

JohnnyFairplay

TO THE PUBLISHER

Dear Sir,

Please find enclosed a manuscript written by my father, John Bevin.

I have no claim to expertise on literary matters, nor a great interest in reading. I happened to go into a large bookshop, picked up a thriller at random and copied down your details. I enclose a large SAE, should you decide to reject the manuscript..

What do I need to say about my dad? Well, he was difficult, getting more difficult and we did not exactly get on.

He died about six weeks ago. After he had had a knee replacement operation I had gone round for a time in the evenings to cook for him and he seemed to be coping fine. Then one night we had had an argument. His leg was stiffening up and he admitted that he had not been doing his exercises, but worse than that, he was so drunk he could hardly make sense. He told me he didn't want my help any more and threw a bottle at me. So I left.

A few days later he hadn't taken his milk in – again. His neighbour and the milkman had opened the letterbox to have a squint in.. It was that very hot spell we had at the end of July. The smell knocked them backwards. My father had apparently tumbled from the top of the stairs to the bottom and broken his neck. Death would have been instantaneous but you can imagine how badly I felt.

Well, after the police had done all their forensics, had taken him to the mortuary and opened all the windows I was allowed in to dispose of all his stuff. Which didn't amount to much for a life of fifty-three years.

In the end the coroner recorded an accidental death; as if it can be considered really accidental to contain enough alcohol to pickle a bear, judging by the empty bottles. In kindness I told my mother (they had been separated for three or four years) the partial truth, that he had stumbled and fallen. The local paper only mentioned the event on an insignificant page – Ex-Police Inspector Found Dead, it read. Out of respect for his reputation it didn't go into too much detail and I was grateful.

His problem with booze had begun at a surprisingly late age, around 49, forcing an early retirement from a brilliant career. He absolutely loved cracking cases and refused many opportunities to get promoted to a better paid desk job.

Anyway, as I was clearing his wardrobe out I came across, to my great surprise, a laptop and some print-out. He hated IT. That was my first clue and introduction to this diary of events I have sent you. (The rest is on the disc).

As I said, I'm no reader but I couldn't help getting involved with it, as it was my own dad's thoughts and all. I knew he had written quite a lot of poetry. And my sister and I used to get funny short stories about his childhood, for Christmas. But this was strange and different.

I read the introduction in the print-out and found the rest on file. I made myself a pot of tea, sat down and didn't go home until I had finished it.

It shocked me then and shocks me still. And baffles me. To be honest I had never given a second thought to the Granddad I had never had. Why would I? Dad's Dad. What was he to me? According to Dad he had died in some accident up north in the late 60s, when his son, my father, was still at school. He only mentioned him once or twice.

What you are about to read, should you so choose, may be all true, partly true or mostly false. Or a total lie. There is no way for anyone to follow in his footsteps; not only has he altered his own name but all other names, dates and places have been altered too in order to protect "the family". I thought about going to the Police, but there would be no point. I know of only one body which could be exhumed to confirm or deny this history. He will remain forever buried however.

Well, here it all is. I know for a fact that he did take leave from work and go away on his own for a few days some years ago. It was not long before my parents separated, after my sister Helen had gone to University. It was in that period that he had started drinking heavily and having more and more time off work.

If you do publish this I would like any money to go to my sister. She has developed a personality disorder and cannot work. I'm a computer scientist with good prospects and my mother, who is well provided for, must never know of this. Nor any other "relatives".

Yours faithfully,

Adam "Bevin"

JohnnyFAIRPLAY

IN VINO VERITAS

THE QUEST

You shall not follow where I tread  
The past shall keep my secrets yet;  
The images which fill my head  
You, my friend, shall soon forget;  
The knowledge I alone possess,  
The days you seek, the names you crave,

Shall fade with me in emptiness  
Beyond those chiselled on my grave.  
Of a vanished moon, her darker side  
Shall tantalize and shall not turn;  
Her seas where all lost dreams abide  
Shall ever searching daylight spurn.

The one you seek is me, my brother;  
Where I am now was once my other...

Dear Adam,

If you are reading this I am either dead or senile. God help everyone if it is the latter. Please, whatever you do, Adam, do not show it to anyone else. I know only too well what you think about reading but if you just read one more story then let it be this one. If Nana is still alive please, never, ever mention this to her. Your great-uncles and great-aunts have all passed on now, so that you will not be able to check out any "fact" with them; all dead, and, for ever, secret-keepers!. The other places and other characters here below have been disguised. Some of them are fictitious, some of them are as real as you, and are probably having a cup of tea, washing up or watching TV as you read this. Which are which? I leave it to you to judge.

Haworth and the Brontës are amongst the only genuine names in there. Haworth, Adam, is a wonderful, dark, gloomy, fascinating town in Yorkshire and the Brontës were dark, gloomy, fascinating novelists. Just imagine, in one family, three great geniuses! And there might even have been five, if their two elder sisters had not died in a bleak, consumptive school, causing their father, in the nick of time to extricate Charlotte and not send Anne and Emily, preserving them for posterity and the great cause of our literature.

I am sorry and only wish you would have read, or would still read, (please read!) the wonderful, feministic Tenant Of Wildfell Hall, about an abusive husband, so many, many decades before its time, or the astonishing, cruel Wuthering Heights. What could have possessed Virginia Woolf to overlook those extraordinary works, and give credit to Mary Anne Evans for writing the first novel (Middlemarch) "for grown-up people"?

Adam. Do not prejudge this. Keep reading. It's a real thriller. There is even a kind of car chase (it did happen!) and real villains, (though not as bad, or as many as in Wuthering Heights.)

I'm sorry I tried to push you into an avenue for which you had no liking or aptitude. I loved literature. But if there is one lesson that could and should be passed down with the genes, it is this; fathers and mothers should not rub up their sons and daughters against their grain. We were different. You came from somewhere else.

If we didn't get on well towards the end please forgive me and try just to remember the good old days,

With love,

Dad

### **October 200-**

I have decided to put pen to paper this morning because the dream I've been dreaming for the past thirty odd years had its last episode, I think, last night. The dream (never until then a nightmare) began a few years after my father, Charles Bevin, died in tragic circumstances in the sixties. I always dreamt it in black and white but this instalment was in colour.

My dream used to begin with mother announcing that father had come back, and then we went to look in on him. Apparently, Adam, other bereaved people experience similar dreams. In mine Dad was always grey, quiet, self-absorbed and just sat at the table or on the settee, slightly aware of our presence but never inclined to communicate, or even to acknowledge us. He would not eat or drink and the dream would usually end with him leaving the room to go for a walk or to bed. More bizarre than his behaviour was ours. On hearing the news, we were never surprised or pleased. We made no comment, no demonstration of emotion and simply went in to stare at him, then carried on with our normal routine. Last night I found myself before his open coffin, staring at the face I had known in my boyhood, his eyes closed, but with that roguish grin, suntan and sweep of wavy blonde hair, at his very handsome best. As I looked at him his head turned and he opened and winked one pale blue eye at me. A voice I had not heard for forty years whispered that it was time for me, the great detective, to find out the truth. I woke up in a sweat. No matter what I did that day the vision remained, as a bright image stays long on the retina.

### **Tuesday October 17th**

Adam. Many, many years ago, while I, a boy of fifteen, was lying awake late at night, wondering where he was, my father was being beaten to death in an insignificant town in Yorkshire. The attackers were never caught. At the time the details of how or why he died were of no importance to me. He was dead. As I have grown older I have wondered more and more about the circumstances of his demise. It took an encounter with my Uncle Wilfred two weeks ago, thirty-three years later, to set the events about to be recounted now in motion. I intend to write some of the story on my travels from notes I take at the time and other chapters much later after my return. If I cannot throw light on those circumstances I will abandon the whole project.

You know that I am a good detective. I am held to be a good judge of character. Within an instant I can tell whether a suspect is being evasive. The eyes are the key. When I ask a question are the eyes thinking back to the right, to retrieve a memory? Or thinking up, to the left, to invent a lie? It is so obvious when alibis are being spun. For one thing, there is too much detail. Honest people have only a scant idea of what they were doing on, say, Tuesday 19th February at 8:45 pm. Most of our humdrum lives are instantly forgettable. Stupid people do not realise this. Believe you me, Adam, most criminals are extremely stupid. The jails are bursting at the seams with stupid, inadequate people who are so easy to bamboozle and trap.

Many make the big mistake of relying on a woman to provide an alibi. Women are poor liars. I can actually see the guilt, the stress of their make-believing in their hot, evasive faces and can even sometimes smell it seeping out in their fusty sweat. Women hate lying. They come in reluctantly to be interviewed. As courteously as I can, sitting myself down opposite them, rustling through my papers, pausing as if suddenly struck by some significant anomaly and then tapping all neatly together square, but with an ambiguous smile, I begin:

- Right, Mrs (Smith). I'd like to ask you about (Joe's) movements on Tuesday 19th of February,

last Tuesday in fact, if you wouldn't mind...

- Tuesday????? But I thought it was Monday that he.....

- Monday? Why ever Monday? What happened on Monday then? That he what....by the way.....?

- He was at home with me all night...

-Oh how cosy!. And Tuesday? What happened on Tuesday? Joe's told me all about it and I've got it written down here....

-I'm not sure....I think....I...I don't know...

-Oh come on! Tuesday's after Monday. If you can remember Monday surely you can remember Tuesday....

It doesn't take long then to squeeze out the truth, like an ugly little blackhead.

There is a pull-thread in the webs of most alibis. I love to find it and begin the unravelling; to watch the fat lie-spider scuttle around, spinning more lies in a frantic effort to repair the damage. Sometimes, cruelly, I allow the spider to think, for a while, I have been taken in.

I am devious. I was destined to become either a villain or a copper. When I was 15, after my father's death, I nearly went to Court for stealing cigarettes, by distraction, from the newsagent's where I worked. My headmaster, a serving magistrate, used his influence to get the case dropped, on the grounds of my bereavement, and took me under his wing. I had told my mother I would leave school as soon as I could to become the breadwinner. But she - and he - insisted I remained at school.

What do philosophers, scientists and police officers have in common, Adam? Answer: they are after the truth. They love a mystery - until they cannot solve it. Who, besides, really loves the truth? How much contentment out there depends on misconceptions, dishonesty and plain lies? Do you honestly wish to know what we think of you? Do you really want to know all the sordid details of a sexual betrayal? Do you want to know who you really are? Come on! The tale is more pleasant, the accepted version, the alibi. What is religion but a complex response to our abhorrence of death's stark simplicity, a temple of the mind to cover over the stink and the bare bones of the tomb? Our lives are constructed on so many falsehoods, evasions and illusions. Without them we could not continue. The God of Truth in Greek and Roman mythology did not rank very highly at all. In fact the Roman proverb "in wine the truth" implies disrespect for the truth, characterising it as a gross, unvarnished frankness, spat out as a drunken indiscretion, in an unrestrained rage, rather than an object of veneration. In other ancient halls of the gods Truth did not even figure.

The riddle I have returned to again and again in my search for the truth regarding my father was what caused him to stop loving me. Admittedly I did take after the other side, unlike my brother who was the image of him in looks and personality. So Alan was the favourite but it was not simply a matter of preference - I could have accepted that. No, as I grew older my dad grew more distant, wary of me even. I gradually came to the conclusion that he believed that I, in the last few months of his life, had begun to guess his many secrets. Yet I had not. I "knew" him - excluding the unknowing years of infancy - for a mere five or six years. I saw only the very thinnest sliver of him, the edge of a dark moon. He died when I was a teenager. So I never got my chance in adulthood to ask him to sit down and help me with my enquiries and to un-spin his

alibis. From what I know of him I am sure he would have been a challenge to me. But he was never quite a villain, I use to believe; no, more of a merry rogue, who, whenever he saw his chance to prosper, took it. He was a wage-slave for most of his life, so why shouldn't he? But did he really pocket the flower show funds at The Pauncefote? And did he really cheat at cards? Did he have other women?

My earliest doubts about him began with all those messages scrawled on the insides of fag packets, which I discovered shoved under Granddad's front door.

2:15 SANDDOWN PARK 5 SHILLINGS E/W THE MILLER'S BOY

SAMMIE

Lord Wigg made my dad legal when Harold Wilson's government made off-course betting legal. Harold Wilson was his political hero and he admired him greatly, nearly as much as Danny Blanchflower of Tottenham Hotspur. Dad had set up, at first clandestinely and illegally, in a spare bedroom at my grandparents' house, but now fully authorised, licensed, and, indeed, almost respectable, he moved out into a little rented shop in the village main street. It was an exciting day when the sign CD BEVIN TURF ACCOUNTANT in black lettering on a glossy red background was raised above the window of a defunct fish and chip shop opposite The Pauncefote Inn. A boy of nine or ten, I was allowed in at first, and I remember particularly studying the huge, crisp sheets of runners and riders pinned to the wall, and listening to the tinny voice on the loudspeaker rising to a gabble of excitement as the races neared their end. And I loved to watch the furtive to-ing and fro-ing of the customers who had the peaks of their caps well pulled down for shame. The window had the same kind of frosted glass which protected the privacy of those gamblers as drinkers in the saloon bar across the road.

There on Sunday evenings in summer we would play in the back garden while our parents and grandparents sat in the great bow window of the lounge; we came to tap on the glass when we wanted more Vimto and crisps. These were the golden days of childhood when all seemed to be designed and destined to turn out for ever and ever for the wonderful best.

My father's business did well for a start. He was widely acknowledged in the family and by his friends to be brilliant at mental arithmetic, could work out second and third place odds in his head, and he knew exactly how much money to lay off on dangerous favourites and promising outsiders. He had a very good nose for a winner and for over-priced horses, and for those under-priced horses which had been overlooked. As he thrived he began to go to race meetings in the week as well as on Saturdays, finally giving up the insurance of his hosiery job and leaving his younger brother, my Uncle Denis, and Granddad in charge of the shop, and taking his tick-tack man, Little Dicken and another man, whose name I forget, as his driver and runner. Once he took Alan and me as a treat to Warwick races. I looked forward to it all week and could hardly sleep the night before in anticipation. My brother loved it but I hated it. It rained and I found the whole procedure, after the novelty of the first hour wore away, very tedious. Perhaps this explains why I have never shown the least inclination to gamble on horses, cards or pools. My little vices lie elsewhere. Despite my disillusion on that day I shall always remember my father, in his pomp and prime, standing in front of his red leather satchel and board, under his great red umbrella, chalk in one hand, pen in the other, scribbling on and handing out his tickets, singing

I'm Johnny Fairplay  
Never known to run away  
Catch me up another day  
I'm Johnny Fairplay!

He was attracting a lot of attention. I felt so proud of him, Adam. I remember women, arm in arm, stopping, looking, laughing and shaking their curls at him. He seemed to fascinate them. His pale blue eyes were twinkling with guile and his soft blonde hair was wispy in the breeze. And he had a sweet voice. He could imitate Frank Sinatra or Matt Monroe and add something of his own. He had a good day at the races and by five o'clock his red satchel was heavy with notes and coins. We sang all the way home, stopping for a drop of ale for an hour half-way. We were kept well supplied with Vimto and crisps in the porch.

Most Saturday nights he came back a winner and was sheer sunshine, dancing round the living room and tipping all the small change out of his bag onto the carpet for me and Alan to scramble for. But then, as I crossed over from childhood into early adolescence, an ill wind blew the weather-vane of his fortune round to a colder quarter and the bungalow became glum. A new, bigger rival had set up shop in the village and had taken away some trade with a slicker service. The little men in flat caps took themselves off, their rolled up newspapers under their arms, down the road. Dad began to return from race meetings with a light satchel, muttering that all the favourites had won. One day my mother, red-faced, asked for all the tanners, three-penny bits and coppers back which we kept in a great tin under our bed. My ripped school trousers had to have a knee patch, like a black badge of poverty, which did not go unnoticed in class. I began to realise as I approached my teenage that this was not the way most families went on. Part of childhood, as you must have experienced yourself, Adam, involves the slow dawning of the realisation that those gods we adore and worship, our parents, our grandparents, our uncles and aunts, are but fallible beings, with bad breath, smelly feet and other mortal flaws.

Within me this realisation was now slowly turning into a resentment of my father.

And so by my mid-teens between me and Dad a rift, a chilling had set in. He had, as I said, become increasingly distant from me. At that time, in my callow years, I had not, of course, analysed why and I could not understand his ill humour and quirks of temper, and occasionally violent outbursts. I found myself too often the scapegoat and victim of these low spirits and began to dislike him. It was unfair. Alan, younger by two years, never came in for such rough ill-treatment.

And yet had he not once been such a tender-hearted father? I had woken early one bright Sunday morning. How old had I been? Four? I woke and saw a lovely, golden beam of sun, a searchlight full of motes and dust, slanting through the bedroom curtains. Then I was at the window. What a wonderful, blue sky I saw, almost dark blue, and low over the far allotments a great sun was brimming up, beckoning me out.

I had gotten dressed quickly and hurried up to the path by the railway line, where I ever loved to race up and down and play "trains" on my little bike. Now, at this hour there was nothing but a stunned silence, and a sky striped with chimney stacks. On the other side of the railway, the great factory, whose eight o'clock hooter used to warn my mother and all the scurrying women to clock in and start their prattling sock machines, was having a day off like every other source of

din. On the plants by the hedge-row there were beads of dew and under their leaves, betrayed by the intense sun, were shadows. I turned them and found there tiny snails, (schnee-schnaws I called them.) with shells like humbugs, stuck on by their dry, flaky glue. I picked them off and put them in a pocket. And here was a dark brown furry caterpillar munching left to right and back again, like a type-writer, now raising its shiny black head. I tore its leaf and rolled it up and pocketed it too. I smelt my hand. It was pungent with a stink, which I have since realised, was wild garlic. Then I heard behind me, "John?"

I turned.. It was Dad. He knelt down, tousled my hair and said "What are you doing up so early? It's only six!" He picked me up and carried me back to the kitchen. There was a jar. Carefully all my treasures were put in there and he took me back to bed, their bed, where I snuggled down between their warm bodies and slept on.

I contrast this with the time we had walked home together after he had picked me up from school on a frosty cold day and I had given up chattering because his response had been, apart from the odd grunt, utter silence all the way home. I began to understand what the word moody meant. It was a mile to trudge from school to the great railway bridge, after which we turned the corner into our sullen council close. That mysterious old railway bridge. It has long since been replaced by a functional clanging metal effort. How often I had dreamt of hidden boxes of treasure within the loose dark bricks of its walls! We had taken some bricks out and put our dead caterpillars and other victims behind them. Posh Nigel had said a prayer and crossed himself.....And now I think with a shudder of that young woman. I am staring down at the top of the diesel train from the bridge. I had been in the police service only a few weeks when an emergency call summoned us to the station. A young mother had asked an old couple if they would mind keeping an eye on her two toddlers while she nipped to the toilet. She had walked onto the platform, calmly climbed down and stretched herself across the rails. A train was slowly approaching but in spite of all shouts and pleas she had not budged, had just lain there with an odd smile on her face. The driver had braked but could not avoid hitting her. When we had calmed him down he reversed the train. She lay there, still smiling, in four neat pieces, head, torso, two legs, all parcelled and sealed up neatly. There was not a speck of blood. A weeping WPC had taken her twins away who were asking where their mummy was. How on Earth had they been told the awful truth? Had they ever found it all out? The distraught husband had come in to be interviewed two days later. There had been no note and no indication that she would take her own life. She had often been a pensive, remote person, prone to long bouts of introspective silence. A witness on the platform had said that she had come past him "like a sleep-walker" What had made her do it would never be understood. And even now, as I have just written this, tears are welling up in my eyes again for the husband, and those children; to be bereaved so suddenly and so inexplicably, to have absolutely no means of resolving gnawing doubts and pangs of guilt, no way of getting at the truth, must have been so cruel. Was this not the cruellest thing anybody could do to a loved-one? The perfect cruel crime? To be bereaved after a dreadful argument would come close to that despair: to watch a lover walk out in a huff, in grim silence, never to walk back in again, to smile, kiss and make up. What thin ice we all skate on, Adam!

Now I recall my parents' new resolve to bring their finances into order. Intensely miserable, Dad had begun to fill in at the despised hosiery factory on odd days. He and mother had bought a money box with different sections, labelled in his curious block-capital hand

RATES

MORTGAGE

ELEC

GAS



But he still went racing. One Saturday night he came back cock-a-hoop. Every favourite had gone down and he had landed a spectacular bet on a complete outsider which he had particularly liked the look of. He had won a packet!

On Sunday morning, however, the mood turned very sour. It turned out that Uncle Denis and Granddad, very partial to a drop of ale themselves, had taken it in turns to pop across the road to The Pauncefoot on a slack lunch hour in the shop, and had managed between them to forget a large bet of £20 on the very same horse that Dad had backed. It came charging in at 50-1 and more than cancelled out Dad's winnings. In fact it cleaned him out, and more. Denis and Granddad blamed each other. They hardly spoke again and within a few months Denis had moved to his beloved Skegness (where he eventually made a small fortune with a bingo and amusement arcade business.)

The shop rent could not be paid and it was closed up. Dad went back to work full-time, only occasionally going to meetings on Saturdays, where he became overcautious, shutting his book as soon as he was just a few pounds ahead. He told my worried mother that he was saving for his favourite meeting in Witherbridge, in Yorkshire. All would turn out nice again. She had smiled but I could see how deeply troubled and unhappy she was. She had said to us years later that if only he could have been content to go to work and carry on like everybody else she would have had a very different life. And yet she had also acknowledged that a win on a horse had paid for the deposit on the bungalow, and it was indeed named after it. Crepello. National Hunt racing at that course in Witherbridge meant big fields and therefore an excellent chance of for a bookmaker to make a killing, as long as he laid off the big risks wisely and did not get caught with a late bet himself. So with a big smile and a big tweak on the cheek for Alan and me and a peck for Mam, he set off one bright autumnal afternoon with his driver-cum-runner and Little Dicken. The last weekend of his life.

