligned we really are. And a Liberal defector would give us a very strong hand. Imagine the photo in the paper.”

I asked her to listen and clicked PLAY on my mini tape-recorder. When Butterworth had finished whining I looked at her triumphantly.

“Is that Butterworth?”

“The very same. I played a dirty trick on him. Surely that’s enough to get me elected.”

“But, don’t you see, if you discredit the Tories too much, it will help the Liberals. Tory voters won’t come straight over to you, necessarily. You’ll be doing well to come second.”

“But what about the drugs-bust at the flats?”

“That’s great, but we need to put the Libs under pressure somehow. What would be *different* about the Eskdale if *they* just took over from the Tories? We need to go door to door with a leaflet NOW to ask people to tell us what they want to see.”

“But that’s how the Libs operate.”

“I know. Listen! If we can persuade Sheila Skidmore to hang on for two or three weeks we could be out there FIRST in force - so that people can’t say - *Oh they only come round when they’re after your vote.*”

“God, Lydia! You’re a *politician!*”

She smirked and confessed she had worked for the Labour Party in Smethwick during the early Blair years. I looked at her in admiration then felt the chill and ache caused by Eleanor’s message invade me again. I looked at the screen.

“Eleanor’s not coming back to Earlstone.”

“She’s not?”

“No.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“Pretty bad. Well, part of me is really down. I love - loved - her.”

“And the other part?”

I shrugged.

“If you don’t want to talk about it...”

“You’re the first person I’ve told. I just needed to tell somebody.”

“*Somebody*. Right. Was it because of her you got drunk?”

“Partly. It just happened. My editor’s wine.”

She asked me what she was like and I told her.

“Passionate...funny....outspoken. Too outspoken. Free with her opinions.”

“Pretty?”

“Not in a fashionable sense...She has an interesting, intelligent face....Unusual. Red-haired with a temper to match...pale,creamy skin....and underneath her pout she is a little unsure of herself, self-conscious...she hated her teeth.”

“Hated her *teeth*?”

“They were a little prominent, but they were....just her, really. Can’t explain it. But what about you, Lydia? You must have somebody.”

“No. I did at Uni. Since then I’ve not met anybody I’m that wild about. I like my independence. My own company. My job.”

She suddenly looked at the clock and groaned.

“I’ve got to mark all these books for tomorrow. You’ll have to excuse me.”

I was not sure how to take my leave of her at the doorway in the alley. I promised to phone Sheila to ask her to hang on. She promised to email the finished manifesto to all the members before the next meeting. She thanked me for coming. I thanked her for the pancakes. The rain had been pattering but now began to fall heavily. She reached behind the door and passed me a yellow umbrella with a pink floral pattern. She laughed when I put it up. She waved and slowly closed the door, not taking her earnest eyes from me. I noticed they were a slate blue, almost grey. Finally she was gone. Around the corner I let the broolly down and allowed the rain to soak my head. I patted the broolly which I had stuffed inside my coat. I had something of hers and a silly reason to go back.

I woke the next morning and it was the first object I saw, propped against the wall. The first person I thought of was Lydia. The second was Eleanor. I dithered over breakfast and then adamantly sat down to compose the letter I had been writing in my head since Saturday.

Dear Eleanor,

Your email was not a shock but it did hurt me. How could it not? I know we were not exactly getting on well before you went home and I know you have been under terrific strain. But I wonder if the decision you have taken more truly reflects your state of mind than your heart.

We loved each other. You know we did.

The Earlstone project need not be an obstacle. There are now so many other people involved and I am far from indispensable. If I came down to talk all this over, would I be welcome?

I still love you Eleanor,

Andy xxx

I had a call from Sheila. She agreed not to resign until I asked her to and said she would give careful thought to my invitation to join us. She had decided not to be afraid of her husband any more. When I mentioned this to Lydia in an email she had an inspired idea.