I remember the phone ringing on Saturday night at about the time he was expected back. I had watched the results on Grandstand and I knew from the long prices of the winners that he must have won. I picked up the phone and it was him, Dad, at his cheerful best. He *had* won. I passed the phone to my mother and her delight gradually subsided. He told her that some business had cropped up and he would come back on his own on the train some time on Sunday. Maybe Monday even. He would let her know for definite tomorrow. Mam frowned wearily but hadn't argued. She was used to him. All Sunday we waited. His dinner was saved in the oven and then finally scraped away. The gloom turned to twilight and then turned to dark and still he did not come. There was no phone call. I lay in bed awake till the small hours. As I had gradually become aware of his unorthodox, maverick lifestyle I had increasingly lain awake at weekends waiting for his return. Billy Nixon at The Pauncefote kept the backroom open for a card school most Saturday nights and bribed the local constabulary with a few free pints as they did their rounds. And I would lie awake crying and cursing him, aware of my mother restless in the next room, both of us awaiting either his careless, unsteady footsteps or the slowing of a car bringing him home. My younger brother Alan always slept on untroubled.

The grey, windy dawn woke me. I had missed him. But my mother's sleepless face instantly told me he had not come home. Reluctantly, I pedalled to school against a cruel gale and lashing rain. I sat in French, still damp, when the door opened. It was the headmaster. Instantly I knew he wanted me. Then I heard him whisper to the teacher and I thought I heard my name mentioned, to which the latter replied with a strange sigh, as if shocked and appalled. Then I was properly

summoned to go out. Once in the corridor the head said

“Go to my office, John. Your uncle is in there.”

The use of my Christian name and his more sombre than usual fiddle-face told me my father was dead. In a different dimension of the world to everyone else I floated down the stairs and corridor. In the office my Uncle Wilfred, my mother’s brother, sat shrunken in an armchair. “Your dad’s been hurt in a fight John.” (I sighed with relief.) “Hurt so bad....he’s died....” I remember how we both got to our feet at the same time, bolt upright, as if to stand for the national anthem. In his car he lit us both a Woodbine. Wilf was a chain-smoker. Even then, his cracked voice was giving early warning of the throat cancer which would eventually despatch him.

### **Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> October**

Uncle Wilf had long, long since retired to the Cotswolds with his wife Margaret. I happened to drop in to see my mother this morning, and she told me that Wilfred was a lot worse. Her trembling hand held a letter from her sister-in-law, and she handed it over

Dear Irene,

I don’t thing Wilfs going to be long now. I now you cant get over on your own, perhaps the lads would bring you over. He says he’d love to see you all,

Yours,

Margaret

I looked at her as she painfully got to her feet with the help of her frame.

“I’ll mek a cup o’ tea.”

Mechanically I offered to do it but, as usual, she refused, saying that she needed the exercise.

She had put milk in mine again, but I didn’t mention it.

“I’ll take you, Mam, if you want to go.”

She picked up the letter and read it again, shaking in hand and head.

“It’s such a long way.....I’ll remember him as he was.....poor lad...”

We sipped our tea. She whimpered “poor lad” again. He was younger than her by three years.

“I’ll go down on Saturday, mother.”

“Shall you? With Alan?”

I nodded. “Well, I’ll give Alan a ring anyway.”

I knew what was coming next.

“Buy him a card and write it from me,” she said.

“Get him a card?” I replied. “What? A get-well card? A sympathy card? I don’t think so mother.

I’ll just give him your love.”

I phoned Alan but he said he was busy. Saturday was the worst possible day for him.

### **Saturday 21st October**

Now I barely recognised Wilf’s balding, shrivelled head on the pillow. My first impression was that he had been seated in a ridiculously huge circus armchair; the truth was though that he was fast disappearing from the world. I had been quite close to him in my youth and to see him so

reduced awoke in me now a great pity. I had been closer to Uncle Wilf than to my own dad and it was acknowledged that I took after him, both in the face and in the brain. I shuddered to think that I was staring here at an ancient version of myself. I had admired him more than any other member of the family. He had risen from the shop-floor to be first the manager of a room, then the general factory manager and finally a director of a knitwear company. He had passed his exams to go to Grammar School but the family had not been able to afford the uniform, and of course, in stuffy old England such formalities were much more important than lifting a clever lad out of poverty and ignorance. Nevertheless, his mind had glowed amongst the murk of his surroundings and his merit was recognised, to the extent that, though only in his twenties he was appointed to the committee which oversaw the preparations for Earlstone's celebrations of the queen's coronation. That programme of events still lies, yellowed, among the precious photos and keepsakes in my mother's biscuit tin.

He could barely gasp his words now; the voice that had kept us so well entertained was virtually gone. I got as close as I could. The smell of death in his breath was appalling. When I had given him my family news and he had asked the odd question he became silent and pensive. Finally he looked me directly in the eye and said,

"I can't stop thinking about that day....."

"I've been thinking about it a lot, Uncle Wilf. I'm afraid it will always be....my main memory of you...."

He began to weep silently, doubtless thinking of all the other, much worthier contenders, such as Christmas parties, autumn walks in the wood, gathering shiny chestnuts and acorns....that August week in Southport....when death was a distant speck, many, many, many miles away... I passed him his tumbler of lemonade; his tearful grey eyes, now massive in his gaunt face behind his magnifying glasses of spectacles, looked fearfully into mine. I took his hand, thinking he must have been staring into oblivion.

"I've always meant to ask you, John...why...you knew he was dead already..." he said.

"Intuition..." and I told him of all the clues leading up to our meeting in the headmaster's study. While he thought that over I decided to gamble. "Now tell *me* something, Wilf. What were you keeping back?"

"Keeping back? Me? Nothing!"

But his great eyes said otherwise.

"It's alright" – and I rubbed his wrinkled hand like an old lamp – "Whatever it was, it can't hurt to tell now. So tell me"

I pictured that awful scene again. He had taken responsibility and gone up to Yorkshire to make the identification. My mother could not move, for grief and shock. He was handing back my father's empty wallet and his cracked, arrested wristwatch to my mother in the lounge. The expandable metallic strap had a link missing. The red satchel, bulging with the winnings he would never enjoy, sat on the armchair, keeping his battered suitcase, with its torn and faded triangles of previous outings, silent company. And he was looking at mother, in the same over-deliberate way he had just looked at me now.

"He looked quite peaceful, sis. He was bruised but not..... badly knocked about. They said he probably passed out and didn't know much about it, thank God...."

His coffin had come down by train a few days later, as soon as the police were satisfied he could be buried.

"Don't go and see him, Irene," Wilf was saying. "Best remember him as he was, at his best..."

And she had cried loud with relief. I couldn't cry. Alan, my brother, had loved him in a

passionate, boisterous, uncomplicated way. He was his favourite son, looked like him and later on behaved, though on a lesser scale, like him. He had sobbed all day after Wilf – poor lad – had had to go and fetch him, like me, back from his school. Alan could not understand my obvious lack of grief and, like two trunks of the same tree, we diverged from each other gradually and by tacit agreement from that growing point onwards.

“Tell me, Uncle Wilf. What was it? We always put the best gloss on a story, particularly on one as cruel as that.... You can’t say anything that could shock me all these years later...and, it goes without saying, I would keep it to myself. I won’t tell my mother.”

There should surely be no more honest a narrator than a dying man. Wilf looked at me this time with more determined eyes. I rubbed his hand again. At last he said “He was a bloody mess, John, a terrible mess. His face was so swollen up that..... I know he had been beaten up, but.....” He stopped and began to weep again. In the hallway, into the panel of the tulip glass of the lounge door Aunt Marge now came hovering, a distorted, indecisive ghost, and then dematerialised, returning to her kitchen.

“Didn’t the inquest say a blow to the temple.....?”

“Yes, that’s what killed him, but this was more than a fist-fight...I’d seen plenty of those in the army...bad ‘uns...Charlie had been ...totally.....pummelled...by a gang.”

He coughed and cried out in great pain. When the attack subsided he looked at me again, even more candidly.

“There’s something else?” I asked. Perhaps Wilfred had just decided that he would not take his long-held inner thoughts, unaided and unshared, to his grave, because he suddenly blurted out, in tears, in a dreadful whisper “I couldn’t stand the man.....Charlie.....Your dad.”

He collected himself. “I hated him...him...and all his ...women...How he treated Irene - don’t you dare tell her! – The amount of money he wasted on gambling. ..and boozing... You know, him and his friends would even gamble whose beer-mat a fly would settle on next.....That’s the sort of man he was..... But I’ve said too much.”

I sat transfixed by a strange, chill feeling inside. Another piece of the puzzle, called My Father, which I had begun so many years ago, had suddenly snapped into place. I had long had a feeling that infidelity was likely to have been one of his sins, yet its confirmation here still came as a shock.

“You haven’t said too much. Uncle Wilf. Now I’ll tell you my secret.”

He gulped at his lemonade which seemed to throb down that blood vessel made so stiff and explicit by his demise, and peered at me for enlightenment.

“I didn’t much care for him either,” I whispered. This did nothing to comfort him and he looked even graver. I began to try and take my ungenerous comment back but he interrupted me impatiently.

“There’s something else I need to say.”

Then he looked doubtful and looked for more encouragement. I told him to go on.

“I couldn’t be sure - absolutely sure it was .....him.”

“Couldn’t be sure? You couldn’t be sure?” I sat back, utterly shocked. In a flashback to my nightmare I saw my father wink in his coffin. Wilf coughed again and tears of pain and sorrow welled in his eyes.

“I’ve kept it to myself all these long-lived years. Now it’s out.” He broke off to sob. “He was so badly beaten up that his face.....” He shook his head and gasped for breath. I gave him more to drink. At length he grew calmer and carried on.

“That damned detective! He was in such a hurry - kept looking at his watch and saying he had an

appointment....But his clothes and his bag and everything else were there...It had to be him! And he never came back, did he?" His anxious eyes searched mine again for reassurance. I smiled.

"He never did - course it had to be him, Wilf." But the detective in me could not help adding "You didn't notice anything odd?"

He shook his head and looked away, alerting me. There *was* something.

"I don't know - I hadn't seen him for months," he said at last. "People alter as they grow older. Just look at me!"

"What was different?" I asked as gently as I could. He shrugged and I saw how pitifully bony his shoulders had become. "How sure were you, Wilf? Eighty, ninety per cent?"

He shrugged again. "Almost totally, but that little doubt stayed with me, and it's bothered me more just recently. There! It's off my chest at last! I see that awful face in my dreams still - in my nightmares. I can't remember any more what he used to look like, alive."

Nor could I.

"Was there one particular feature....the ears? The nose?"

"He didn't have a nose! It was a flattened pulp...."

I left him with a long gentle kiss on his cheek, said something utterly useless to a hovering Aunt Marge, whose name and face always pop into my head as soon as I hear the word or see celery, and left their bungalow for ever. On the way home, the past, now thoroughly stirred up like a whirl of dry leaves by a nagging wind, began to distract me. So I pulled over and switched off the motor. That mad genie which almost subconsciously solved crimes for me was yanking out files from all over my brain and scattering their contents on the floor.

### **The train journey to Southport:**

That hot August week in about 1960. (About 1960! Honestly! How much could any of us write accurately of our lives, if it was part of some Examination we had to pass before we were allowed to die!?) I remember Wilf, standing at the corridor window, risking his head to collect the numbers of oncoming engines for us to scribble down, while Dad sat smoking his Players in the compartment, resolutely keeping aloof. Wilf and he seemed to avoid each other in my recollection. (Or had Wilf's confession now simply enhanced that impression?) As our special train sauntered through Crewe junction there were suddenly so many numbers to scribble that we could hardly cope. So encouraged by Mam, Dad came to our aid. A great red "semi" stood indignantly hissing as we crawled humbly past.

"46209!" exclaimed Wilf and I wrote the number down.

Dad took my pencil and scratched it out. "No, 208" he said quietly.

Wilf turned and looked up at him over his spectacles and raised his eyebrows.

"D'you want a bet, Wilf? The engine's mucky, look!" said Dad.

Wilf seemed to force a laugh and said, "Bet with you Charlie? No blooming fear!"

Perhaps I did just imagine that there had been a slight tension between them. Wilf and Marge were "chapel". Dad would always let Wilf chatter on. He quietly downed pints while Wilf sipped glasses of pop or cups of tea that holiday.

### **The circus in Southport**

As soon as the lion tamer had come into the ring I said "The lion will bite him". And it did. He

wasn't badly mauled as it turned out, but amidst all the screaming, Dad turned to me and gave me a strange, almost anxious look, open-mouthed. Like the lion.

### **The grey horse:**

“The grey horse is going to win”. We were sitting one afternoon at Granddad's around the telly. Dad turned to me and sneered. “What, that old nag? It's 10-1! More likely to drop dead than win!” But Mam protested, “It's a lovely horse, Charlie!” And chivvied by her and Grandma, he had reluctantly called a fellow bookie to put a few shillings, to win, on the grey. Half-way round it was nowhere and Dad was muttering that it would be renamed Kit-E-Kat after the race. Then three furlongs from home it got a mention; one furlong and it was in the first four and improving, finally winning by a nose to our great roars of encouragement and delight. Amidst the cheering Dad was giving me the same sort of quizzical look as at the circus.

### **Yarmouth!:**

It hit me like a bolt. Now there was no point trying to drive on. Looking through the rainy window, I noticed a pub further on, on the left. It was brightly lit and enticing. I needed a drink. I phoned home to say I would be late (“Eat without me. I'll get a take-away”) I sat down in the cosy lounge and watched the flames from the logs in the grate licking through the wheaten beer in my glass. And mentally I went back to Yarmouth. Had it been a July? Dad had taken Alan and his friend (what was his name??) but not me, as a special treat. Seeing I was more disappointed than I had let on, Granddad had said “Why not go and surprise them on the course?”

An obviously relieved Denis had agreed and told him to leave the shop to him. So Mam put up some sandwiches and we caught the train. Round and round we trudged, looking for digs, but with it being high season and race-week, there were NO VACANCIES signs in every bay window. As we were despairing of finding anywhere, I suddenly caught sight of Alan and his friend. It turned out that they were staying in a private house. At the kitchen sink a pretty, youngish woman with a blonde pony-tail was peeling potatoes. On a stool by the grate a beautiful little girl, Sherry, was telling a story from her picture book and swinging her legs back and forth. Her mother made us a cup of tea and said that “Charlie” would be back soon. She was humming away to some strange music on the radio and telling her little girl that she had been named after it. I couldn't wait for Dad to come in and be surprised, but when he entered it was not with a look of delighted surprise but of shock. Dad and Granddad went and had words in the other room. Possible reasons did not register at the time. Perhaps it had been about leaving Denis on his own in the shop. Or the lack of room in that house (I had to double up with Granddad and put up with his snoring) Perhaps. But when they came back in to the kitchen Granddad and he were both looking at me in the same anxious way, as Dad had often looked at me before.

Nothing was said. Now, thirty odd years after the event, had his old look, which I now remembered, given the whole truth away? Then another thought came crashing in. Who was the little girl? I calculated. How many times had he been to Yarmouth? I had no idea. Was that his last or last but one summer? Had it been after Yarmouth that the chill had set in between us? The clues and questions were surfacing like great bubbles in hot mud. I suddenly fancied a brandy. I had not drunk one for years. I had taken a vow of abstinence after I had lost my patience on brandy with a stupid fellow-guest, some liberal advocate of civil liberties for the criminal, at a dinner party. So I stood up and bought a double. I sipped. Still more files came tumbling out.

### **May, in the car:**

May was my mother's friend. The News Of The World would have called her an attractive, petite redhead. (I used to read its lurid accounts of unwanted (?) "intimacies" around May's and her husband's house on Sunday mornings (my mother would not have it in the home) and so get my first little erections in my short trousers.)

Well, as I had left home to do my paper round after school one afternoon there were Dad and May sitting in her car. She must have brought him back from The Pauncefote (he never did learn to drive). They were kissing and cuddling (à la News Of The World, being "intimate"?). For a second neither of them smiled when they saw me; and then waved at me enthusiastically. Too enthusiastically? This show of affection from Dad struck me as odd and unconvincing, even then, and not in keeping at all with the growling he was wont to greet me with. But I waved back and then thought no more about it. Now it had become part of an overwhelming case for the prosecution and had lost its ring of innocence.

### **The woman in mourning:**

Had it been May? Against the kicking gale, which had seemed to blow on and on since the day of his death, we had fought our way up our drive to the hearse and our black limousine. Across the road, with a veil and a black scarf flying, stood a woman in a black shroud of mourning.

Mam paused from her wailing and spluttered

"Who she?"

Who she? Who indeed?

### **The phone calls:**

For weeks after his death the phone rang with strange voices. "He owed me money" ..... "He was looking after some money for me" Some of the voices were women's, with faraway accents. At first mother was timid and polite. Then she became firmer and gradually lost patience, gaining indignation in its stead. After a few weeks the phone calls stopped. She had emerged as a lioness, who had remained too long in Dad's leonine shadow. Before he died she would only answer the phone if she thought it was him calling. Having always been the easy touch at home, she now began to become resolved and even implacable.

"Mam, I'm leaving school to get a job." She threw back her mane of auburn hair and said to me quietly, "Oh no you are not. You are staying on to do exams and make something of yourself." And I did as I was told and became the first person in our family to get a degree, a good degree; in English, at a respectable university. But Alan, never an academic, did leave, to work as a nurseryman. (Now he owns one and does very well, better than me, but would do even better if he did not gamble.)

### **The drawer:**

Dad had one drawer of their bedroom table under lock and key. Among all his clothes and effects that came back down from Yorkshire no key was to be found. After we had searched together for days to find it she finally took a screwdriver and wrenched it open. Bank books. One by one with a mixture of joy, shock and exasperation she took them out and inspected the amounts inside, ranging from a few pounds to nearly £200. "Why? Why did we have to live like that when he had so much money?" We looked at the branch addresses – all racing towns. Uncle Wilf took some time off work and, taking the death certificate, set their closure in motion and arranged the monies to be credited to mother.

*“He was looking after some money for me.....”*

Was there a bank book from his place of death, in Yorkshire? I looked in annoyance at my last drop of brandy, as if it was that tiny piece of irretrievable information, and drained it. Should I ask mother? No. She could hardly remember birthdays these days and I would have to explain the reason for the question.

I got back into the car and drove straight home. After a restless weekend I went to the police station on Monday and dealt with my backlog of paperwork. As soon as I could, I took the ten days leave owed to me. The same day the message came through that Uncle Wilf had died in his sleep. Alan would go to the funeral. We would send a message of condolence and a wreath with him

### **Thursday 26th October**

Your mother had gone off to the library where she works, Adam. She neither seemed surprised nor interested that I have taken this leave. She required no explanation and I did not feel disposed to give one. I sat and pondered where I should begin my investigation. After a few enquiries at his old local I found Little Dicken easily enough, resident in a home for the elderly.

”Do you remember me, Roy?”

He looked up from his quivering book and shook his ratty head.

“I hope your marbles are intact.”

He laughed and called me a cheeky bugger, whoever I was. I had never quite taken to Roy Dicken. He had a sly cast to his face. And I could not forgive his intrusion on our morning of mourning and distress, almost throwing himself on my sobbing mother in his own exaggerated grief. He had been drinking and I could sense her recoil. “If only I’d stopped with him, Irene” he kept saying indistinctly between mouthfuls of her wet blouse. I had been disgusted.

Did he remember me? He looked at me long and hard, quizzing me with his rodent eyes for clues. He truthfully shook his head and I noted this as a benchmark.

“I’m Charlie’s eldest son, John Bevin” I watched as this sank in, like slow water into sand and watched his narrow eyes grow, as somewhere behind an old light slowly turned on. He sat back and drew his hand through his now thin strands of brilliantined hair, across his small yellow skull and he made a strange smacking noise with his dry lips, which eventually turned into a cry of surprise and delight.

“Good God! I never...well.the last time I saw you.....” He threw his head back to check.

I supplied him with the answer. “....was probably at his funeral, Roy.”

“Mmm...Oh dear...It was a bad piece o’ business ...terrible...” And then he sighed. “You know....if only I’d.....” He slowly shook his head again.

He fell silent and his rocking head seemed to follow the rings around in the carpet.

“If only you had stayed? Why, what could you have done?”

“If I’d been there...things...might have turned out better...different...you know.....”

“Can you remember what happened before you came away?”

“As if it was yesterday.” He coughed.

“Roy” I said “I want you to tell me everything.”

The carer brought us some tea and I helped him light a fag. As he began to tell his tale I took out a note-pad. He told me they had put up, for the Friday night, for the fourth year running in Hope



Street at a B&B called The Hollies, just off the main road, along from the church. Him, Charlie and, (of course!) Bob Coley, his driver and runner (who had moved away and had, so he had heard, died some years ago of lung cancer). What a grand day they had at the races! Only one favourite had come in and they had laid bets off well. They had gone back to the digs, and at Charlie's suggestion, fatal as it turned out, instead of going straight home, they had decided to go for a slap-up dinner at The Regent Hotel, the prime restaurant in town. Charlie had been on especially good form and had soon had the neighbouring tables rocking with laughter at his jokes and tall stories. They had even ordered a bottle of champagne. Then at half-past-eight Dicken had looked at his watch and said they ought not to stay much longer. Coley kept saying he had to get back. But Charlie was in full flood. He had got wind of a card-school in the back room. Brag. They would stay another half-hour to clean these Irishmen out, who were working on the motorway. Coley had started to witter on about having to get up early the next day so Charlie had lost his rag and told him to get packing. He would get the train back with Dicken on Sunday. Then he had made the phone call home. Coley had watched the cards for a while and then had left.

"These four Irishmen were pretty sozzled. Your Dad suggested we make it a bit more exciting and play with black deuces as floaters"

"Floaters?"

"Yes, floaters...wild cards...could be anything...What? You the son of a bookie and never heard of that?"

I shook my head.

"Anyway, they agreed. Thought it was a good idea, the idiots! And before long we were taking them to the cleaners between us. The limit went, at their suggestion, from a shilling to a florin, to half-a-dollar and pretty soon to ten bob."

"But how were you working together?"

"Easy. Whenever one of us knew we had a black two dealt to us we would go a shilling blind."

I nodded. *Going blind* I understood.

"So that meant they had to bet double to see you?"

"Correct. To fool them, one or the other of us the other would play for a while, and then dack."

"Dack?"

"Dack. You know, throw his cards in, to lead them on. Occasionally we picked up rubbish but more often than not you'd had a flush, or a run or a prial."

"But how did you know you had black twos, without picking your cards up?"

He looked again at me in surprise. "Dead easy. As soon as you got a deuce you made sure that after the hand you put your cards on the bottom of the pack last, with the two at the very bottom. The pack was never shuffled. All you needed to do was to count to 52 and you knew where it was. Whoever had got one stood a good chance of winning. They were so drunk that your Dad even started to hide twos on his knees under the table. We won their bloody wages off them, the thick Micks!"

My eyes must have registered some disapproval because he added "They didn't have to play. Nobody made them!..... Well, pretty soon one or two were dropping out and some others wanted in. Then this big chap, with a boxer's nose sat opposite your Dad and after a few hands said he wanted to talk to him. So they went outside together."

I tapped my pencil. "How old?" Now a slight change in his eye alerted me.

"Mid-thirties.... Younger than us... fairish hair. When he came back in Charles had gone all serious. He told me he had something to sort out and I should see if Coley had gone yet. He was

staying put. So I rushed out and just managed to catch him as he drove past the hotel.”

“That’s it?”

Dicken nodded. His sharp black eyes were shifty now. What a poor liar! There was a lot more, I could tell. He had just told me the old, old story, which he had recounted dozens of times in his heyday in the Pauncefote bar. The story he felt comfortable with, like an old pair of slippers. He was about to enquire about my mother when I said, sharper now “Who was he?”

“Who?”

“The tall bloke”

“Dunno”

Lie.

“Roy...my dad’s killers were never caught. Was he one of them?”

He took a long pull on his fag and shrugged his little shoulders.

“I told the police all this a long time ago. They showed me mug-shots but he wasn’t there”

He glanced up at me and glanced away.

“Roy. Look at me.” For a few seconds I had his open face to plumb. I sat back and drummed my fingers on my hand. “Let me tell you why he wasn’t there Roy. He didn’t have a record, that’s why. You knew him, didn’t you? All three of you knew him. I just have this feeling of certainty you knew him. You described him too well.”

“Now that’s the bloody copper in you, ain’t it?” he sneered, suddenly showing me his genuine, nasty self. “Look, it doesn’t matter who he was. It was the Paddies who beat your Dad up. Wanted their bloody money back....The police knew three or four must have set on him...bloody cowards....he’d have handled them easy, Old Bomber, one by one in a fair fight....They must have followed him from The Regent on the Sunday and then duffed him up in the alley.....And the police found a packet of Sweet Afton fags by his body. It was the Micks, no doubt about it....”

I knew already that this was more or less the accepted version of events that evening. Unlawful killing had been the coroner’s verdict. I sensed that Dicken had gone on too speedily to the authorised version. He was covering his tracks and trying to distract me. “It does matter who that man was, Roy. Shall I tell you why?”

Now he looked at me again, this time with genuine apprehension.

“Because I want to know who he was. And as Charlie’s son, not as a bloody copper, I have a right to know. This is the first time I’ve heard a word about him. Whatever business kept my dad there on Sunday was linked to him. You know that.”

Now I lowered my voice and slowed my speech “You mentioned him because you thought that would be enough to ease your conscience. You always believed that he had something to do with it. I can tell, Roy. And I can tell there’s something burning your conscience that you’ve never told anybody.”

And then, incredibly, he bent his head and cried. And with a start of horror almost, I saw him now, just as vividly as back then, crying on my mother’s heaving bosom. Those had not been tears of grief at all, but of guilt. And not imaginary guilt either. I let him have it out. I told the carer that Roy was a bit upset about old times and asked for another pot of tea. When she had come and gone I said “Where do you keep your whisky, Roy?”

He looked up and lines of laughter cracked his bleary face. “What, here? Chance’d be a fine thing!”

I reached into my pocket and slowly drew out a half-bottle of Teachers. I had recollected a day when he had parked himself in our kitchen and splashed some from a flask into his tea. Dad had

declined his offer. He never touched spirits. Now Roy stared at me and at the bottle like a child on Christmas morning. He had already sipped his tea, making room for a good double measure. I tipped the bottle.

“Whoa! You’ll get me drunk!”

“Roy, just enjoy it. I remembered you like a drop.”

“Ain’t you heving any?”

I shook my head. He drank and let out a rapturous - “Ahh!” then said “You’re just like Charlie then. He never touched spirits” He sipped a couple more times.

“Roy, whatever it is that’s still troubling you, whatever it is that still makes you feel guilty and unhappy, all these years later” – and here I took his wrinkled hand and patted it – “I know you still feel bad Roy, but you must realise it wasn’t your fault he died.. You weren’t there. You loved him.”

Roy took a deep drink. He was snivelling again.

“I did, John, I loved him...like a brother. Oh my God! Why? ...Why did I tell him? I...I just felt such pride to count him as a friend...because he was so funny...and clever. Those bloody thick navvies...thick as effing bricks....John, your dad was as much at his ease with the ladies and gentlemen and lords and ladies in The Silver Ring as he was with the trash in Tattersalls.....He was ...special.....”

He drained his cup and carried on. “Dicken“, Charlie whispered to me, “I’m going to sit here another half-hour.” Then we would all get going. Coley went back to pack and sort the bill out. He gave us till ten at the latest. And we would have gone! Charlie was letting them win a few bob back, just to soften the blow when he would stand up and go. Always a good trick to use with big losers, if you want them to let you go.... And then, at about quarter-to-ten in walked...this chap, Jim. Charlie looked up at him and smiled, friendly like. ..”

“Go on...”

“Big Jim..... was the landlady’s husband. Another Irishman.”

Something froze within and seized my chest. My pen and note-book fell on the floor. I took up the whisky and drank from the bottle. Dicken, shaking, held his cup out like Oliver. I splashed a good measure in.

“Jim Who?”

“Can’t remember....The digs were The Hollies.”

“I know”

“Who told you that?”

“You told me, Roy.”

“Oh yes, I did, didn’t I! Well, he came in and stood near me at the bar. I had dropped out so that another navvy could sit in.”

“And what did you tell him, Roy? What was it you regret telling him?”

He took a big swig.

“Come on Roy, get it off you chest” I tried his hand again. He was breathing quite sharply now and a bead of sweat had trickled like a tiny snail from his thin hair down his yellow temple. It flashed through my mind, how ironic it would be if he should croak it now, just as the critical moment of birth approached. Yet, no...there it came.....

“ Jim said – “It looks as if you boys have had a good day, judging from the state of you!” Well, I know I had had it. I couldn’t have drunk a drop more, even if my life had depended on it. I told him we’d had a big win, cleared nearly three hundred nicker. We’d had a big count-up afore we came out... Well he must have looked at Charlie’s stash of coins and notes on the table because

then he said – and I can remember it word for word – “Lucky at the gee-gees, lucky at cards AND lucky in love....How does he do it?” And he slowly shook his head. Anyway, I was pretty blotto. I’d had a whisky chaser to every pint – plus the champagne – and I...I ....told him.....”

“What did you tell him?”

“How he was doing it.....about the twos....”

“You told him, a stranger, about the twos? You mean you told him how he was winning the shirts and pants of those big, burly Irishmen.....?”

He sipped until his cup was empty again. “A spot more?” he implored.

I was angry. “When you’ve told me everything, we’ll see....”

“Well, it didn’t seem to matter. He weren’t exactly a stranger...He seemed a good bloke. He wasn’t playing or losing money (he told us he never gambled – or drank too much– he had seen enough of that from his dad when he was little – ) So I just whispered in his ear how he was doing it. I just thought he’d laugh and see the funny side.”

I waited while he thought over his next sentence. “But he didn’t see the funny side, did he, Dicken?”

“No. He stiffened up and said, quite loud, - “Charlie Bevin, you’re a bloody cheat – and not just at cards” – It was quite noisy in there but it was clear enough to hear for anybody really listening – the bloke next to him at the bar looked up a second and looked away. I hardly dared look at the table...but thankfully the Micks hadn’t taken any notice – too pissed up or wrapped up in the cards – But Charlie was staring back at him. He looked worried. He got up and came over and told Jim quietly to keep his mouth shut. Jim was a fair bit taller but your dad was giving him a good, old-fashioned stare – we all called your dad Bomber at school, you know!”

“I know.....he bombed me fair few times.....”

“Oh I know he had a bad temper. Well, Jim just shut up and swallowed hard and they both went outside. The Irishmen were all complaining. “I’ll soon be back” he said “Call of nature” He looked proper out of sorts when he came back. The rest of the story you know...”

But he said this too quickly, as if he wanted done, looking too candidly at me.

“One more?” I held the whisky above the proffered cup but held it there without pouring.

“Roy, I know why you kept it all back. You think that Jim set the Irishmen on Charlie because you told him about the twos” – (I let a few drops fall into his cup but only enough to tantalise) – “You’ve always blamed yourself. That’s why you told the police half a story. You weren’t lying. You just weren’t telling all of the truth. You could live with that. No-one would ever need to know your part in all this and you had been a reasonably good citizen, travelling back up, helping the police with their enquiries, etc.....”

“I felt sure that somebody else in the back room would tell the police who he was and that would put them onto him.....And even if he did tell the Micks what was going on, they had been the ones to clobber him. What crime had Jim committed?”

I let the bottle slip again and he drank greedily. “But he wasn’t a drinker, Dicken. Nobody in there knew him. The bit in your theory which is totally missing is the answer to the question why....”

“Why? What do you mean, *why*?” He proffered his cup again.

I took a slow swig myself and watched his eyes follow the air bubbles rise and vanish in the amber of the half-full flask. “Why would Mr X want Charlie – a house guest – a man he barely knew– badly done over? Why? Tell me about *her*, Roy. Was she pretty?”

He gazed away and nodded reluctantly like a schoolboy finally caught out in a lie.

“Give me a drink and I’ll tell you everything.”

I poured him about a third of what was left. By now the spirit loosening his tongue was beginning to slow and slur his voice.

“The rest is yours when you’ve told me.” I said. “I don’t want it. But I shall know if there’s one smidgen of truth left behind” And I swirled the rest of the whisky in the bottle. “Think of the truth as the rest of this whisky. It’s only job now is to come out. I’m the only one who will know and you can’t shock or upset me”

“I didn’t want to say.... ANYTHING..... to hurt Irene. I adored her. But your dad was a bugger wi’ the women. Did you know? Most of the landladies we stayed with fell for him. Wendy was no different. Jim didn’t know because..... he worked nights..... at some big dairy as supervisor. When we arrived there this time Jim was as pleased as punch. He had a three-month year old son. All three of us just stood and stared at Wendy.”

“Three months old, Dicken?” Now he looked up at me and raised his eyebrows. “It wasn’t Jim’s then?”

“It was the bloody image of Charlie! Everybody could see it.....apart from that idiot Jim.”

“So what happened?”

“I can’t say for sure.....but when Coley got back to the digs that Saturday night Wendy had been blarting and was in a terrible state. She’d either told him...or he had just guessed.....maybe because he had seen Charlie again”

“And she was blonde, brunette, redhead or what?”

After a while he muttered, as I fully expected, “Blonde.” Now I saw again the blonde woman with the pony-tail peeling potatoes in that Yarmouth kitchen. Was that my little half-sister swinging her legs as she read her stories on the chair? The girl, whose face I could no longer see, whom I had taken out in her pushchair to the beach? She had told me she wanted to marry me. Where was she now? Had her mother ever told her the truth? What was the truth?

“So you think Jim wanted Charlie roughed up and scared off?”

He nodded. “I decided to keep everything quiet. If it had all come out about the woman and the child, how would Irene have taken it, on top of everything else? Charlie was dead. It was either just the navvies or the navvies plus Jim. It didn’t seem to matter and it wouldn’t alter the fact that he was dead”

“Roy, you did the right thing. I understand and I don’t blame you. And you have no idea what happened between Jim and Charlie on the Sunday?”

He told me no and I believed him. I patted his hand and gave him the rest of the whisky. I drove back home and packed. Jane stood in the bedroom with her arms folded and watched me. Finally unable to quell her curiosity she said, “Where are you going?”

I turned and smiled. “To Lincolnshire. To see Uncle Denis. I’ve taken ten days.”

I gazed deep into her cold eyes, eyes the blue of forget-me-nots, once a source of such passionate love, gave her a significant look and added. “You won’t mind.” I thought again of that phone call. She had picked up the receiver and in her usual bold way had spoken, and then instantly hushed her voice. That confirmed all I had suspected. I had persuaded myself that I was not that bothered. The flame had been guttering and spluttering out between us for quite some time, but like all long, slow processes it was difficult to say when precisely it had begun. A little sparkle in her late forties would do her no harm. And I had had my moments too. I smiled and kissed her chastely, as if she were my sister, on the forehead. She did not respond, except to turn and go downstairs. The next morning I set off for Skegness.

## Friday 27th October

How long had it been since I had been to Skeggy? Apart from Cousin Eddie's wedding? I calculated.....thirty-four years? Had I been sixteen? It had been a crazy Whitsun weekend adventure. Three pairs of us had hitch-hiked there with little more than two tents, a few pounds and the clothes we stood in. We had found a quiet spinney near Uncle Denis's and camped there. No-one bothered us. I had called briefly on my uncle and aunt and was not made particularly welcome. Luckily the sun had beaten down and not rain that weekend, otherwise our canvas would, I'm sure, have been found wanting. Basically we drank ourselves silly, overdosed on fish and chips and chatted up a few birds who were staying on a nearby caravan site, and had nearly got invited back. (But the Permissive Society had not quite filtered through to those latitudes by then.) By Monday morning, dazed and hot in the strengthening sun we were hitching back. Or rather, walking back. We were half-way to Lincoln when a kindly man in a camper van had picked us up, exhausted, and driven us back to Leicester. There we bought a platform ticket, caught the next train home and scrambled through the hedge at the station into the jitty, the same jitty of my childhood wonder and wandering, which ran alongside the line. We had been all over the country like this, following our beloved Leicester City, hiding in the toilets until the ticket inspector had given up knocking ( I could do a very convincing old lady) and had passed along the corridor. Now I was on my way again to Skegness. When I reached Lincoln I was thrown onto a never-ending ring road, at the hub of which the great cathedral very slowly turned, like a model in a great museum, against the huge, very pale blue sky, with the vast Lincolnshire plain behind.

Another flat, slow fifty miles saw me in "bracing" Skegness. The gloom of the past few days had lifted and a beautiful, soft, autumnal day was blessing the coast, managing even to take the hard edges off this brash place. The lowering afternoon sun was blinding the windows of the caravans, thousands of them, rank upon rank, beyond which the waving, writhing arms of the funfair rides were speeding up or slowing down. I drove slowly along the front, recognising nothing. Like the code of some commercial DNA, the building blocks of this Phenomenon consisted of Pub, Pound Shop, Chip Shop, Amusement Arcade, in no coherent order. And all over it, amongst the litter of greasy papers, swarmed the new English roundhead army, victualing themselves from cardboard trays and helter-skelter ices, with obese stomachs, tattooed, flabby arms, and premature double chins, dressed in their vests, trainers and baseball caps; as if the high-rise blocks and estates of Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester had all been cleared for the day to be given an overdue airing. Am I a snob?

I had seen Uncle Denis and Aunt Nora twice since they left home. In all these years contact had been restricted to an exchange of Xmas cards with my mother. He was Dad's younger brother, by about five years and would now be about seventy-two. I had had some contact with cousin Eddie off and on at football matches and he had kept me updated about his dad's various heart bypasses, so many now that his heart had been christened Spaghetti Junction.

I cruised around the more sedate quarters of the town, found their road and pulled up outside their impressive Victorian pile. I crunched my way down the pebble drive, rang and waited. "I thought I'd surprise you, Aunt Nora." She had peeped her nose around the massive door. Had she shrunk too? She straightened up a little and looked at me. "Is it Alan?"

"No, it's John. Can I come in?"

"Why on Earth didn't you ring and let us know you were coming?"

"Maybe if I had, you would have found an excuse to tell me to stay away." She thought this over and then opened up.

“You’d better come in. But I warn you, he’s not in a very good mood. I’ll make some tea.”

I went into the lounge and sat down opposite him. He was asleep in his great armchair. He had also shrunk but anyone could see he had been a hulk of a man in his prime. His dark hair still waved to one side and across his forehead his black eyebrows were still crawling away from each other, without success. His still meaty forearms rested, fists clenched, on the rolled arms of the armchair. I could see myself in the cabinet next to him and compared my long, square face with his chubby, round one. Who would ever guess we were close relatives? A walnut clock, like an admiral’s hat, ticked away slowly on the shelf in the remoteness and silence of their house and of their old age. Nora entered with a faltering tea-trolley. “Denis! Wake up! Look whose here!” He snorted and opened his eyes. Their old sapphire lustre – the only feature he and Dad had shared – to my intense disappointment – had faded. He had glaucoma and had a real job to look and see who was there.

“Is it Eddie?”

“No! It’s John..... JOHN!”

“John? What, Charles’s John?? Well, I go t’ hell! John. How are you, me duck?”

“Pretty well, Denis. And my mam’s still soldiering on; poorly knees, but she gets by.”

“You still with the police?”

“I am.”

We chatted about respective family fortunes and old times, but after about half-an-hour we began to have to beat our heads for something to say. Nora was suddenly discomfited by the silence. “It’s a long way to come just to say Hello” She seemed to have the same old nerves she had always been famous for.

“I haven’t come just to say Hello, Aunt Nora. I’m on my way to Witherbridge in Yorkshire, to where Charles died. I’ve stopped by because I need to know a few things.”

The genial smile on Denis’s face went out. Now there was apprehension.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to interrogate you. I just want you to tell me a few things about him I don’t know. Which my mother doesn’t know.”

Nora stood up, as if stung, and slammed the door behind her. Was she one of his conquests too??

The clock clucked on in the slammed silence even louder. Denis, not at ease now, said, “I’ve never known quite why but Nora didn’t really see eye to eye with Charlie...and didn’t really have a lot in common with Irene....She was always extra nervous in their company.”

“Denis, I’m going to find out who killed him, and why.”

He stared at me, then laughed. “Irish labourers! They wanted their money back! They were bad losers”

“No. They were just the tools. I want the craftsman who used them. I’ve talked to Roy Dicken.”

“Little Dicken? I thought he was dead.”

“Very much alive. But Coley’s dead, Dicken reckons. Lung cancer.”

“I never like either of them. They both cheated your dad, you know. Helped themselves when he wasn’t looking. And he was always lending Dicken money to fund his drinking. Never saw a penny-piece back from the scrounging little bugger.”

I had the distinct feeling that he was leading me away, like a lark from its nest.

“Did he ever talk about his stays in Yorkshire?”

He relaxed. “I can’t remember. He was all over the place at one time: Epsom, Goodwood, Ascot, Yarmouth.....all over. It’s been such a long time....”

I could tell he wasn’t lying. Just to be absolutely sure I casually mentioned Skegness.

“Do you still like it here?” And he rambled on in the same manner.

And then I interrupted him and said, “Tell me about Charlie’s women”

He stiffened and shifted the angle of his body in his chair. “Other women? Rubbish! Whatever gave you such an idea?”

I waited and waited while he shifted uneasily, awaiting a reply from me.

“Uncle Denis, if I have worked out, or found out nearly thirty-five years after his death about, about his woman in Yarmouth, about her in Yorkshire, about – (and I took a gamble) – May, mother’s friend” – Denis looked darkly – “And about one or two others, thirty-five years later.... You were his brother....What more must you know? I know pretty much about my own brother’s escapades....”

He took a paper and began to roll a cigarette but the tobacco kept falling out. I reached over.

“Here, let me” And within a minute I gave him a perfect roll-up to stick in his lips.

“D’you want one?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No thanks, I packed up.”

“I’m allowed three a day” He looked at me and took a drag. “Charlie..... was.... a ladies’ man.

They bloody threw themselves at him. Any man would have found it hard to resist. He just seemed to trip over them. There was the landlady at The Pauncefote. Old Nixon was past it and he didn’t mind, even encouraged him, just to keep her sweet. Charlie used to sneak upstairs from the back room from the card school. Then there was the boss’s wife at the factory. When he gave her the cold shoulder – he couldn’t go on risking his job, going behind the boss’s back – she lost her rag and tried to get him the sack, saying she’d seen him nick a bobbin of yarn. Bloody old tart”

And he cackled that favourite cackle of his. Now, instantly it came back to me, the memory of that trouble.