If Sheila decides to resign the Tory whip and becomes an Independent supporting our programme, then there’s no need for a bye-election. That would give us plenty of time to establish ourselves across the town before the next elections. There is a danger that the Tories and the Liberals will combine to vote for The Mead project but if the recession gets worse then the finance for it will disappear, don’t you think?

On Friday I had three pieces of news, only one of which absolutely astonished me. The first was a report in The Gazette. My arrest and the near riot outside the police station were front page news above a photo which Jim had taken of our terrace. The decision of the CPS to take no action against me was given and on an inside page opinions amongst local residents were divided about it. Asked for his view, Councillor Butterworth had chosen not to comment, which I thought was magnanimous of him in defeat.

From Eleanor I had my reply in four words.

I'm sorry Andy.

I sat for ages making up my mind how I felt when my phone rang. It was Graham Blower. He was upbeat - no, more in a state bordering on elation.

“What ever is the matter? You won the lottery?”

“Better than that. You’ve not heard on local radio?”

“I never listen.”

“My contact at the nick was on to me last night. Remember Ajay? He’s been trying to win a bit of credit with the CPS and the Bench. He’s been saying how the big man importing all the gear lives in a village near Earlstone - in a big house with tall chimneys. He was trying to get a bit of extra insurance so he bought one of those doggy transmitters - you know in case Rover gets dognapped or lost - and sewed it into the lining of his pay-off bag. So after he’d given it to his contact, he tracked him down one Saturday afternoon and remembers there was a cricket match on the green. He spotted his contact’s car outside a big house. Andy, there’s only one village within miles where they play on the village green. It’s Dadlingcote. They took Ajay out for a ride and guess whose house it turns out to be?”

“Butterworth’s!”

But my glee evaporated when I realised that he had no reason now not to discredit Sheila. But Graham dispelled my anxiety. The Old Rectory had been raided and sniffed over by dogs, but nothing had been found. Butterworth had been arrested, questioned and later released without charge, as all that could be alleged was that a man accused of drug dealing by someone in police custody had attended a garden party there.

“Don’t you get it?” said Blower. “Butterworth can argue till his blue in the face that he can’t be held responsible to do a CRB check on all the social climbers and prominent businessmen who pass through his door - but the taint is enough! I phoned Lambert, the vice-leader of the Tories for a comment and he told me off the record that Butterworth is finished. The Tories are going to be in total disarray tonight when The Mercury publishes it all.”

“It’s turning into a bad week for him.”

“But that’s not the best news I’ve had all week! I emailed Cynthia and told her what you told me about the old gent being swindled by her husband. It turns out she half-suspected it. Something he said about Butterworth joking at a party that he was the best estate agent Pailton could have suggested. So I went round to Northfield Rd and showed your Mr Russell a photo of Butterworth. It was him, Andy! I told Cynthia and she tackled her husband. He admitted it and she’s leaving. Here’s me - I’ve been trying quietly all these years to make a few changes around here. Then you turn up, just happen to pull at the right threads and everything starts to unravel.”

The council sent some men around to the towers to turf over some of the earth we had dug but

within a few days the new grass had disappeared, presumably into nearby back gardens. I contacted Geoffrey Langham to ask if he would join us but he refused. He had been a “Labour man all “ ‘is life.”

Then a bombshell. Sheila announced that in future she would be representing Westfield and Eskdale for New Earlstone, and the price for her support would be the abandonment of The Mead and the conversion of the recreation ground to a garden. The council retaliated by having wooden stakes and a netting fence erected all along the periphery by the road at the bottom, making it inaccessible to everybody “for a temporary period to allow the ground to dry out in preparation for the installation of new play equipment.”

We warned everybody against any act of criminal damage and went down to hang placards on it, declaring it, amongst other things, a NO-GO AREA FOR NEW IDEAS AND GOOD SENSE. Furious letters were written to the paper and the Reverend Clarke fulminated in a new Church Comment, (and in response his anonymous perennial critic who signed him or herself *SCEPTIC*, wondered whereabouts in the New Testament Jesus had mentioned horticulture, affording the reverend the chance to score an open goal with the parable of the talents). In addition a protest vigil and march were planned - (then called off because of more shocking wet weather) - and new petitions began to circulate.