“Ah yes. I remember now! The police came round but took no action. Mam told me it was to do with a jealous woman, and Dad had tried to avoid her....Denis, when he died Mam found lots of bank-books, registered in various racing towns. What did you know about them?”

“Bank-books? Nothing. How really close do you think we were, John? We were always rowing; about the shop, about our mam and her bad heart, and about politics – you know your dad were a big Labour man – We didn’t get on ever so well – and there were five years between us. All I know is he did have other women. Home and away. Dicken told me once when he was pissed. Bloody little blabbermouth. Don’t you dare tell Irene!”

“Don’t you think already she knows? She’s not the brightest star in the firmament but she’s not so dim. She knew alright, perhaps not the whole story. She was married to him....”

He flicked the ash from his fag..“So why stir everything up now and upset everybody?”

“Because I want to know the truth!”

“Why? What good would it do you?”

“No good. But I need to know. I can’t help it. What do you remember about that last week, that last weekend? Anything. Did you see him? Did he mention a name, a horse, an address? I need something to bite on.”

He took a last drag on his precious fag, smoked down as far as his finger nails, and with a sigh of regret stubbed it out.

“What I’m going to tell you now is probably nothing but I’ll tell you anyway.”

I leaned forward eagerly. He checked to make sure that Nora was not near and in a hushed voice went on. “That week before he went to Yorkshire he phoned me out of the blue. Here. Could I send him a cheque? He was really desperate. I was more than surprised because we had a terrible row about a big loss he blamed me for and we had hardly exchanged ten words since. Well, he



needed to borrow a lot of money and he thought I owed him a bit of a favour. He needed.....a thousand.”

“A thousand? A lot of money.”

“A fortune back then. He had borrowed money of that bloke Harry Harper – You remember Harper’s Pond, where we caught all the roach? – well that was on his estate just off the Watling Street .....Now he wanted it all back, plus a tidy sum of interest. Harper was a nasty bugger who could hurt people. He knew gangsters, even if he wasn’t exactly one himself. Your dad got in with him at Nixon’s. I warned him to keep his distance but folk like that seemed to attract your dad and he attracted them.”

“So what did you say?”

“I hummed and ha-ed. Nora had just come into a few bob from her great-aunt and I could just about have scraped together enough to help him. I told him that if he did alright at the races I would make up the rest to keep Harper happy. So he gave me a cheerio and asked me to wish him luck. Last time I ever heard from him.”

Then I remembered the phone calls. I told Denis how people had pestered my mother for money. He shrugged his shoulders.

“But why was he in so much debt, Denis? Was it just that bet, the one you and Granddad didn’t lay off?”

He looked at the floor and whistled out a long breath.

“That was just the biggest of quite a few. People were always slow to pay up when they lost, but of course when they won....different story! Me and Ernest weren’t cut out for bookmaking. You needed to think fast on your feet and keep on top of everything. And make the right decision, quickly. Horses for courses, your dad always said. He wouldn’t even paint his own front door! I was the wrong horse for the course and so was your grandpa. He was just too old and couldn’t keep up with it. It killed your grandma, all the worry of it.”

This news surprised me. I pictured her again in bed, without her glasses, my lovely, kind grandma, surrounded by us all, after the stroke which she succumbed to later that week.

“And what about Witherbridge? Did you ever go racing there with him? Did you ever hear mention of a Jim or a Wendy?”

“Wendy? Wendy...Wendy...” He sat back and looked for help from the ceiling. “I remember. It must have been sometime earlier that year, just before we moved to Skeg, that a woman called The Pauncefote asking for Charlie. I took the call. She said it was urgent. She might have been Wendy. I don’t think I gave him the message....Perhaps we had already fallen out.”

“When exactly was this? Early summer?”

“We moved in late June. So it probably was.”

I pictured her panic. What she had suspected all along, that my dad was the father of her child, must have been confirmed beyond a doubt when she first clapped eyes on what had just slipped out of her. With this conjured-up image still occupying my thoughts I looked at the reddening, swelling sun perching on aunt and uncle’s back trellis, amongst their last flourish of roses, and decided I should be on my way. I declined Nora’s half-hearted invitation to stay for dinner – (those tasteless orange disks of carrot, which she had reluctantly once thrust in front of me and Alan, magically reconstituted themselves, as soon as the word “dinner” emerged from her lips) – and shaking Denis’s hand, probably for the last time I left him and met Aunt Nora at the front door. I bent down to peck her cheek. Her shy, old eyes were red. On an impulse, for she had never been a revered relative of mine, I whispered “Did you love him too, Nora?”

Her tears almost started again and gently but firmly, as if I was nothing to her either, she pushed

me out of the front door and closed it.

Outside Skegness I spotted what I was looking for. A signpost pointed to Mogg's Eye beach. I turned off the main road and finally saw the dune grasses spreading all along the horizon. I drove as near as I could and got out. Then I stood again on the deserted sands, as deserted as they had been all those years ago. I looked around and found what I hardly dared hope to see. The big black stone was still there. I crouched down in the on-shore breeze which had forced us to snuggle up together in our big picnic blanket, a breeze which was still blowing on-shore though today less chill than then. And I removed the stone and scooped away the sharp sand until I found what I was looking for. A perfect whorl of white, a snail shell, pearly and almost transparent, a beautiful artefact of the sea's making. I had gone exploring and brought it back as a present for my sleeping Jane after we had made love. The breeze was blowing strands of her blonde hair away from her cheek, as smooth and flushed as a peach, speckled with finest sand. I adored her. She had woken and taken it, turned it and buried it, saying that one day we would have to come back and find it. And now I had found the big, jet stone. I turned the shell again in the huge sun behind my back, so that it glowed orange. Looking at it a last time I buried it again, leaving the stone as a marker. I looked across the calm, wide sea for inspiration, for solace, for a sign; and then with one last look along the beach in both directions I turned and crunched through the marbled razor-clam shells, stranded in front of the grassy dunes, got back into my car and drove away.

I drove inland until, in a small, pleasant town, I found a snug-looking inn to put up for the night. Hanging my coat on the back of my bedroom door, and pushing my car keys into the pocket I found an envelope. I went down into the lounge and found a cosy corner table at which to eat and while away the evening. After my dinner I took out the envelope and read Nora's letter. The hand and the sentiments were surprisingly vigorous.

Dear John,

Please, never come here again. You brought back too many hurtful memories. Off and on I had an affair with Charles for several years. I couldn't resist him, no matter how hard I tried. In the end I wanted to go off with him but he wouldn't leave Irene. He just wanted me as one of his other ports of call. As soon as I realised how it all stood, I finished with him. Which was a major reason for me to move here. I couldn't come to his funeral with Denis because I was so upset. I trust you to keep this secret. Denis knows nothing. Nor Irene. There, now you, the great detective, know everything.

Happy?

Your dad was not a very nice man when you worked your way through all his charm. In many ways he spoilt my life, but I was just as much to blame.

Goodbye

Nora.

I bought a double brandy and tried to come to terms with it all. What did anyone truly know about another person? Even the one you have been sitting next to most of your life your life? I imagined Denis smoking his third and final cherished Golden Virginia of the day, puffing away

in his chequered slippers, while I sat a few miles distant, perusing this letter which would at an instant destroy the cosy view he had of his life and put paid to all peace of mind. Or did he secretly know? Had he perhaps long ago traded off, cancelling out, in his own mind, his wife's transgressions against some of his own?

I now considered giving up the whole project and returning home. Hadn't I already uncovered enough? My father's infidelities were proven and his secret lairs – if not lives – were exposed. And I had a name attached to a motive which explained how his death – almost certainly unintended – had come about. I saw - and sympathised with – the heart-ache which Jim X had felt on discovering that his bouncing, beaming son was not his son at all but the result of a sordid little liaison with a travelling huckster, a guest under his own roof. I even sympathised with the old-fashioned expedient he had taken to put the wind up his rival and drive him away. How many in those days (and still even today) would resort to such persuasions? I now saw my father as a powerful magnet who unsettled the fields he sauntered into, creating attractions among the fair sex and, no doubt, amongst the unfair sex, repulsions in equal measure. Did this influence he had over people help to explain the unease which I often felt in his company?

I was too often privy to the nasty, unvarnished truth beneath all the charm. My mother must have often experienced this unease. They never argued but she seemed to be ever bottling her feelings up. And as I drank I suddenly recalled that hot night when a vicious row had broken out in their bedroom between them in hissed undertones. It had woken me up. Had she found out about a woman? The woman at the factory? If the police were involved and the motives were the jealousy and anger of a woman scorned, he was surely bound to tell her something very near the truth. I racked my brain for a correspondence between the two events – the row and the accusation – but to my intense frustration could find none.

I started on another brandy and thought of .Jim-whoever-he-was. I decided that he had by now probably all but died, moved miles away or even emigrated. Even if I could find him to expose him what good would come of it? Would the CPS be interested in dragging an old man in front of a court regarding a fist-fight getting on for half a century ago? On what charge, for goodness sake?

Then I thought of my more than probable half-brother. What possible reason could I have for disabusing him of his illusions, even if I could track him down? Did I want to meet him? Would he be pleased to see me and throw his arms around me? In all probability Jim and Wendy had got on with their lives and put that little interlude behind them. Many children had been brought up lovingly by witting or unwitting cuckolds, never suspecting that "Dad" had nothing biologically to do with them. He had gone on to lead a happy, useful sort of life, no doubt. What gave me the right to go blundering in to put the record straight and screw everything else up? In how many more lives did contentment depend on such fundamental falsehoods? I looked around the room at the several singles, doubles and groups variously enjoying the night out. Who was really related to whom? Who harboured a secret, well disguised resentment of their present interlocutor? Who knew a fact which another thought (or would think) a fiction? How many mothers had given suck totally unaware that the babe which they cradled lovingly in their arms was another's and only there because of a mix-up on the maternity ward? How many unsuspecting fathers were lovingly kicking a ball across the lawn to their unknown rival's son? I thought of my wife. Who was she with now? Was she enjoying the old delights which she used to have with me in bed? I conjured up her slender, naked body, explored by another faceless person's hands.....Enough! I recognised the symptoms of morbidity which too much brandy was beginning to break out in me. Black storm clouds were racing ever faster past my staring inner eye. I drained the glass and

went to bed. I dreamt but could not recall what about.

### **Saturday 28th October**

As soon as I awoke I thought: Sunday? Why Sunday? Why not Saturday? Why hadn't Jim followed one of the navvies out into the toilet and whispered "You know he's counting the black deuces don't you?" Why hadn't he just spoken louder so that the whole room could have heard him?.....Because he didn't want them to hear. He wanted Charlie to hear him, not them. Why? What had Jim planned for Sunday?

I sat up in bed. In the crack where the curtains nearly joined, a thin line of blue was marking the end of the night. In the little square – and this must have made me dream and then woken me – a diesel engine was chuntering. Now I could hear the annoying clang of metal poles and the slap of wooden boards. I looked through the window and saw market stalls being erected. I look around the periphery of the square and one of the shops reminded me I was in Alford. I went back to bed and lay there dozing until breakfast. After I had eaten, packed and paid the bill I went and sat in my car and began studying the road map. What should I do? I had begun to doubt my earlier version of events, suspecting that it was too pat and had appealed too readily to that part of me disinclined to pry further and all too ready to steer a course for home and a quiet life. The snooper in me was lining up a steady stream of challenges to the idler. What had taken place between Dicken's departure and Dad's death? How had twenty-four hours been killed? Where had he spent the night? Surely not at The Hollies? What had he discussed with Jim? Financial terms? Was Jim trying to blackmail him? Had he threatened him? Why hadn't he come home during Sunday? What had detained him so long? Questions were begetting ever more questions, and no answers. I started the car. The idler urgently told me to go back home to Jane, sit her down, make her a cup of coffee and ask her about her affair. I wouldn't be angry. (I didn't feel angry, only sorry.) I would admit I had neglected her and, for good measure, I would toss into the ante my secret dalliance with a pretty DC which had started drunkenly and sweatily on the table of my darkened office after we had cracked the Nolan case, and had continued sporadically until her transfer to Nottingham. We would blubber, promise to make a fresh start, make it all up gloriously and noisily upstairs and then go away hiking for a few days. South. In the Cotswolds or in the Malvern hills.

I drove out of Alford, gave way at a junction, and then turned north.

The flat, open prairies of Lincolnshire had given way to the bleak uncompromising of the Yorkshire moors. I began to see temporary yellow signs directing traffic to the race course. As I entered the drab, dark-stoned town of Witherbridge, my misgivings were again urging reconsideration. But this was the town where thirty-odd years ago my own father had been set on by a bunch of cowards and left to die in some alley. I owed to him and the rest of the family to get to the truth! A hopeless voice retorted and asked where I ought to begin. This wasn't that town at all. It was over thirty years older. I saw the narrow church spire looming up like a tall black finger of caution, the one ever reliable buoy in the race of time and change. I turned towards it and pulled in, just off the main street. Some of the shop walls still bore the names of their previous incarnations or the names of their retired or deceased owners, some fading from the original proud black of their capital letters, some almost obscured by years of determined white-washing. Ignoring my misgivings I set out and soon found The Regent Hotel. An ACCOMODATION sign hung askew in a window. The misspelling instantly hinted that its

former grandeur inside had probably faded as much as its façade. An upstairs casement had parted company with an oblong, sandstone block and the fallen G of Regent had never been reinstated, lending the building unfortunate connotations of rentable cheapness. A sandwich board proclaimed that Sunday was QUIZ-NITE and told of a Premiership match which had already been played. Inside it was rather gloomy but surprisingly spacious. It was only eleven thirty and therefore empty; a vacuum cleaner somewhere was providing a whining descant to the bass beating out of the speakers. I looked around and tried to imagine where he might have sat that weekend. How many times had the walls been re-papered? Was there a fragment beneath those layers on which a few atoms of my father's cigarette smoke still lingered? Then I saw a sign in pale green glass, RESTAURANT, above the door to a room beyond, where the rotund bar carried on round into the back. Looking in through that door I saw a pretty, slim, honey-blond girl putting the cleaner round, torso half-exposed as the fashion then - so inconsiderate for her podgy and obese sisters - dictated. It was a largish square room, with perhaps ten tables. Here then, was where he must have eaten. I found myself looking into a corner where I could imagine him keeping everyone nearby thoroughly entertained, their laughter encouraging him to try ever more verbal somersets and risky comments. In the right hand corner was another door marked PRIVATE. Had this been the notorious back room where the chosen few could gamble? The awful whine of the cleaner abated to allow the awful din from the speakers its full say. She had become aware of my presence and spoke up in a firm, unpolished but not unpleasant growl, which is the hallmark of folks at this latitude.

"I'm sorry, but restaurant's closed until this evening. And you're a bit early for a bar-meal. We serve from 12. There's a menu, back there, on t' counter, in t' bar."

"Thank you. I want to book a room but I'm in no rush."

My impression of spaciousness in the first room was soon abruptly corrected, for as I looked beyond the tables and chairs set adjacent to the bar counter, I saw long bespectacled face gaping gloomily back at me and I recognised this, with a slight start of surprise, as merely my own reflection, pensive in the wall mirror. As I looked still into the mirror, experimenting with other, more captivating expressions to wear, the girl who had been the cleaner in the restaurant appeared there now behind the taps as the barmaid. She had a bright oval face and such intelligent grey eyes. Was this her normal job, I enquired, with, I hoped, that correct amount of doubt in my voice to flatter her without being thought condescending. No, she was studying Law at Manchester and was the Jill of all trades there; barmaid, cleaner, chambermaid, waitress and occasionally cook and bottle-washer.

I sat at the dark hardwood bar and sipped my coffee. I had asked to see the manager. When he appeared he was unfortunately much younger than I had dared hope, and spoke with that Aussie soap-opera question-intonation, so fashionable amongst the more impressionable of the younger generation, as he itemised the facilities of the room which he could offer me....."It's got a....a TV?... En-suite?....Kettle, tea and coffee?... Internet connection?...."

"That all sounds fine?" I rejoined in kind but the sarcasm was lost on him.

During that lunch hour no-one came in who looked much older than forty. Some irritating young men in suits came in and held court around the bar, obviously entirely delighted with themselves, and clearly convinced that their every spectator and auditor was equally pleased with them too. (I admit, Adam, I am a fully paid-up member of TOFS – The Old Farts Society. Everywhere I go I sense a slide into self-obsession and pointless self-adornment, self-proclamation and acquisitiveness, upon which neither any awareness of the sheer Oddity of Being nor any notion of one's proper, tiny place in the cosmos could intrude. And I cannot help but feel disgust to note

the increasing tendency of some people to speak out loud on their mobiles and to behave loud in company as if they are starring in their own absurd, cliché-ridden soap-opera. The baleful influence of the mass media has a lot to answer for. Messages for material gain, in advert, article and programme have been continuously dinned into them until they have become the unwitting clones of their equally talentless icons.)

It feels good to get that off my chest, Adam, if you have read thus far. I'm glad that a lack of loud conceit is one of your chief virtues.

At £50 a night my poky garret (just above the missing G as it turned out) was decidedly poor value for money. A staleness of old tobacco matched perfectly the jaundice of the wall paper and the toilet seat was loose and would threaten me with unceremonious and instant abdication whenever I sat on the throne. Through the old lace curtains I studied the grey rooftops around the church which jostled together like the dropped wings of some freezing flock for comfort from the chill moor, and I wondered which had been The Hollies. I measured with my eye the route he would have taken that night, his wallet and spirits bulging, from somewhere in that vicinity. Not much more than five minutes to walk. Where then had he been waylaid? I pondered whether all atomic traces of him had been washed and blown away by those unsentimental, elemental allies of Time. The rain which rendered the place so funereal was stopping. I took a stroll and within ten minutes found the two rows of stern terraced houses which made up Hope Street. I looked along both rows in vain, of course, for a swinging wooden boarding house sign. So, I needed an old lady or gentleman, marooned and isolated there from the comings and goings of all those intervening years, to come tottering to their door. I slowly walked up and down but none would. I marked three or four houses with old-fashioned lace at the widow and/or a run-down air and Iibble-obbled them to decide where to call first. The winner was the shabbiest. The plaster had come off the garden wall in lumps, exposing grey brick, and behind it, in an old pot, a strangled hydrangea was losing out slowly to a siege of grass. If it had had a voice it would have been screaming. I knocked at the flaking door until an ancient croak, more of a crow than of a person, said "Who there?"

Who there? In an instant I thought of our battle through the wind towards father's hearse.

"Who THERE?"

I fingered my warrant card. "Police!"

"POLICE??. What the bloody hell do you want?"

"Just to ask a few questions" I waited as several bolts were drawn. The wind blew a salvo of drips from the broken guttering onto my head. Slowly on its chain the door opened far enough to reveal the most ancient woman I think I had ever seen. Her hair was snow white, and her face as wrinkly as a testicle, with several sprouts of grizzled whiskers on her chin. She grabbed my proffered ID and disappeared, returning after a series of awful curses, wearing her misplaced glasses. "You can ask yer questions out there. It's stopped raining"

"I need to find The Hollies. It was a B&B in this street in the late sixties. Can you help?"

"The Hollies? Haven't a clue. We didn't come here till the eighties...Worse luck"

"Who might know in the street?"

"Dunno" She thrust my ID back out and retreated into the murky inside, like some weird anemone. My misgiving was smirking ruefully now, as I looked around again without a clue. I stared at the blank facades, in their stiff conspiracy of non-cooperation.....and then, suddenly, I saw them. Further down, on the left, two holly bushes adhered, espaliered, to the wall on either side of a bright ground-floor window. As I drew near I saw, with a pang of excitement, two drilled holes in the brick above the door from which a sign must have sometime swung. The

window had colourful, modern fabrics hanging and declared the house to be the property of a young, prosperous couple, in 1970 either tiny infants or still part of the Uncommitted. I laughed my doubts into a corner and looked around me. Across the road, not quite opposite, was a respectable house, though drab by comparison. I crossed over, knocked the door confidently and almost immediately a sprightly, cheerful old lady opened up. "I wondered if you'd knock. I've been watching you walking up and down like some stray. You ain't a burglar and you ain't selling nowt....."

"Oh, that's right. I'm a policeman working on a very old case. I need your help, if your memory's in good shape."

She blew a raspberry and cackled. I showed her my ID and she asked me in. Her front room was as bright and as cheerful as she, with several photos of smiling youngsters clutching degree certificates and holding onto mortarboards. A great marmalade cat was crouching on his paws in the sunny window, with a huge grin, slyly opening his eyes to slits in order to study this newcomer. On the rug lay another great cat, a round mound of black heaving fur, totally and honestly given up to a very deep sleep.

"You must be very proud of your grandchildren."

Her face lit up even brighter "Three grandchildren and two great- grandchildren! How old do you think I might be?"

"I couldn't possibly say...."

She smiled and laid her hands in her lap. "Go on, guess..."

"Well, until you said great-grandchildren, I would have thought....mid-seventies....?"

"I'm ninety-four. in November"

"You never are! Have you lived long here then?"

"Ever since I were married. 1930! Yes, 1930, our Bobby...!"

Bobby opened his slitty eyes wide, scratched the anti-macasser on the back of the arm chair briefly, yawned and shut them again.

"BOBBY! You bad lad! I'll have your guts for garters if you start scratting!"

He looked at her, grinned and pretended to doze again. 1930! I felt like kissing her. My spirits rose even higher.

"You must have had a few cats in all those years."

"No, not until Stan died. He had asthma and couldn't abide cats anyhow. He came from dogs..... We were married sixty-four year."

Automatically I said, "Oh, you must really miss him....."

"Aye, I do, but the cats are better company.....andsixty-four year were about long enough!"

She cackled and put her hand over her face "Ooh, yer must think I'm awful!"

I stared at her and wondered what to say.

"Drink yer tea, duck. It'll g' cold"

"Would you mind if I ask you about The Hollies? I'm assuming it was that house across the road, with the holly trees?"

"Oh, they're a lovely couple, Riswan and Preti , and they have two lovely daughters.....But it hasn't been called The Hollies for years. And it's years since I've...." She stopped and stared back. "An old case, you say? Did he do her in then, or summat?"

Now I was on to something. "Did who do who in?"

"Her name was Wendy. His name was ....."

"Jim?"

"Aye, Jim. But how do you know them?"

“My dad knew them. But he couldn’t remember their surname”

She shook her head. “It was summat Irish ....O’ summat....but I can’t remember. It’s such a long time ago.”

I felt a momentary disappointment. “So when was it last a B&B?”

“Sometime in the seventies. Stan used to complain that all the coming and going at all hours was keeping him awake. Then one morning the sign had gone. Mill had shut, you see and there were only the racing after that. No customers. I mean who’d want to come here visiting? .....Hold on. Your dad knew them? I thought you said you were a policeman?”

“I am. My dad stayed there a few times in the late sixties.”

I showed her the photo which I had borrowed from mother’s biscuit tin. He was all smiles in his lovat green suit on the back lawn of The Pauncefote, with me and Alan gathered round his knees. I thought suddenly of that morning where my mother had stood irresolute at first in front of a brazier, burning his clothes. This, if any were needed, was final confirmation of his utter expulsion from the land of the living, wearing and doing. This very same, his one-and-only suit, the one he had been wearing on the night of his death, was now in her hands. She had looked at it for one last time and then thrust it into the flames.

“His face doesn’t ring much of a bell. Maybe ...maybe....Folk were coming and going there all that time in the olden days. He’s a handsome man though. If I had seen him I think I’d recognise him.” She tittered again.

“Well the reason I’m here is because Jim and Wendy were among the last people to see him alive. He died in a fight somewhere near here in September 1969.”

“Oh good God....he weren’t that bookie were he.... the one....?” (I nodded.) “And you’re his son? But you look nothing like him!”

“Folks say I take after my uncle.” (She grinned and winked.) “No, no, my mother’s brother. I’m John Bevin. His name was Charles.”

She emptied her tea cup and frowned. “But didn’t they get somebody for it?”

“No. The case remains unsolved. That’s why I’m here. Can you remember that week? Last weekend in October, race week. Why did you say something about *him* doing *her* in?”

She looked up, as if trying to put events into their proper order. “All I can do is tell you what I remember about them. They must have lived there for three or four year. But it weren’t what you might call a happy marriage. They were always rowing, sometimes in the street. He had a bad Irish temper. I know for a fact he used to push her about...you know.... without so much as quite hitting her, like....Once he took all the light bulbs out and left her completely in the dark. She came over once when he’d locked her out in the wet.... and we became sort of friendly. She was lovely. Lovely blonde hair, a real sweetie- pie, with the clearest blue eyes....I never understood why she stayed with that, that.... brute. He was always accusing her o’ going wi’ other chaps, but she was a good girl. At the root of everything were the lack of a child. When she got pregnant it changed things overnight. Suddenly he were all smiles, even waving to us, and such....Until that night, one weekend, and it might well have been the one when your dad passed away. Stan was out washing his car. It were Juke Box Jury on telly and he couldn’t stick it for love nor money....And, anyway he comes in and says, Flo, he’s at it again. Well, the door was open...he were yelling...she were screaming.... baby were wailing. All the neighbours were out. It’s a wonder nobody didn’t call police. Then the door slammed and it all started to calm down. I went across to take a pint o’ milk back I’d borrowed, as an excuse like, and he comes to the door. So he asks what I want and then he takes it off me and goes to shut the door. But I just got a look of her, sitting on the hallway floor, sobbing with her head in her hands. I hear him go



upstairs so I open the letter- box and whisper “Are you OK Wendy?”

And she says “It’s OK Flo. Don’t worry.”

“Did you see him go out?”

“No. After a while, when it had got dark I stopped thinking about it. Sunday was quiet.”

“Did he go out then?”

“No. But *she* did, pushing the pram. I didn’t see her come back, mind, but I’m not nosy. And Sunday was always such a busy day for me, wi’ so many mouths to feed.....But then on the Monday morning the police were all over the place. I thought he must have done her in until I saw her at the door. She was really upset. Then the police started carting stuff away, a red bag, clothes and that.....I asked the constable standing duty what had happened - I took him a cuppa – and he said, a chap staying there, a bookie from down south, had been found dead with Wendy’s business card in his pocket. And that was about it. I didn’t see her much after that. Then she came over to say that Jim had cleared off. Somebody reckoned later he must have gone back to Dublin”

“You didn’t see him go?”

“No. Then about two weeks after that she came over and told me she were off. Sold up to another couple, lock, stock and barrel. Took just one suitcase, the pushchair and the babe. But the new folk never made much of a go of it. Mill closed down, you see. Unemployment were pretty bad after that.” She paused and stroked her chin. “Now then, a few days after Wendy had gone a couple came to the door. Did I know where the couple opposite had moved to? Well I didn’t like the look of the woman - sharp, staring eyes - and I wouldn’t have told ‘em even if I knew. The bloke, a big, blonde chap, kept his back to me. I watched them go round knocking all the doors.”

“Perhaps they were debt-collectors,” I suggested, but she was away with the fairies and did not reply. I thought I’d have one more try with my dad’s photo so I passed it to her again and asked her to think hard. I told her there were three of them, one a really little fellow, with combed back greasy hair. “Looked like a drowned rat”

She shook her head.

“Is there anyone still here who I could ask?”

“No love. All popped their clogs or moved away. There’s only me. It’s mainly Asian folk round here now. Not that I’ve owt against ‘em. They’re decent, hard working people for the most part, who bring there kids up strict. Not like some of them English yobbos who frighten the old folk indoors....” And then she had a thought. “The card! Of course! She sent me a postcard a month or two later. And I kept it as a keepsake.” She got up and rummaged long through her drawers. My heart was beating fast.

“Ah, here it is!” she said at last. "I knew I hadn't chucked it."

I recognised instantly a photo of my beloved Haworth. On the back in a juvenile hand it read

Dear Flo,

Me, Jim and Timothy are fine. I think he’s getting his first tooth. Staying with a cousin in Haworth. We love it here and hereabouts. Might look for a place to rent. Thank you for all your help when things were rough. Things are much, much better. We’re really happy now.

Take care,

Wendy.

“Timothy” ..... “Cousin” ..... I made a mental note. But, to my intense frustration there was no surname.

“Flo. Try to think about her surname. O’ *what?*” I took some paper and wrote down the letters of the alphabet to try to jog her memory. But it seemed unjoggable. And then, after she had given it up trying again, just as she was showing me out of the door she suddenly remembered.

“O’Meara! It was Jim and Wendy O’ Meara!”

I picked her up and gave her a big kiss.

“Goodness! You’ll get the neighbours gossiping about me!”

Taking one last look at The Hollies I went back to the hotel, now light on my feet, and ordered her a massive bunch of flowers. I looked at my watch. Two-forty. I had a sudden fancy to go horse-racing.

I parked, paid my admission - a few pounds - and walked in. I was standing in a vast arena lying in a natural bowl. Away in the distance a white rail appeared to be holding at bay the besieging waves of the moor, a jealous drabness threatening the emerald of the turf. Should some cataclysm strike to put an end to all human activity, it was not difficult to see how rapidly that beast would repossess the territory from which it had been ousted. The rain clouds had dissolved, leaving a high thin tracery of silver through which the hazy October sun blessed the proceedings. The neighs, the shouts, the whistles and echoings of loudspeakers besieged my ears while aromas of tobacco, arm-pits, fast-food and dung attacked my nose. A bewildering pageant of colours - in spots, quarters and stripes - on the silken blouses of the jockeys, who gripped the shoulders and flanks of their mounts like bizarre mantises, went milling around and parading in the far paddock. Beyond, in the centre of the course, squadrons of rooks or crows, strutting and waddling and flapped at by seagulls, were holding a meet of their own. Around the parade-ring rows of punters were admiring or making last-minute inspired decisions about horses to back. In an adjoined enclosure thirty or so islets - the stands of bookmakers beside their boards and satchels, beneath umbrellas turned parasols on this brightening afternoon - were awash with a race of customers intent on finding the best odds for their favourites. Castrato, baritone and bass, the siren-songs of the bookies mingled in an odd, pleasing cacophony, almost like waterfowl, as the last minute deals were urged and concluded. Here, there and everywhere the tick-tack men frantically went through their repertoire of sign language about the strengthening and weakening prices of runners. Odds were being rubbed out and altered as they shortened or lengthened. In the stand around me a jovial crowd was gathering, emerging blinking from the bars, well-oiled, or climbing away from the ring to find a good spot to watch the imminent race through their binoculars. The prancing centaurs were assembling also, a swirling patchwork of motifs, behind the starting tapes to my right. Beyond them the track gradually narrowed to a point and dark lines of fences increased in frequency. To my left the distant narrowness began to widen out again until it reached the final fence and then the last lumpy stretch to the lollipop of the winning post in front of us all. The echoing babble of the tannoys now joined with the growing babble of the crowd and a crescendo of “come-ons!” was being yelled in the direction of the unheeding horses. A sudden flap of the rising tapes, a general howl of excitement and a reverberating “They’re off” from the loudspeakers set the race in motion. As soon as they were away I pushed through to the deserted enclosure. Some bookies were already wiping their boards to chalk up the competitors of the next race. There was plenty of space to stroll round and have a good look at these

fascinating characters and the names, sometimes bizarre, (Fishman, Thickbroom, Shacklady, Bugg) on their boards. I was looking for another time-weathered face. Eventually I found a promising candidate: FEATHERSTONE & SONS ESTAB: 1958 While one of his sons, wearing a roguish black eye-patch, was busy at his board the gentleman I took for old Mr Featherstone sat in a canvas chair eating a sandwich. The field of racers had now turned the far bend and, stretching out front and back, were steadily crawling from right to left, now looping over a fence like some gaudy caterpillar. I took my chance and showed Featherstone senior my photo. Did he remember Charlie who used to come here? He put his near-glasses on and exclaimed in a guttural Geordie accent "Well! Bugg-ar me! If it ain't old Johnnie Fairplay! It's an old photo of him, mind. You know, I've not seen him here for - what? - twenty, no thirty year! I supposed he got too big for his boots to keep coming back to a little track like this....."

"No he died in an accident"

"Accident? Never? When was that?"

"Late sixties."

"Late sixties? No." He seemed to be trying to get a grip on his memory but gave up. "It seems only like yesterday I saw him. You just can't believe it. And him doing so well..."

He sat shaking his head. I took back my photo. Now his son was growling something to him and he jumped to attention. The crowd behind me were finding their voices again as the group of riders, turning for home, began to increase steadily in proportion, flowing now like a wave over a fence and sweeping on, with clumps of turf rising like flying fish in their wake. As the vanguard rose, descended and raced on at the final fence, forcing many panels to the ground, the cries of the spectators turned into a tumult. When the winner, with its green-vested mannequin raising an arm in a salute of triumph, crossed the line the din ended abruptly. A few isolated screams and shouts of delight were audible but the crowd was already melting away. With only some folk descending to the enclosure to collect winnings, a sparse fraction of the onlookers, it was clear that an unfancied horse had won. The smirks of the bookies confirmed it. Many punters had crowded around the unsaddling enclosure, whence a hot fog rose from the panting horses. Suddenly hungry, I joined the queue for a beef-burger, a delight I had not sampled for years and which I smothered in ketchup and hot mustard. Returning to the stands I went kicking through the confetti of disappointment, the litter of all the torn up losing tickets. I decided to wash down my burger with a cold lager in the bar. It was wriggling with excitement and discomfort. I fought my way past the tables stacked with empty plastic glasses, around which the parties of exhilarated revellers were seated. A young collector was pushing his way through with a great spout of empties to clear the decks. It was loud, hot and smoky. I managed to get to the window. The attraction of it all I could understand but I felt very much a cold outsider. My watch said four o'clock. Preparations were well under way for the next race. I drank up and was making my way to an exit when a name on the list of horses in the 4:15 caught my eye. CHARLIE'S ANGEL. I suddenly remembered Jimmy Edward's corny old joke about the gambler who dreamt he should put his money on a horse whose name had something to do with a hat. Well, when he looked at the race-card for the day, to his dismay there were "Hats" in almost all the races. So he decided to split his money between them all. In the 2:30 Black Hat pulled up lame and had to be shot. In the 3:15 Top Hat fell at the first. Hat Trick in the 4:00 came last. Seeing no "Hat" in the last race he decided to spend his last tenner in the bar and drown his sorrows. Suddenly an old friend appeared at his elbow, offering to buy him a drink. He had had a big win - £10 on 40-1 outsider! "What was its name?" asked his friend dismally. "Oh, some old French nag, called Mon Chapeau."

So I turned and went to the parade ring. There he was, my angel, with his jockey already up, in a green top with red hoops, an awful clash with his dignified, quiet, intelligent pale grey mount. Another grey horse. Another good omen? I found my way back to the Featherstones. Charlie's Angel wasn't written up. So it had to come under that strange collective noun "bar", one of the probable no-hopers. I enquired what its price was. 25-1.

I watched with amazement my hand offer up a twenty, the first note I pulled out of my pocket. I received a ticket and went into the stand. Soon it was time for the race to begin. I didn't need binoculars to see those garish colours. Charlie began slowly and I gasped as he stumbled after the first fence. After a while his colours disappeared. I thought he must be a fallen and I was wondering whether to leave when out in the far straight his miraculous reappearance showed that he had simply been working his way through the field, and was now in the middle bunch. As they turned for home he again fell out of sight. On the crest of each rising wave I sometimes glimpsed, sometimes missed him. Had I heard the commentator mention his name? Had he fallen? In the straight before the final fence there was such a gaudy kaleidoscope of colours, but I felt sure he must be there.. Now the crowd was shouting again. Suddenly, amazingly, silver, beautiful Charlie was jumping the last fence in the lead and to my great joy, the horse in hot pursuit, to a chorus of groans stumbled, twisted and collapsed. I tried to shout, but could not for excitement, as he actually did, now, to my astonishment, cross the line first. Had I got the colours wrong? No, now the tannoy was bellowing his name as the undisputed winner. £500. I felt almost ashamed to return and collect my winnings. Had I cleaned FEATHERSTONE AND HIS SONS out? But Featherstone junior was actually smiling as he counted out my winnings. I couldn't help myself asking him "Did you lay it off?" He just looked at me, winked with his one good eye and said "Dad fancied it as well." Now Featherstone Senior smiled at me. He took my elbow. "You know, I'm sure Johnny was here in the seventies." I stared at him and unaccountably thought of my Uncle Wilf. I smiled kindly and shook my head. He let go of my arm and said "You know what? He were a bloody good bloke, old Johnny Fairplay."

That night I felt flush. I sat with a few others in the restaurant. It was Saturday night but not exactly busy. And yet the food was fairly edible and not over-priced. I sank a bottle of decent red wine with my steak. When I had settled up I returned to the bar and said to the pretty barmaid, "Who are the really old regulars in here?"

She looked around as she collected some glasses from the counter. "Well there's Old Potty" and she indicated with a nod an old soldier in a blazer, settled in a corner, patting an old black dog, which was snaffling a ripped-open bag of crisps beside him.

"He's Mr Potter, but he calls himself Old Potty. He's quite a character."

"What's his tittle?"

"Brandy and soda."

"I'll have two doubles, one without soda."

The music of the lunch hour had calmed down. A few tables were occupied. In a far corner an unenthusiastic game of darts was in progress. Despite the efforts of the manager this was obviously not the in-place for the younger drinkers of the town. I sat down near to him.

"Fine old dog you've got there," I began.

He looked up amicably. "Oh, she's a good friend to me, old Coleen. Couldn't do without her. Just a bit past it, like old master here! But she gets me out of the house...."

"And where's that?"

"Oh, not far from the church... Where are you from then, Sir? Not a Yorkshireman I detect..."

“No, I’m from Leicestershire....”

“Bit out of your way then?”

“Yes. ...Mr Potter, I took the liberty of asking at the bar who were the old soldiers in here and the lovely girl at the bar....”

“Oh, isn’t she a little darling!....”

“Yes, a beauty...she told me to come over to see you. And she told me you were a brandy-man, just like me....”

I slid the drink towards him and his old eyes lit up. He finished the one he had been making last and started on mine.

“So, you’ve been coming in here a longish time then?”

“Oh yes, this has been my local forty odd years. I’ve seen a few changes in those days, I can tell you, not many for the better....those damned things for a start...” and he pointed with his stick at the flashing fruit machine, but whether he meant the machine or the dumpy couple in baseball caps, mindlessly pushing one coin and then another into it, I could not tell. His eyes quizzed me.

“Businessman, are you?”

“No I’m on a sentimental journey. My father used to call in at The Regent when he was at the races. He loved it here. Bookmaker he was.”

“Bookmaker? Well I never. I might have even known him then. I’ve always enjoyed a flutter.”

I saw that he was draining his brandy fast. I put up my fingers to the barmaid for two more. She brought them over.

“You are a good girl, Emma!” he said with an old gleam in his eyes. She smiled tolerantly. I gave her a tenner and told her to keep the change.

“Cheerio” he said and drank. “You know, I might have even seen him in here. We used to be regulars in here on a Saturday night ...Best dinner in town at one time, not that you’d know now. This was a really select place, collar and tie, no jeans....Well, look at it now.”

I thought it was time to try the photo. He looked at it and was dumbfounded. “I can’t believe it! It’s him...what’s his name?....er.....”

“Charlie”

He was just about to ask me how he was when the words stuck in his gullet.

“But...but he died. ....in the town.....!” He gulped and took a rather long drink of his brandy and soda. For a long time there was silence as he sat deep in thought. He kept staring at the photo then studied me carefully. “But you’re nothing like him!”

“No. I took after my mother and her side..... That’s me at twelve, and that’s my brother.”

“Well, he’s the image of him!”

“Mr Potter, could you help me to fill in a few details about his time here? He died in an alleyway somewhere near but that’s about all about I know. ”

“Well there’s not a lot to say. He popped in here for a drink a few times and was just great fun. I can’t believe you’ve just brought him back. That time, in the restaurant he kept us all entertained...My poor wife – God rest her soul – was helpless and nearly choked for laughing! And then, in the week, we heard he’d been beaten up and killed. We couldn’t believe it. Some Irishmen he had been playing cards with.....here.....in the back room.”

“Did you go in and play?”

“No, I’ve always found cards boring. And I was out with my wife. And our friends.”

“Did you see a big boxer-type chap come through?”

He said he had not. He continued to reminisce about the way the old, comfortable world used to be and then looked at the clock and drained his glass. “Look, will you excuse me? I’m rather

tired. Come on Coleen, old gal. Time to climb the wooden hill. Potty's had a sip or two too many...."

I put my hand on his freckly old hand as he struggled up from the settle. I helped him to rouse his decrepit old Labrador from beneath the table. She stared through her sclerotic eyes, licking her chops. I patted her back and the hollow tunnel above her nose till she whimpered with pleasure. Guiding him out into the fresh black air I offered to see him home because he was unsteady. He accepted. It was beginning to patter with rain again. As we walked down the main street I asked him to point out, if he could, where my dad had died. Leaning on me he raised his stick and waved it round in the direction of the garish livery of a well-known electrical store. "Behind there, when it was a pub." We walked on. I looked up. The church spire seemed to be ripping the low clouds into rags as they chased each other by. The full moon which had been joining in the pursuit suddenly stood absolutely still in a rare cloudless space. Uncannily similar in size and degree of luminosity, indeed virtually identical to it, apart from the black roman markings on its edge, the church clock eerily duplicated the real moon still floating to the left of it behind the spire. And the thought shot through my tipsy head - How many times had both gone about their wearying routines since his death....unlike that other shocked time-keeper on his wrist? And I thought about all other clocks in the town which, like these two, had ticked on with utter indifference to their sister-clock, suddenly stopped for ever. What ever had become of it? Did it lie at the bottom of mother's biscuit tin? What death-time did it show? I didn't even know that. Suddenly I felt depressed. I looked up again at the clock but her shadow- moon had gone. The rain was in earnest now. I left Potty inside his hall after I had helped him with his key. I promised to buy him dinner on Sunday night. Now in steady rain I went over and looked into the store window, with its display of gadgetry and wizardry. I could see no way around to the rear of the shop. I crossed back over towards the church, turned and looked slowly along the row of shops and at their upper storeys. In the sulphur lamplight above the shop I could just about make out the words THE LION. Below at street level, to the left of the shop, a slight anomaly, a slight shadow, in the plastering showed me where the old alley might have opened onto the main street. A group of good-humoured revellers were now emerging from the brightly glowing foundry of the town-centre, pulsating to my right in the distance, the girls tottering and tittering at the loud jests of their young men. Their goal, a fish bar near The Regent, was doing brisk trade. In a lull of activity, broken only by an occasional car cleaving noisily through the lying rain-water, I crossed over again and walked to the corner of the road. I soon found the delivery access to the parade of shops and within a minute I found myself staring at the back of the old pub. The alley, bricked up at the front, still existed at the back, an unsanitary slot-hole for a rubbish skip on wheels. Next to it, to the left, jutting out towards me was a brick outbuilding. Two doors on the left suggested it was the old toilet block, which had since been converted to a store room. The path from the old back door of the pub came up its left hand side and doubled back on itself into the alley. The rest of the back was clean and concreted to allow for deliveries. I keep staring at the path, now partly cluttered by stacks of old bricks and boxes and tried to feel for the exact spot where he had succumbed to his attackers. Had he been jumped on as he left the toilet, or were they waiting in the alley? I felt a shiver to realise where exactly I found myself standing, the son of the dead father, all these years later. In the pouring rain I closed my eyes. I thought I heard a voice. A stumble over a brick. A hand. On my shoulder. I was spinning round. "Go back to where you've come from, you bastard! We sleep here." In the yellow glare of the shop-back a red face in a hood was staring into mine. It reeked of cheap sherry. Behind him was a shorter shape with clumped, rained bedraggled hair. His woman.