And so February came to an end with no end in sight to the stalemate. On almost the last day of the month Giles Butterworth finally resigned his council seat in Shilton Verney, citing ill-health. We were going to fight a bye-election in that chocolate-box village, knowing we had no hope of winning. But in nearby Naunton, over the Warwickshire border, we were cheered by the news that a New Naunton party was being formed after one of our members had shown friends our constitution and manifesto.

I got a postcard from Scotland signed *Graham and Cynthia*. And in a brief text Eleanor told me her mother had died; followed by a blank silence. I sent an email to Lydia asking her round to dinner, mentioning that I still had her umbrella.

* * * * *

On the first Saturday in March, at something past five, my phone rang and woke me.

“Who is it?”

“Andrew, it’s Caroline. Sorry to wake you, but you must come and see.”

“See what?”

“We’re all out here looking. The police have just turned up. You must come! You won’t believe it! Just pull on some clothes, jump in your car and come over!”

My first sleepy thoughts were that they had had a break-in - or that Mr Peveley was being arrested again. Yet she had sounded excited not anxious. The roads were deserted and I began to skirt the town centre on the ring road. At the police station I turned left and climbed the hill to Westfield and Priestley Rd. To my right below me, in the gaps between houses, I could see a light moving steadily across the recreation ground. I had the absurd thought that a UFO was preparing to land or to launch. I turned onto the small car park from where I had first spied Demi and her friends kicking their heels.

Against the slate sky I saw figures standing on the other side of the hedge. Some were drinking from mugs. I became aware of a deep, rumbling noise like a chuckle. I squeezed through the gap

in the hedge and saw not an expanse of very dark green I expected, but of dark brown, almost black. Down at the Eskdale side there was still a strip of grass, and chugging along, turning over a furrow behind it, watched over by two police cars with their doors wide open, was a tractor. Everyone around me burst out laughing as a uniformed figure, flapping its arms around like a scarecrow in the wind, smartly jumped out of its path. Had Mr Peveley had another mad-cap scheme and gone and stolen a tractor and plough? But no, here he was quite suddenly in front of me, telling me it was a farmer from Dadlingcote way who had decided he had enough of the “bloody“ council. Pev pointed to the left, to the end of the hedge. There were about ten white paper sacks. In the growing light I could read SEED POTATOES on one. A cheer from the Eskdale side made me peer down through the murk. The tractor, having finished the job, was raising the plough up and down in a farewell gesture and now moving off along the road with police cars in slow pursuit.

“What do you think they’ll charge him with?” shouted Caroline.

As it chugged out of sight and distant figures jumped up and down behind it a sudden seizure of euphoria made me laugh until I cried. A sack of potatoes landed at our feet and a knife was produced by magic to slit it open. William handed me one and announced that I should have the honour of planting the first. The stave of a spade was thrust into my hand and I drilled a hole into the clay. The potato disappeared into it and with my foot I buried it. Shouts and laughter grew louder and amongst the muddy youngsters scrambling and tumbling over the furrows towards us I recognised the radiant face of Demi. She recognised me and began to dance around like a small child. Now she was looking past me.

“Miss!” she screamed “Look! We’ve got our ‘lotment!”

I turned and saw Lydia in her cloak and beret, sniffing the cold air with a red nose, like a shy mouse. I could not help it. I picked her up and wheeled her round until she was nearly hoarse from laughing and telling me to put her down.

Just then, beyond the great cedar tree, in the space where it had risen thousands of times in early spring over Earlstone and its predecessors - and had risen countless times before the ancient woodland had been cleared for the first settlement - now escaping grey tethers of cloud, to gild the wet furrows and bring all the lurching bodies to a sudden halt to squint at it - up into heaven was soaring a marvellous, a glorious, a huge new sun.

Shining its blessing on new Earlstone .