“Look, I’m sorry. Don’t worry. I lost my way. I’m a stranger.”

“Well, you be on your way, then.”

My heart drumming with the shock, I jogged past them back onto the High Street. In the lounge at the hotel I gratefully sank another brandy and went to bed.

### **Sunday 29th October**

I awoke with a hangover. I went to the window and saw it was still raining. Sunday - the whole day; I felt low and frustrated. I had made such good progress and now I had to mark time. I wanted to go to the police and ask to look at the file. I wanted to call at the offices of the local newspaper and read the old report. I had this Sunday and seven days left to get to the bottom of everything. Sunday! What a bloody waste of time!

After an indifferent breakfast I asked for the phone book. I looked up the O’ Mearas. There were three. The first one didn’t answer. The other two were suspicious but helpful when I told them I was looking up an old pal from the area. But one had never heard of a Jim. The other said she had an Uncle Jim but he had never come to Britain. He lived in Canada and was in his mid-forties. Too young. I kept trying the first number and finally there was an answer. I said I was trying to find an old mate called Jim O’Meara. The woman at the other end asked who I was. I told her my name and where I was staying. She told me to hold the line. I looked again at the name in the book. P O’Meara. I waited for five minutes but suddenly the line went dead. I dialled again but it was engaged. And whenever I rang again there was no reply. I wrote the number and the address in my notes.

But what about Wendy? Had she been a local girl? She would hardly have a police record, but I could try the schools, dentists, doctors..... but not on a bloody Sunday. I called on Flo again but she couldn’t say what Wendy’s maiden name had been. Had she sounded like a local girl? She wouldn’t swear to it but she thought she was from further south. I drank a cup of coffee in a café off the main street and considered. Someone, perhaps really close to me, in my vicinity, was holding the key, without being aware of it, to the next door along in my quest. I asked a few older pedestrians if they had heard of a Wendy O’ Meara but none had. I decided to return to the back of the shop, once The Lion. The cold sweat of the dismal morning permeated every brick, stick and slab. I shuddered to think of such a miserable life as those two outdoor creatures suffered. I peered past the overfull brown skip but could see little in the gloom. There was scarcely any space between the skip and either wall. Breathing in my belly as far as I could I could just about squeeze by. There, on a pile of flattened cardboard boxes, their makeshift mattress, was a double sleeping bag, zipped up and empty. The lovers were elsewhere. I tried to imagine what had driven them to live like this and on an impulse took out a twenty from my wallet, folded it up and threw it on their bed as reparation for intruding on their space. I edged my way back out and stared again amongst all the smut and debris, trying to see how it had all taken place all those slow years ago. But the memory had long been washed away. I found a pleasant park where a large dog was taking its master for a walk. The swings dangled down, twisted together and un-swung in the drizzle. I looked from one horizon to another and saw no promise of brightening, of no silver lining, as Granddad used to call it.

He had taken Alan, Eddie and me out one early, damp summer morning for a little walk and reconnoitring. Mam and - reluctantly - Dad, Denis and Nora had promised to take us all to Skegness if the weather was fair the following day, a Sunday. I recalled the sad but resigned

expression on Dad's face, as he was encouraged by the other three to set off after all, as soon as we burst back into the kitchen, saying excitedly that we had seen a silver lining. And so we had driven off and had spent the whole foul, wet Sunday under cover. I don't think Dad said two words all day. He counted Sunday as his day, with a lunchtime drink at The Pauncefote as the highlight.

Now, to the east it was difficult to disentangle the frazzled edges of the black skyline from the stunted trees of the moorland. A scattering of black-crowned sheep, like frozen maggots, stood in the far corner of a distant field by a tumbling dry-stone wall. Did they belong to anybody? Did an owner know or care where they were? I entered the graveyard and then walked out to find the more modern cemetery on the edge of town, bordering the moor. But, amongst all those settling down there for a long stay, reclined no O'Mearas in either. Their bell had not yet tolled, at least not in these parts. I pondered as I re-entered the town centre where he could possibly have spent such a long Sunday. He must have talked things over with them. He and Wendy would admit everything to a brooding Jim. They would say it was just a one-off, an accident almost. They had slept together once, the last time he had come racing. Jim had been at work. Perhaps she would carefully remind him, like a little girl tip-toeing around a wounded lion, that he had been horrible to her again that evening; perhaps he had accused her - again - of slipping into bed with the guests. If he believed that was what she did, and wouldn't listen to her denials, why, she might as well do it! Charlie had noticed she was upset when he came back from the pub; had comforted her perhaps and one thing had led to another.....Jim might moan and take his head in his hands to shake away the horrid, frantic imagery of his betrayal .....and she might tell him that it was all his own fault. She had loved him.....still loved him....but she felt neglected, needed to feel loved.....Then what? Had they all sat down together for dinner, talked about the weather or the balance of payments crisis and then watched the television all afternoon until Charlie had looked at his watch and said, oh, he ought to get going to the station? But he hadn't taken the train. Why? It just didn't make sense. What if Jim had demanded money? Had he threatened to phone Charlie's wife and tell her everything? Jim might have wanted financial support to help with the upbringing of this child which did not belong to him. Did he want Charlie to agree to a trust-fund for Timothy too? If that was all true, then Dad was in the mire. He had had a big win after months of meagre pickings. Now here was Jim trying to take him for as much as he could get. There, back at home a semi-villain called Harper was waiting, wanting his thousand pounds back, and more beside - God, this must have all looked like Mount Everest to a fat man with asthma - and canny Denis had not exactly promised he would help bail him out. Others he had held at arm's length wanted their bets honouring. Had he opened his red satchel, stared at all that money, now worthless to him, which he had to give away twice, once to O' Meara and once to Harper? ....No, three times, because Dicken and Coley probably hadn't had their cut! And he would close the bag and curse his luck and then envisage dismal days and nights taking stockings from a great noisy, oily machine in that soulless job which he had desperately tried to escape from. Now he would have to do it until he was sixty-five, retire and then slip quietly away in a huge armchair. Had he told O' Meara about all his indebtedness, begging him for time to raise funds, to get to his bank-books, his rainy-day money, his contingency funds which bought bits and bobs and flowers for his other women here, there and everywhere. A bank-book! I stopped and said a silent prayer to my God of Intuition, who always worked on mysteriously behind the scenes. Dad must have had one for this locality with him! Had he perhaps offered to pay its contents to Jim in full and final settlement of the matter?



I began to make note of where the building society branches were. The nearest one to Hope Street was five minutes away. This would be my first port of call tomorrow. I stopped dead again. Where was the bank book? If he had had it on him or in his case why hadn't it come back home with the rest of his things? Had it been taken from his dead body? Had he given it to Wendy on the quiet? Or had he been forced to give it to Jim to buy some time? Convinced I was on to something I went into a pub not far from where The Lion had stood for a drink and a snack. I opened the door and a blast of smoke and noise hit me. I struggled to the bar.

"When did The Lion close?" I asked the landlord. But he had no idea that there had ever been A Lion. He asked around in the bar and a tiny, old fellow in the corner, with a face like a cracked mud-puddle, said that there was no point asking Johnny Come-late-lys, at which the landlord sent a beer-mat whistling by his ear, in synthetic indignation.

"Mind yer manners, Benny!" he said.

"Bar the little bugger for his cheek, Tommo!" joked a chap standing at the bar. I went over to Benny in his corner.

"It closed in the 70s, pal. Too many watering-holes but not enough thirsty faces when t' mill shut.....It were my local...better than t'beer and t'bloody service you get here ....."

Everybody was laughing and shouting. The man at the bar said, "Bar him Tommo! D'you hear what he just said?"

I asked him if I could buy him a drink. He had clearly already had one or two.

"Buy me a drink? You can have a try if you like – he might not serve thee if you're getting one for me."

I came back with a couple and sat down in his smoky orbit by the corner of the bar. It turned out that he had been a local in The Lion until the very day it had closed. They had given Jimmy Deacon, the landlord, a real good send-off. Benny had had to have two days off work afterwards! The pint of Taddy's there had been delicious, he whispered, closing his eyes and tasting it again.

"It were a deep cellar, and t'beer came up as cool and crystal clear as from a spring..." and he whispered again in my ear "...this stuff ain't a patch on it....mind, after t' brewery got taken over ..(this had been a Taddy's place till then)....they went and changed the bloody formula....(that's the trouble, these days, allays messing with things to improve 'em, and buggering 'em up.....)"

"Did you ever drink in there on Sunday nights?"

"I were there every night, home from home."

Here then must sit the next key-holder. By total accident I had bumped into him. I just knew I had!

"Every single night?" I asked.

I sensed that this was the time to take out my photo. Had this alcoholic just one small parcel of brain cells left undamaged after all those boozy years?

"Oh that's my old mate Charlie" he said instantly. "He came in once in awhile with his mates, for a game o' cards. Years ago mind, a bookie from ...Nottingham.....no Leicester, a gambler an' all. You know, he used to bet -"

"- On which beer-mat a fly would land?"

He stared at me and asked how the bloody hell I knew that.

"Oh I played with him once or twice. Were you in The Lion the night he died?"

He looked down into his emptying pint and spluttered something, as if suddenly recollecting that he was, after all, dead. I put up two fingers to Tommo and slid some coins across the bar.

"Yep, I was .....and I shall never forget it. We were in t' back playing cards with four other

fellows... We beat the pants off 'em."

"We?"

"Well, him and me like, we were secret partners. We had a lucky streak..."

"With black twos?"

His drinking action froze in mid-air.

"Who the bloody hell are you? You ain't old enough to have played wi' him. You Mr Plod?" He shifted away slightly.

"No. He was my dad."

He coughed and sympathised. "Your Dad? He were a good bloke....a real good laugh.....poor old Charlie....."

"Can you tell me what happened that night? I still need to come to terms with it all. We only knew some of the story in the family....."

"What happened? Big trouble, that's what." He lit up and took a deep drag. "I got out t' back door as soon as it kicked off. One of these Micks suddenly looks up and says to Charlie, he knew how he was winning. Well, I sensed Charlie was nervous already but now he just glares back and tells him to shut up. T' other bloke smiles. The other three are looking at both of 'em. They'd all been up at t' Regent till Mac had decided to lock up and chuck 'em out. 10:40 sharp. So they had come into t' Lion for a late 'un. Up the back alley. Anyway, Charlie's eyes light up and he says, to him, he'd cut him, ace high, low takes, and give them all every penny back if he lost. If he won then he - the other bloke - wouldn't accuse him of cheating again. The others were well pissed and seemed to see some sense in that. This other guy seemed different. "

"What was he like?"

"A big chap...looked useful...better spoken than the others...." He shrugged, as if to say that was all there was to him. "So they went ahead and cut... Mick cuts a King ...Charlie cuts himself a Jack..... Bloody uproar! Jimmy Deacon tells us to button it or they'd hear us in t' street .Anyway, Charlie goes one better...offers, as a man of honour, to give each of the rest a chance to win his stake back, plus a pound, if they could undercut him, at no cost to them. Of course they went for it. And he beat them, each one! But then, one of them who's a bit brighter than his mates says, if he were cheating at brag, maybe he was cheating with the cut! Not possible, says Charlie, and offers to cut 'em for a pint. Jimmy agrees to serve just one more but I can tell he's getting nervous. So your dad, Charlie, loses to the first two but beats this cleverer one. And he says - See gents, it's all down to Lady Luck. Well, I don't know where to look, cos I know how he's working it. Lady Luck? Man of honour? Aye, and the Pope's the Archbishop of Canterbury! So then the first Mick says to Charlie, straight to his face, he'd cut him for five hundred quid..... Jimmy about shits himself and I think I must be going so red that I'm giving the game away....So then Charlie says, looking back at him just as straight, says, "If I win, that'll be it? Not a penny more....ever?" So Mick nods. "And what if you win?" Charlie asks. So Mick thinks about it and says, "I'll be in touch at the end of the month."

So they cut. Paddy cuts a four and laughs like a bloody drain. Charlie stares at t' pack for a minute, two minutes, keeps turning it, and saying a little prayer to Lady Luck, and then picks all the cards up, the whole deck. And guess what's there!"

"A black deuce?"

"Correct. The old thumbnail trick, oldest trick in the book. Mark the aces and pictures diagonal, deuces straight, etc, etc, just like tick-tack. ....bend a corner....Mick is laughing again, but this time it's not nice. And he just thrusts out his fist and punches Charlie on his nose, knocks him straight off his chair, out cold. Jimmy Deacon stands there, I stand there, the three others get up.

One says, "You've killed him!" I slap Charlie's face and he snorts, but he can't wake up. Then Jimmy whimpers, they'd all have to go or he'd call t' police and he barred all of them on the spot. So the big guy just laughs and picks Jimmy up and sets him down on a table. He's staying put, he says, until Charlie comes round. How could he possibly leave without his best friend? Or would Jimmy prefer to tuck him in for the night? Well I decide then and there I'm off! And when I've been for a pee there are the Irishmen having a row in the alley. One's saying, no, he wouldn't go...they had been cheated and he wanted his money back, all of it. He even threatens me. So I'm off.....Well the next day it's all over town that Charlie's been found murdered in Jimmy's alley. Jimmy found him early on when he let the dog out. A terrible mess. Made him puke...."

I stood him another drink. I had a brandy. "What happened after you left?"

"Not a lot. Jimmy said he threw a pint over him and he came round. Paddy just took him off. Jimmy bolted the door and went off to bed. That's it."

"What time did they go?"

"No idea, but it must have been after midnight because it was well past half-eleven when I went."

"How much did you tell the police when they interviewed you?"

Benny pulled a face and sucked at his new beer. "Nowt. Jimmy swore me to silence...."

"You mean...you NEVER spoke to the police?"

"Look, Jimmy was scared to death he'd lose his licence if it all came out. He'd already had warnings about serving after-hours. He swore blind to t' police that nobody had been in t' pub after a quarter-to-eleven, and, try as they did, they couldn't break him down (well the Gestapo hadn't managed to, so what chance did the local plods stand?) After that he always closed on the dot...."

"Where might I find him?"

Benny pointed across the road.

"What's his address?"

"Near the church. Somewhere in t' corner. I used to take him flowers on his birthday."

I put my pencil through the rings of my notebook. "So he's dead?"

"15, 16 years. Aneurism. Bled to death in minutes. Poor old Jimmy, never very lucky."

"You do realise that you committed a serious criminal offence?"

He stared again. "You ARE Plod ain't yer??"

I took out my ID and showed him. He went pale. "Don't worry, Benny. I shan't shop you.

World's moved on a few miles since then. I'd like to thank you. You were my lucky find today."

We clinked glasses and drank.

Now he relaxed. "At the time I felt guilty, Charlie being sort of a mate and all, but I couldn't let Jimmy down. It would have been his livelihood.....as he said himself, what could we say that was not already known? It was obvious who had done it. There were more witnesses than at bloody Kingdom Hall. A fall-out over cards. Must have been. What difference did it make if we came forward.....and told the same tale as everybody else? Charlie had won their money off them and they wanted it back. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to work that one out. And what descriptions could we give? Big and burly with Irish accents. So? Not many fitting that description on the motorway! The police interviewed about all of them there but they couldn't make anything stick. Here today, gone tomorrow most of them. One copper, a regular at Jimmy's, told us that it was pointless examining their hands for marks...gouges.... and scratches, considering the manual job they did. Besides they were always knocking lumps out of each

other.”

“The one who hit Charlie wasn’t a navvy. He lived in Hope Street.”

“Well, fancy that. How do you know?”

I thought of Flo. “A wise old bird told me”

“Well I didn’t know him. And I definitely never saw hide or hair of him again.”

I left the pub and went to call on Potty. He made me a cup of tea. I asked him if he had been in The Regent on that Sunday night and he shook his head.

“Never on the Sabbath, Mr Bevin.”

“Oh pity. There’s a quiz at The Regent tonight. Fancy your chances?” He rather thought he did.

“Good. I’ll see you in the restaurant first at seven”

He turned to his dog and said, “You’re not allowed in the restaurant old girl. You’ll have to stay in tonight”.

As I write this in my tiny, meagre room I glance at my watch. It is 4pm. I cannot believe I have gotten so far in so short a time, and on a Sunday. As soon as I’ve seen the evidence, read the newspaper and checked up on the bank-book I’ll be ready to head home. I will sort things out with Jane and tell her all about this. I’ll go and see Alan and take him for a drink. As soon as I’ve put him in the picture he will understand how I felt when Dad died and we would hopefully make our peace. I feel good. Now I’ll have a snooze. I’m knackered.

At 6:45 I met Potty in the bar for an aperitif. By eight we had eaten and returned to the main room for the quiz. We were one of nine or ten teams. Pop Music was a predictable disaster but we were holding our own in the other rounds. Potty’s hobby was History so we decided to play our joker on that round. He loved to read about the Raj, he told me. His father had served in India. He himself had been in military intelligence, all rather hush-hush. I told him that my father had been called up just in time for D-Day. (To me this made his death all the more ironic, that having dodged death on the beach and in the French countryside and towns, it had jumped him twenty or so more years later in a dirty little alley back home. (I have sometimes mused also on the horror-filled disbelief of the relatives of those early casualties of the Peace, in a road, factory or domestic accident, on VE day, or the next day....)) That’s my morbid imagination again, Adam.

In the Literature round the quizmaster made a mistake. He had asked which Brontë had written The Professor - Anne, Emily or Charlotte. As a Brontë buff I knew it was Charlotte. He had ascribed that often rather tedious book to Anne. In a break in proceedings I strolled over and good-naturedly took him to task for his error, telling him that I had been to Haworth many times and had read everything by those wonderful sisters. He took this in good spirit and on the quiet gave us an extra point, putting us into third place. Feeling rather mellow, on impulse, I borrowed his pen and jotted something down. I told him that there would be a drink in it for him if he read out those two extra questions at the end. With that agreed, I sat back down again.

We did quite badly in the Sport round but with everything counting double for us in the History round, between us we managed 18/20, to put us a clear second, two points behind the leaders. Potty was loving it. I told him to stop gulping his brandy as we needed him sober for the final round, entitled HEREABOUTS, (for what did I know about the locality and its history?) Well, Potty knew the lot and was trembling with excitement as the quiz neared its conclusion. He knew

we had a great chance of winning the first prize, £50. The quizmaster looked around melodramatically and said that his next question would have been the last but there were two mystery, request questions. He cleared his throat and with another stagy flourish said, "Right, ladies and gentlemen, if I were standing with my back to the Old Beeches what would I be directly looking at across the road?"

"The hospital!" whispered Potty hoarsely. "The Beeches was a big house pulled down to make way for GP clinics!"

Then the quizmaster asked for attention. "And now our bonus questions....Who killed Charlie Bevin..... and where is James O' Meara?"

People were looking round in puzzlement and mouthing WHAT?? Potty looked at me in astonishment and I whispered to him that I had just had a sudden impulse to do it.

"It must have been all the wine and brandy." I chuckled as I looked around. No other reaction.....nothing unusual.....and then the tall man in his fifties who had sat quietly drinking by the fireplace, not taking part, quickly finished his pint, got up and strode out.

"Who's he?" I said. Potty hadn't noticed. I got up and went out, just in time to see a car, reverse from a space and turn left into the mist. I memorised the plate and went back in. Papers had been exchanged, and answers were being given out for marking. On the paper which had been passed over to our table in exchange for ours there were two red question marks by numbers eleven and twelve. When it came to marking the final two, my two, the quizmaster looked over to me to supply the answers. I shook my head and told him I didn't know myself. One or two people groaned. Papers were collected in and we waited for them to be checked for scores. We had entitled ourselves The No-Hoppers. When we were announced as the ironic winners, by one point, Potty was overjoyed. Best fun he had had in years! I told him he could keep the money as a present for the assistance he had given me. I called him a taxi and when he had tottered out to it I noticed I was one of the few remaining drinkers. It was 10:40 and people had drifted away. The quizmaster came over for his reward. I gave him a tenner and told him to buy me a brandy and whatever he wanted.

"It seems somebody knew the answers to your questions" He pushed one of a sheaf of papers under my nose. On it someone had written in a bold hand, and nothing else.

1- NOT Jim O'Meara 2-God only knows.

In the night I awoke with a question thrumming in my head. Why had Charlie been given and why was he carrying the card of the guest-house if he already knew the address? I got up and drank a glass of water. My head was hurting. Tomorrow I would have a day off from the booze. I jotted the question on my pad and went back to an untroubled sleep.

### **Monday 30th October**

To have a strong intuition confirmed by fact is an exhilarating and even shocking experience. But for me this was very shocking. I had walked into the Building Society and asked to see the manager. I flashed my ID and told her that I was investigating the death of one Charles Bevin, last seen in this locality in the late sixties. I produced the Death Certificate which I had borrowed from my mother's biscuit tin. I was touring all the banks and societies in town as I needed to know where he banked his money and whether his accounts had been closed. I gave her the address in Hope Street and under the desk kept my fingers crossed.

"I'll have to search for that file on the hard drive. It's not one I use very often, a/cs closed so long ago.....right.....can I have his date of birth?"

“07 06 26..... B-E-V-I-N.”

She keyed it in and we waited, and waited.....Had my hunch been completely wrong? I pictured the same event in every other branch in the town with diminishing confidence in my own intuition. Would he use a more convenient branch in proximity to the racecourse?

“Ah! Here we are!” She exclaimed. I stared at her in disbelief. “Charles David Bevin, opened October 27th 1966 and closed.....”

It had been closed five days after his death.

“The last withdrawal was as a cheque for .....Goodness! Sixteen thousand, two hundred and three pounds, seventeen and tuppence.”

I was thinking over how brilliant I had been in my hunch-making and the significance of the time of the withdrawal. The amount only sunk in when I turned away to leave. How much???? I turned back to her and asked her to repeat the amount. I stared and calculated. Our bungalow had cost £2,700 to build in the sixties. How many bungalows was that? I asked her if there any way to trace the destination of that money. She shook her head. No cheques were kept longer than a year or so by the clearing banks. I thanked her and left. Once outside I suddenly realised that I had now taken against the O' Mearas. They were no longer just the innocent victims of my father's mesmerism. They had clearly benefited, somehow, massively from his demise. Had they had a solid, decent marriage none of this would have happened. I had begun to hold them responsible. Yet how on Earth did this massive amount fit in with a man who had debts back home and forced to take up again a job he loathed? Were the O'Mearas using his account to launder dodgy money? Did that happen in England way back then? What racket were they into? Had Dad been in on it too? But if he was, why were we in so much financial trouble? It just didn't add up. Instead of clarifying the murky waters, I had stirred up all the mud from the bottom.

At the local police station I was informed that records and files were held at the station in the large, neighbouring town, about fifteen miles away. I drove out onto the moors and an hour later I had parked up and had soon found my way to the main police station. It was a depressing building. Its flat roof bristled with radio masts. The windows stared around sternly from their smeared concrete sockets. The fittings inside were cheap and hard-edged, the walls painted institution green. It smelt of smoke, sweat, trepidation, anxiety and faintly of booze. And guilt and mendacity. From below stairs, from the cells, an incoherent voice was loudly protesting, verging on tears. At the desk I showed my ID and asked to speak with the chief constable. I waited and waited. A procession of constables and office staff with files criss-crossed the corridor purposefully. A door opened, swinging back on its creaking brake, which no-one could be bothered to oil, for an age before clicking finally shut. And then it went through the same enervating performance again and again..... It was a dreadful place, a backwater of apathy. “DI Bevin?”

I realised I had closed my eyes to switch myself off from the purgatory around me. The sweet voice belonged to a DC Carpenter. She was a smart brunette with a lovely, long slide of a nose. In a side-room, with the same mission-statement hanging off the wall, which I had read over and over again in the dismal corridor, I began to tell her my tale. After a while she frowned, excused herself and left the room. She came back with a DS Rogers. He was fat and overconfident. Could I possibly have a glance at the old file? He shook his head. He couldn't get it without higher authority. As a DI I ought to know that.

“You know that you can't just walk in off the street and demand to see data on another patch.” I didn't like his voice. It was soap-operatic again, meant to impress the young constable, whom

he clearly fancied because he delivered his speech, half to me and half to her. I told him I would only be around for a time.

“I know its irregular and I understand. But I did ask to see the chief constable and not...” I left him to add in his own mind *the organ grinder’s monkey*. He stiffened as I went on to add “As Mr Bevin’s son I might be able to spot something which no-one else would notice.”

He looked at me pseudo-sympathetically. “If it was JUST down to me” he said with a theatrical gesture in the direction of his own breast, “*No probs* - but I can’t make that decision. And you know yourself there would have to be a bloody good reason....not just to satisfy curiosity.....there would have to be...” and he waved his hand around, searching stupidly for words which he already had and was holding back for effect, “....New evidence.” He took a chair and wheeled it round to sit on it front to back. “Have you got new evidence?”

Had I got new evidence? Would it be a lie to say yes? I thought how to put the best gloss on what I knew. “I have no definite new leads to his killers but...I have proof of the theft of his property, a bank-book, and of the funds in his account....and of the ID of the thieves....and evidence of an assault upon him just prior to his death perpetrated by one James O’ Meara, who then probably aided and abetted the subsequent fatal attack on him. If O’Meara were still alive he would be a material witness to the identities of those responsible.....”

Rogers turned this over in his slow mind and suggested that I make a statement. He left me alone with Carpenter, which was a considerable relief, obviously to her as well. After she had taken everything down, read it back to me and I had signed it, he returned. He read it half aloud, rapidly, and then made a stupid popping, clucking noise with his mouth. Why did I have the distinct feeling he was intending to put it somewhere down below the oubliettes? I decided I would have one last attempt. “Is there no way I could see the chief?”

He slowly shook his head. “He’s at a three day conference in Cumbria. When he gets back I’ll take this straight into him” Aye, and the Pope’s the Archbishop of Canterbury, I heard Benny say. Anyway, I wrote down my hotel address and phone number, which he had signally not requested and evidently did not wish to know, on the pad on the table.

As I was going back to my car the DC caught up with me. She looked concerned.

“I’m really sorry about that. Rogers is an absolute arsehole but there was no-one else available. There’s been a murder and we’re really up to our necks. Rogers couldn’t catch a mouse with a wooden leg....I’ll make absolutely sure that the chief hears about all this....And I’ll be in touch.” “You are very kind. And I’m sure you’ll make a very good copper.”

As I drove away I knew now what I had to do to take everyone and grab them by the scruff of the neck. Seeing a news agent’s I stopped and enquired about the local press. Until a few years back, the shopkeeper told me, Witherbridge had had a local paper publishing every Friday. It had been swallowed by the bigger organ in the city. That paper published every evening, with a special edition for each outlying locality. A phone call told me that all the fiches of the olden days were stored at the main office.

I strode in and asked to see the editor. I showed him my ID and told him all about my quest. His eyes widened in growing fascination, no doubt sensing a story unusual enough even to grab the attention of not easily impressed Yorkshire folk. Suddenly he grabbed the telephone. “Steven, it’s me. What have we got on the front page?.....Binge-drinking? We’ll hold that till tomorrow. I’ve got an absolute peach for tonight. This is tonight’s headline, for every edition ...WHO KILLED CHARLIE? . Send in a reporter straightway.....No, tell her that can wait....No!...NO!.....OBLIGE ME!” he roared. He sat back with a huge beam on his pudgy face,

cradling the back of his head in his hands and savouring the thrill of exercising his authority. After a few minutes an eager young woman of Indian or Pakistani origin came bustling in, clutching pen and pad. With the palm of his hand he bade her take a chair.

“Now pin your lovely ears back and listen to this, Sunita,” he said.

And I began to tell it all again; about The Hollies; of Jim and Wendy; the cheating of the labourers; of The Lion, the fight, the withdrawal of his money (but not the amount) after his death. Finally I said. “Jim and Wendy need to come forward to put the record straight.” I deliberately held back information about the affair and Timothy, to give them some incentive to come out of their hidey-hole in order to keep me quiet and sweet. They took a photograph of me. Then I asked to see the fiches of the edition of that Friday so long ago, following his death. Sunita and I looked together. I felt a tingling in my neck. She smelt of lemons. We found the headline. It read MAN FOUND DEAD IN ALLEY. The story was as follows:

“The police are interviewing all labourers working on the motorway after a 45 year old bookmaker from Leicestershire, Charles Bevin, was found dead at the top of the alley of The Lion public house early last Monday morning by the licensee, James Deacon. Many witnesses have confirmed that Bevin was playing cards with four Irishmen at The Regent Hotel on Sunday night. He was last seen alive leaving there in their company at 10:45 pm. A post-mortem report has established cause of death as a severe blow- one of several- to the head. An inquest has been opened and adjourned, pending further police enquiries. It is thought likely that an argument and a brawl broke out. All men were reported to have been drinking heavily. Time of death has been established as 12:17 pm at which point Mr Bevin’s smashed wristwatch had stopped. Police urgently need to know where he was between his last known sighting and 12:17 and wish to speak to anyone in or around the town centre at that time. Mr Bevin leaves a widow aged 44 and two young sons.”

There was a split photo of The Lion and the alley. I requested the four following editions for my perusal. In the second, at the bottom of the front page, beneath a report about the visit of a minor royal to open a hospital wing, it said simply MAN’S KILLERS STILL SOUGHT, with a further appeal for witnesses to come forward. ( But there had almost certainly had been none). As I looked vainly through the fourth edition, reflecting on the fickleness of the world and its mass media I suddenly spotted, in the personal column JIM - GET IN TOUCH - KATHY DELL. I left the offices and remembered the man who had left the quiz in such a hurry at The Regent. I phoned my station. “Callum? It’s John. Can you do me a favour? Can you run a plate for me?....Suspicion of drunk-driving.....”

Within minutes he came back to me with a name and address. Paul O’Meara. From Witherbridge in Yorkshire.

There was a bold rap at the door as I was preparing to take a rest that afternoon. I opened up to discover a smart woman in her late fifties, early sixties with startling, piercing dark eyes. What could I do for her? She needed to speak to me. About James O’Meara. She said she had been in the lounge bar the previous evening. I reached onto the bedside table for that slip of paper. “Was it you who wrote this?” She nodded. I asked her to sit down on the chair and I sat on the edge of the bed. I offered to make her a coffee but she declined.

“What makes you so sure that Jim didn’t kill Charlie?” I asked.

“When you tell me what this all means to you I’ll tell you my story.”



I could see I was dealing with a formidable woman. I showed her my ID, hiding my surname beneath my thumb, and told her I had taken some leave. That it was a bit of a hobby of mine to try to solve the unsolved or the unsolvable, that I was gathering material for a book.

She looked at me, first doubtfully and then scornfully, and said "That's a lie."

I must have looked hurt and surprised. She folded her arms and went on, "He was a Bevin. Your name is Bevin. They told me at the bar last night you had a room here. Name of Bevin."

I flushed to realise that I had just been caught out here like some witless rabbit in my own interview room. I might tell her that the name was a freak coincidence but she had been watching me too intently. I knew that she would spot another lie easily.

"It wasn't quite a lie. To be totally honest with you..... I am his son. But the rest is correct. So would you mind telling me who you are?"

"That doesn't matter. I just want to put the record straight. I worked with Jim. We were...close friends. His wife....was a shag-bag."

No, Wendy was a good girl! I heard Flo saying. But I could see my visitor was adamant.

"Jim told me that she had confessed to everything," she added.

"Were *you* having an affair with *him*?"

She looked uncomfortable for the first time.

"Affair? No. Jim was religious. He took his marriage vows seriously. I secretly wanted him to...you know....but I didn't press it. We were good friends. Jim had a temper but at heart he was a good man, a fine man. Too good for her. Too easy going."

I saw I would have to tread carefully. I looked at her and said "But he was jealous. A neighbour told me he was always accusing her of going behind his back with the lodgers but that she never did. That doesn't fit very squarely with your version of him, does it? I'm only saying that because of what I've been told. Enlighten me!"

"He told me that she hardly ever wanted sex with him. So he was bound to suspect her."

I considered what to say to draw her out further. "Perhaps she didn't like sex with him, perhaps he was a flop. Perhaps she betrayed him to punish him for all his accusations. Or perhaps she made it all up to hurt him in a row. Perhaps she said it all with irony, and he took her too literally. People say a lot of hurtful things in rows."

She thought this over. Perhaps she did not have such experience, having possibly remained a spinster of that parish. There was something repulsive in her manner and she had the air of a woman who had always had to fight her own battles. Had she been the character who had called on Flo all those years ago?

"On the last Sunday afternoon before he went away he came round in a terrible state. He had been drinking, him, a near tea-totaller. I made him coffee and calmed him down. He told me he had packed his bags and was leaving her, Wendy. I told him to bring them round and stop with me a few days, until it had all died down. They had had really bad rows before and he often came to me to get it all off his chest and cry on my shoulder. But no, he said, this time was different. Her other bloke was there. He and she had admitted it to his face. The child wasn't his. Jim could be a bit slow, but as soon as he'd seen this fellow...Charlie ....again, the truth had dawned on him. They had confirmed it. ...And Jim told me he had locked him, the bloke, in his room."

I stiffened. "What the hell did he do that for?"

"He had gone to his room to get his stuff and catch the train, and Jim had followed him. He wasn't thinking straight. He had a few to drink and he had had no sleep. He had told Charlie he would phone his wife and tell her everything if he tried to get out. He would let him go when he had decided what to do. At seven Jim was starting to sober up and said he wanted to go home. So

he went. Never saw him again. When he didn't come in on Sunday and Monday night - we checked the milk in and sorted the floats out - I wasn't surprised. Then on Tuesday it was all around town about this bookmaker. I felt sure Jim had done him in. By Wednesday I was out of my mind with worry. He hadn't phoned in sick or anything. So I phoned her up and when she answered I pretended to be any-old-body from work. She said he had the flu but I could hear in her voice she was lying. So on Thursday evening before work I called round and told her who I really was and what I knew. She was obviously upset. She started crying like a stupid child and told me he had left her and gone back to Dublin. As I was getting up to leave all of a sudden there was a creak upstairs. I knew I hadn't imagined it because she looked up at the ceiling as well. She said something pitiful about the cat. I gave her my phone number and left. Anyway as soon as I walked in home the phone rang. It was her. Could I come round tomorrow? She needed someone to talk to. So I went. Well, she admitted, Jim had been there the night before, hiding. Now he had finally gone, miles away."

"Was she telling the truth?"

"I'm not sure but she seemed more confident. She wouldn't say where Jim had disappeared to but when I pressed her she told me not to Dublin. Then she said there had been an awful accident. Jim had gone out with Charlie to find some Irishmen he had been playing cards with. He wanted him to win as much money as he could off them to give to him and Wendy. They were struggling. The B&B wasn't earning much. But then Jim had suddenly lost his temper again and set the Irishmen on him to give him a good hiding and teach him a lesson. But they wouldn't stop. Just kept kicking him and punching him. Jim had told them that that would do, the bloke had had enough, but they had been like madmen, and when Jim had grabbed hold of one he got a fist himself. That's why he couldn't come to work. He came to after they had gone, he struck a match and looked at Charlie. The poor man had no face. He just knew he was dead. He had run back home. He was frightened to death. So when the police called on the Monday she told the police her husband had gone back to Ireland for his cousin's funeral. All the time he was hiding upstairs. She told me that as soon as it had all died down she would sell up and go to him. They would patch everything up and start again. Start afresh. Maybe open a B&B in a better spot."

"Where?"

"I have absolutely no idea. You know all that I know. I swear it." She was evidently telling the truth. "Off course I promised her faithfully that I would go along with it and swore never to breathe a word of it to anyone. Four people know the truth.....if it is the whole truth...."

"You don't seem totally convinced"

"No. But that's the trouble with a liar," she said looking pointedly straight at me, "Once a liar tells you a lie, like she did, you never know where you stand... Now I want you to swear to me that you'll leave this all be and go home. Leave them in peace, wherever they are!" She stopped suddenly and her iron composure left her. She was sobbing. She put up her hands and shrank back from my gesture of sympathy. She shook her tears vigorously away like a wet dog and stammered, "The s-strange, the hurtful thing.... the worst of it all to me was that he...n-never once wrote or called...not even a Christmas card...and I was sure he cared something for me....Look if you do find him...Can you tell him to contact me. Just say Kath. He'll know" And suddenly Kathy *Dell* - it was surely the Kath advertising in the small ads - was up and gone, with a slam of the door. I didn't have the nerve to follow her and tell her that the time for secrecy had already passed.

The paper that evening looked sensational. My picture showed me resolute and business-like. Customers in the bar that night were looking at me and nudging each other. Lovely Emma the barmaid brought me a double brandy, compliments of the bar staff. One or two drinkers nodded and murmured good luck. But not everyone felt the same way.

### **Tuesday 1st November**

The next morning I came to an abrupt halt in the car-park when I saw the words GO HOME scratched on the door panel of my car. Then my colleague phoned me to say that my boss was on the warpath. His counterpart here in the next town had phoned him and raised merry hell. I thanked him. I gave Emma twenty quid and asked her to share it around the staff. If anybody phoned asking for me could they just take their name and number and say I'd call back. I bought a spray can and tarted up the body work and asked Potty if he minded me parking the car outside his house.

I was having a snack in the bar when O'Meara's brother Paul walked in again. He was probably in his late fifties but looked very fit, knuckly in the face and broad in the shoulders. He bought a drink and slowly walked over to me. Had I been the one who had asked those questions last night? I told him I had but gave him no clue that I knew who he was.

"Why do you want to know where Jim O'Meara is?"

I tossed him last night's paper. He tossed it back, saying he had read it.

"Why do you think he might know who killed that bookie?"

"My father? Because he was there. He saw it all happen. To his credit he tried to stop it. I want him to come forward. To thank him maybe. What's it all to you then? Did you know him?"

"Yeah, I used to know him when we were kids but I don't know where he is now."

"You used to play together?"

"That's right. I moved to Manchester. He moved here. We kept in touch then he stopped writing.

I promised his mother I'd try to look him up. She had birthday and Christmas cards from him with various postmarks but he never came to see her, didn't phone and gave no contact address. She died in 1973 and the cards gradually stopped. I've been looking ever since. In the end I reported him missing, here. Now and then I drive over, hoping to pick up his trail."

"If he thought the police were interested in him perhaps he moved well away, went abroad, changed his name....."

"Yes, but I've asked around his family. No-one has heard from him."

"Perhaps he's dead."

"I tend to agree. I think you've put your finger on it. So if he is, why are you bothering to make trouble? Why bother poor old Wendy, if she's still around here? Why stir up bad, old memories?"

He had got closer now. I could feel his hot breath on the side of my face. I sipped my beer and slowly turned to face him. "At the station back home do you know what they call me?"

He shrugged." Now why should I have the foggiest?"

"Trapper."

"Is that so? Why? Do you use entrapment, or something?"

I patted my nose with my index finger. "I don't need to. I can smell guilt. I know when somebody's hiding something. And once I get my teeth stuck in, like a gin-trap, I just don't let go. Something in all this smells wrong.....You smell wrong.....Mr.....?"

"You don't need to know my name. As I said, I'm his old friend. Let me know if he turns up" He scribbled his phone number on a beer-mat, tossed it back onto the table and left.

In the afternoon I decided to stir things up a little more. I drove back to the offices of the newspaper. I thought the headline (totally unattributable to me) WHY WON'T THEY RE-OPEN THE CASE? might just do the trick. I was getting angry with this old backwater. Jim had obviously sent his brother over to warn me off. His story was ludicrous. Somebody (probably him or someone else with his knowledge) had ruined the paint-work on my car and the local police had botched the investigation back then and I had seen nothing to persuade me otherwise that they were a pretty average bunch of plods at best. Somebody, or some bodies, wanted me to clear off and leave them in peace. And that was now hardening my resolve to stay put. In the reception I was kept waiting. The receptionist seemed uneasy. The young Asian reporter came hurrying down the stairs with a note. It read "Mr Bevin, I can't see you. The story was a mistake. You are not welcome. Please do not come back." It wasn't even signed. I stared at it in stupefaction. "Who owns this rag?" I shouted. She shook her raven black hair and through her lovely light tan skin she turned deep beetroot. She skipped back upstairs. I went to follow her. At the top the editor put his fat head around the corner and like a turtle drew it instantly back in again.

"What's going on here?" I shouted. "Who owns you? Who got to you?"

As if in response a very large, fit man, clearly one who had seen service in the bouncer, bodyguard trade appeared and made his way smiling down the stairs.

"Who? Who owns this paper? Certainly not you, Mr Bevin -"

"Detective Inspector Bevin," I corrected him as he came ever closer until he was staring down at me from the first riser..

"Make enquiries at Company House, if you are really that bothered. Now the management would be grateful if you would kindly do as they have requested and vacate these premises...." His well-spoken patter contrasted oddly with his low forehead, shaven scalp and ear-ringed lobe. His supreme self-confidence both disgusted and disconcerted me, but I was determined to remain calm. He smelt of TCP.

"Just tell me who your boss is" - and I showed him my ID matter-of-factly - "I may need you and him to help me with my enquiries -". He smiled even more broadly and came yet closer.

Underneath his TCP mask his halitosis was dreadful. He took my ID and pushed it back into my top pocket.

"You won't be needing that around here. Make sure you don't lose it. Now, I would hate to have to escort you off the premises, but you are trespassing on private property and I am fully entitled by law to do so."

I began to retreat. "You can tell your employer that I shall want to interview him - or her - about the murder of Charles David Bevin and theft of his property. You can tell whoever it is that they have made a big mistake to threaten me...." and with as much dignity as I could muster I left.

I sat in my car waiting. After about a half- hour the polite brute emerged talking on his mobile phone. A black Porsche drew up, he jumped in and they were gone. I noted their plate: 5 FMN. By the time I had turned my car round they were already roaring past the traffic light, which was now changing. So the futile car-chase, Adam, a Porsche with an old Rover in hot pursuit, never even began. I pulled over and reached over for my mobile. "Callum, it's John. I need another favour on a plate." But I detected something wrong. He sounded odd. There was a click as I was transferred. Then I was listening to my boss, Stokes, whining and complaining. "Bevin, I'm cancelling your leave. Come home at once! What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?"

I've had nothing but ear-ache from up there."

"Chief. Just hear me out for two minutes and I won't interrupt you once, OK?"

There was a pause and then he told me to go on.

"There's some kind of cover-up going on, involving a racket, the newspaper and maybe even the police. Something smells bad. This was my father, boss, my father. He was murdered here; there were enough witnesses to do a bloody oil painting of the mob who did it but nobody has ever been arrested for it. Why? Sheer incompetence? I'm not going anywhere near that shitty police station from now on. But I'm not leaving here until I find out what's going on....."

I could hear him breathing. And thinking. Finally he said "If you pull one more trick..... You keep to the rules and don't go upsetting people....How would you like it if someone came treading all over your desk with their mucky feet? And if you think you can have private access to the police computer...."

"That was legitimate, boss. The car was all over the road...I just wanted to go round and give him an unofficial warning.....it was my public duty...."

"Bullshit! I'm warning you, John. You're out of order. One more stunt and I'll suspend you from duty, cancel all leave and throw the book at you so hard....."

"Alright. I get the picture. Just do me one last favour. Check two, no three names for criminal records."

And I gave him details of the O' Meara brothers. And of Harold Harper (to whom my father had been in debt). Stokes agreed to help me out once and once only. As he rang off he reminded me of the wasps' nest. The fabled wasps' nest! After an assault on me while on duty I had suffered some disturbance of vision, blurring and seeing double. We had been in Tyrol walking...

Looking down on the mountain path I had had difficulty gauging the true pattern and depth of the stones and roots and had tripped and stumbled down a steep slope. A tree had brought me to a shuddering halt. Amazingly, where there should have been severely broken ribs there would just be painful bruising. Laughing almost, I had begun to climb back up to my appalled wife when I stuck my fist into their subterranean nest. In a whirl of insects I had rushed back up to the path, where a knot of other hikers had ripped my clothes off me. There was hardly a square of skin where I was not stung. One fell out of my ear even that evening. I had no sleep for two nights. The doctor looked at me and told me that I really ought to be dead.

Within an hour I had my information. Against James O' Meara's name there were no convictions. Against Paul there were a string of convictions, many involving violence. The most serious was for GBH, involving a knife, in the eighties for which he had done eighteen months in Strangeways. Mr Harper had one conviction for tax evasion and one for fraud.

### **Evening.**

As I was thinking about O'Meara and his violent bent, I began to wonder if now might be a good time to consider changing my abode. As if in reply there came a gentle rap on the door. I opened up slowly with my right foot and knee planted firmly behind it. But it was DC Carpenter.

"Who were you expecting? The bailiffs?" She smiled and held up a briefcase. "I've brought you a present"

She came in and undid the case on the table. She drew out a manilla folder. "It's your dad's file. I photocopied it."

I looked at her. "But you could get yourself the sack!"

She shrugged. I said a muted thank you and began to sift through it. She jumped onto the bed and

drew her knees up under her chin. “Nobody will find out. I signed for it and took it back half-an-hour-later. If anybody asks I’ll just say I was checking on the surname, in case Rogers forgot.” I began reading witness statements, glancing at her occasionally as she chattered on. “To be honest though, I’m pissed off with the police. I hate working at that dump. You wouldn’t believe how much back-biting goes on there.....” She stopped because I had sat down suddenly on the chair. The photo. I had come across it. It had been taken in situ. In a pool of dark where the flash had ceased he lay. The flash had turned his battered face into a monochrome grim mask, bloated, without features or contours. Uncle Wilf had not exaggerated, for apart from his hairline and wavy hair he was scarcely recognisable. I took out my childhood snap and compared the living face to this appalling death mask. The soft lawn and shy sons of one had become the bricks and splashes of black blood on the other. His crumpled suit was the same....but why had they only taken a photo of him as far as the knees? Puzzled, I looked for other shots, close-ups, other angles but to my utter disappointment there were no others. “Only one photo? Didn’t you have time to copy the others?”

“There were no others.”

“You’re joking.....” She shifted uncomfortably in the stung silence. I desperately wanted to be alone, for her to go but was too polite to ask. She must have realised that I was more than just a bit upset because she said presently “Would you like a drink?”

I looked over at the bed-side table where a bottle of brandy I had started on, was standing. “Pour me a double, if you would. Thanks. And help yourself.”

She didn’t drink, she said. So she didn’t really know what a proper measure was because she filled my glass almost three-quarters full. But I wasn’t arguing. I told her to come over and compare the photos. She laid her hand on my shoulder but grimaced when she saw the difference between them and said it wasn’t easy to tell that they were of the same man.

“Where’s the post-mortem report” I asked. “Don’t tell me there isn’t -“

“It’s here look,” she said almost tenderly. I skim-read through it ....”five broken ribs”.....”severe bruising to chest”.....”severe head injuries”...”massive brain trauma”.

Basically the thick bastards had turned his clever, devious brain to jelly.

Then there were all the statements from O’Malley, O’Reilly, Murphy, Hickey, O’Donovan, O’Meara..... *Paul O’ Meara..*

I felt a light pat on my shoulder and then heard the door click quietly to as she left. What a clever girl she was. I realised afterwards that she had probably intended to stay the night. I read with disgust the half-literate statement that had been taken from O’Meara and written down by the interviewing officer.

“...I was drinking in the town centre at The Hare and Hounds on the Saturday night but as I had no mony (sic) to go out on Sunday, I staid on site all night waching (sic) TV with Patrick Hickey.....(etc) “

So there he had his alibi, as he, in turn, was the alibi for his mates. All very convenient for everybody. So, I deduced, Jim had phoned his brother Paul on Sunday and told him how his mates, or even he, had lost their money. Did they want revenge? I saw it all. It was not just a flare-up. It had been planned. It was deliberate. But then my anger turned on the police investigation. They could have brought them all in, sweated them in different rooms, put them in parades, baffled the bastards with trickery, like my dad had done, like I would have done, until they had got to the truth. But they couldn’t be arsed. Charlie was an out-of-towner, and (whisper

it low) a bit of a crook, a card-sharp, deserved all he got.....I didn't go down to dinner. I drank the bottle down steadily and just kept sifting through the papers until I felt my head slump onto the table.

When I woke again I was in bed. I couldn't remember getting in. The clock said ten to three. I groaned. It was always a mistake for me to go to sleep early, as I barely need five hours any night. Now I would have to lie awake until breakfast and feel dreadful all day. Then I realised what had woken me. A creak in the corridor. Could I just detect a faint rhythm of slow breathing outside or was it my own I could hear? I held my breath. In the sparse light I watched the door-knob slowly turn. Had I locked it? It clicked and turned back. I had! I saw the door stiffen. A jemmy in the door-jamb! I got out of bed and stuffed a pillow under the covers to mimic my sleeping body. Just in time I arrived in the corner between wardrobe and door. With a low clack the door came away from its lock and opened. It carried on opening until I was aware of a bucket and an absolutely sickening smell. In the quarter-light of the moon I watched as a writhing dark puddle - of blood - flew through the air and slapped down onto my bed. With all my considerable weight I now crashed against the door crushing the intruding arms and forcing the bucket to smash against the wall. "Bastard!" I heard. Now he was backing into the door. Through the stench I got a whiff of anti-septic. Gradually his greater strength began to win the battle and the door opened more and more and his arms began to squirm free. Like a sack of potatoes I sat down against the bottom of the door and pushed with my feet against the wardrobe. The door was a foot open but now there was stalemate.

"Now....fuck off home, Bevin" he whispered.

"OK" I gasped. "You win." And suddenly, subject to my pressure alone, the door slammed shut.

### **Wednesday 2nd November**

The next morning, by mutual agreement it was agreed that my stay at The Regent Hotel should come to an end. I was quite willing to pay something towards the damage until a nervous tic in the manager's eye told me all I needed to know.

"It wouldn't be such a good idea to call the police," I said staring at him. "They would want to see where he broke in. And eventually" - I broke off to sign the credit card chit - "Somebody here would be forced to admit that they either deliberately or absent-mindedly left a door open....Or even ...." - staring straight at him again and raising my voice in mimicry of his stupid intonation - "gave him a key?"

As I turned I saw clever Emma gazing at me in astonishingly lovely, wide-eyed surprise. I gave her a quick wink and left. I put my bags into the car outside Potty's and rapped on his door. He let me in and made me a cup of tea. I told him I was off elsewhere for the time being. I would give him a ring when I was coming back.

"Could you do me a favour, Mr Potter? Could I use you as a sort of go-between?"

"A go-between! Nobody better!" he cried "With my cloak-and-dagger background!"

I gave him a message for Emma and fifty pounds to keep himself well lubricated and her on-side.

"Just slip that to her when she comes over with your brandy. It just asks her to tell you who's been in asking about me and who's been phoning. And it asks her to say I've gone back south.

Could you say the same if necessary? I'll ring you every breakfast, if that's OK. If I don't phone by ten could you ring this number and report me missing?"

"Missing? Not in any bother are you?"

I told him, no, but I just needed to take that precaution.

“What if I need to contact you?” he asked.

“I don’t want you to. I shall always withhold my number, so there’s no point pressing 1471. Whatever it is can wait until I phone.”

He shook my hand and he wished me the best of British. I patted Coleen, my favourite dog, on her snout and left. As I drove out of Witherbridge, that much-flawed and neglected little town, I had a conviction that I would never see it again; nor did I especially wish to. It is marked, like so much of urban Britain, by the least appealing, messy traits of man, that most uneasy, most unconvinced and devious of social animals. Only communities require police officers and most police officers, marred by experience, tend towards pessimism. Yes, they are driven by a virtuous desire to combat anti-social elements, partly out of a sense of duty to the outraged victim, partly to be rewarded by their gratitude, partly to gain in prestige and in career prospects and partly to have the satisfaction of knowing that the right man or woman is convicted and out of circulation for a time. The cynicism begins when the villain escapes due to an inept judge, a stupid jury or an inept prosecutor. But beyond the vagaries of that there is the grinding experience, the formative years of dealing, day in, day out, with the utter dregs of humanity, smelling their drunken breath, staring into their ugly provocative leers, visiting and inhaling the stench of their neo-hovels and walking their dismal neighbourhoods, which strikes them, like coins, with their immutable criminal features and hallmarks. When they are found at home they are entirely natural; any social graces which they may have developed for the world-out-there are dropped, like outer garments; and they can be vile. Do they make slums or do slums make them? The detective is inclined to believe that they make slums. He thinks it unlikely that the feckless, idle, weak and stupid are a reformable race. He thinks that if they were put into a smart row of houses that it would not be long before the lawns were a wilderness, that little bikes were left out to rust and that windows, once smashed, would remain smashed or boarded up. Will the criminal ever be re-housed out of existence? The detective would throw back his long disillusioned and unshockable head and guffaw at the notion. The socialist detective might smile wryly and point out that the biggest criminals live in the biggest, poshest houses. As an ex-socialist- (and they surely are the worst misanthropes of the lot ) - I have concluded that people are, to put it at its mildest, basically disappointing. Even at their charitable “best” do they not seek the selfish “feel-good” factor? It is hard for a detective to look at a human being and not assess him for deviancy and deceiving. Hard-bitten misanthropy is the occupational hazard of criminal investigators and I am no exception. And yet the vast majority do obey and fear the Law.

\*

And yet I love, for reasons perhaps hard to analyse, the small town of Haworth. I love its frankness, its permanent mood of brooding, even in fair weather. It sits, a few miles outside Bradford, a cluster of jet stones, clasped by that desolate, beautiful moor, a sturdy beauty beyond flattery. Here have hardened off and weathered out, like the blackened sandstone of its unfussy buildings, the same honest pessimism and misanthropy which streaked the personalities and works of its three great daughters, (of whom Anne, in my opinion, is the unacknowledged genius-in-chief.) Haworth’s modern citizenry still inherit that wry, grim bluntness from their surroundings.

Haworth is an unpretentious, tidy place, spun from simple materials to hand, beyond frivolity and decorum, and it suits me. In the 1860s the Vicar of Haworth, Patrick Brontë, who outlived by decades his gifted offspring (gifted, apart from his daubing wastrel of an only son, the dope-



addicted Branwell) had become so concerned at the appalling mortality rates among his parishioners that he commissioned a scientist from London to get at the root causes. After striding up the steep hill which was bordered on the right by slum dwellings, he instantly recognised the culprit – in Brontë’s own backyard. The church cemetery. From its vantage point at the top of the hill at the village centre, its rotting occupants were steadily poisoning the drinking water flowing down through their corrupt limbs and loins into the mouths of their still animate brethren below. The inspector had ordered the raising up of the more recent burial stones, to sit like tables, on edging blocks, to permit the pestilential ground beneath to breathe, and ordered also the planting of horse chestnuts at regular points to probe deep amongst the foulness, and to fix it into their insensitive roots and boughs.

Now, screaming and bickering like cut-throats in the top-sails of these huge trees - which I imagined surging up at astronomical annual rates on such a rich compost - the rooks, surely descendants of those which had witnessed the ground steadily giving up its ghosts, were engrossing and entertaining the visitors as usual. And all around the tall, broad masts of these leafy galleons, in which an autumn lode of gold was now steadily eroding out, slumping and upheaving, like petrified black waves, those ancient lifted stones were spreading out like a troubled sea in every direction. Here were enclosed in black walls, as they had been, though less narrowly in life, the old generations of Haworth. I strolled around examining those chiselled summaries. They gave away as little as their taciturn inhabitants probably had done when erect and alive: name, two dates, spouse and perhaps an occupation. I thought of all the thousands of deep secrets they had taken down there with them, mostly kept, no doubt, to protect a loved-one from hurt. How ironic then that the very essences of them, once dissolved, turned lethal, had filtered back down the slope into the old pumps and pails of those very friends and relatives. I shivered in the gathering twilight, left that arrested turmoil, and walked to a nearby guest-house. Here Jane and I had often stayed before the slow decline of our heyday. The VACANCIES sign in the great bay window was a relief. Plump Mrs Boscombe opened the door and grinned. Then looking past me in some apprehension and surprise she said, “On our own are we, this time?”

“Yes, Mrs B. I’m here on a little matter of business”

I borrowed a phone book from her and looked for O’Mearas. There were two. On both I drew a blank, though one had put down the phone suspiciously quickly. Of course if Jim and Wendy were still in that vicinity, as I strongly suspected, with a past which they wanted to conceal it was more than probable that they were ex-directory or had changed their surname. Suddenly I had a very strong conviction that I had come as far as possible in my quest. In order to get closer I would have to use a very special bait - my own neck. Through third parties, the O’Mearas had already made it abundantly clear that they were not interested in raising a glass with the son of a long-lost friend for old time’s sake. All I could do now was to wait around, make a few enquiries and see if anything turned up. I checked my mobile phone. One message from my boss: GET IN TOUCH. URGENT. I thought over what it might be about, decided it would be my instant recall, probably ordained at a very high level, and deleted it. Mobile phones have a nasty habit of getting lost or stolen. Mine would be no exception. Then I phoned Jane. I told her as succinctly as possible what I had been up to and how far I had got; and that I was at Mrs B’s in Haworth.. She seemed distant. She told me in flat tones she had been worried about me. She sounded the kind of worried that people are when they wonder if it will rain.

“Why didn’t you call me?” she asked.

“You could have called me.” I replied. “I didn’t know whether you would be there.”

Now irritated, she asked me where else she would have been, if not at home.

“Well,” I said, suddenly decided to make her aware of my suspicions “I wasn’t quite sure who you.....were with.” There was a long silence. She must surely have known beforehand that I had guessed the truth, and was perhaps debating now, whether at this distance, as a disembodied voice, she should take the opportunity to tell me all. She still did not speak. Now I pictured her sitting on the bottom stair, with her slender legs tucked underneath her, twirling wisps of her strawberry blonde hair around her fingers, as she was wont to do whenever on the phone.

“Jane? Remember Mogg’s Eye? I went back there and found our shell. I hid it again. I should be on my way back home soon; maybe we could go together and find it? Or why don’t you drive up...or get the train...I’ll pick you up” I could hear her sniffing.

“It’s too late.” she whispered and was suddenly gone.

I knocked back a large brandy in The Bull and went out for a stroll down the steep, cobbled main street. The thickening gloom of the early evening was steadily increasing the brightly lit cheer of the antique bookshops and knick-knackeries, as if they were Victorian oil lamps or gas lanterns. I stood on the bridge of the station and watched for the steam train, probably the last of the day. I heard its whistle first and then stood blissfully immersed in its pungent fumes as it chuffed and stammered in below me. I closed my eyes and yearned to re-engage with those treasured scenes from boyhood, in which steam engines, proud and stately, in their red and green liveries, sped, slowed and then came, with grand reluctance to a dignified halt on bustling platforms. Those were the days of goods vans, trolleys, drays and coal-carts as well as sleek railway engines; all now swept away like toys by some careless hand into a box whose lid had been firmly rammed down. I saw again Uncle Wilf dodging the dragon breath and sparks of their funnels having dared, like some train-spotting Prometheus, to steal their numbers. And Dad was saying - No. 46208. Wanna bet? I wouldn’t bet with you, Dad!

What a delight to walk back through the doors of The White Lion at the top of the hill! I had wandered around first in the Old Apothecary, the erstwhile supplier, a hundred and fifty years ago, of Branwell Brontë’s opium. I had gazed again at all the sweet jars, with sasparilla sticks (a supposed aphrodisiac), midget gems and barley sugar; at the old soaps and other forgotten artefacts of my childhood fifties and sixties, such as dolly pegs, and had inhaled the intense aroma of nostalgia there too. Now I was ready to eat, having had nothing since an indifferent breakfast.

The hotel receptionist was the same grave, polite matron as ever. Her smaller bustling colleague in a black dress and a white apron, a satellite of hers, who managed the restaurant seemed to recognise me. I asked if they had room for me.

“Oh, I should think so” she exclaimed cheerfully and squinted an eye at me. “Is it Mr Bevin?” I congratulated her on her excellent memory, telling her I hadn’t been there for six or seven years.

“Ah but you and your wife used to be real regulars here, didn’t you!”

“We’re not together now.”

She pressed her lips together, shook her head and said she was sorry. She genuinely was. I entered the lovely old-fashioned, wood-panelled restaurant and was invited to take a corner seat. The wall lights were turning their immediate vicinities a rich honey colour. Outside there was a blue dusk, darkened now and then by the shapes and shadows of strolling visitors, perhaps about to embark upon the fascinating Ghost Walk around the cemetery. Inside, at one end, a large party

of hikers were discussing their day out. A few quiet couples were dotted here and there. I ordered the sea bass and a bottle of white. I thought of my following day's plan of action. I took out my notebook and began to scribble. A visit to the library might reveal who had opened or taken over B&Bs in the last thirty years. Or would O'Meara want to take that risk of cuckolding again? With some hairy hiker or travelling salesman? Perhaps he had gotten himself a job at a dairy. But these days milk delivery was dying out. Perhaps the Tourist Information office could put me onto some local history buff who could direct me further. What about a local newspaper? Then an obvious thought struck me. They had emptied my dad's building society account and were rich. If they were, indeed, behind the threats made against me and had hired a great semi-urbane ape, with breath like a horse's arse - in a Porsche - to put pressure not only on me, but on the editor of a considerable local newspaper, they had self-evidently risen to be people of greater consequence than the mere loading of milk floats or the cooking up, ad infinitum, of the full English breakfast would have made possible! No, if my theory was right, and if they had made a fresh start together with the fat funds in my father's account, and the proceeds from the sale of The Hollies then, of course, they had prospered. Had Wendy really stayed with a cousin? There was no way to find out. If I was entirely on the wrong path and Wendy and Jim had gone away, or had absolutely no inkling of my existence, then WHO wanted me out of their hair and for what reason? Paul O'Meara? Should I take a gamble and put him on the spot? *What are you really about, Mr O'Meara? (Oh yes, I know who you really are). Why do you want me gone?* Then what? Would he tell me, a copper, his big secret? 5 FMN. Were these Mr Almighty's initials? Was this the fifth of a string of cars? Of Porsches? I wrote DC Carpenter's name down and circled it. She had already done me one risky favour. Dare I ask her to do me another and look up the registration on the computer? I took up my wine glass again and felt the alcohol begin to ease out my thoughts like a series of great wobbly bubbles, over which I had no control. Who were these people? Had I put my hand accidentally again into a great wasps' nest or into a fat spider's massive web? If so, how badly would I be stung this time? I had drunk nearly two-thirds of my wine when the fish I had ordered finally arrived. I asked for another bottle. Which raised an eyebrow.

Then to my left I suddenly became aware of a slim woman in a short black dress. I looked down. Her thighs and legs were shapely and supple, like an athlete's. Her hair, in a bob, was a platinum colour. When she turned to see where her table might be she showed me a profile which startlingly resembled my wife's. It was just as if my own lovely Jane, as she had been over twenty years ago had walked in, a lost soul, from the past. The pearls around her neck, the pearl clusters on her ear lobes and the pearl-white teeth in her mouth set off her dark blue eyes perfectly. I must have gasped or in some other way attracted her attention for now she turned and for a long second looked at me full-on, almost, I imagined, with an air of recognition. I noted immediately that was slenderer in the face than Jane. Her lips were fuller and her mouth slightly larger. She reminded me of someone I had seen on a classical mosaic once. This was an extremely beautiful woman, from good stock, from a good home.

The total silence which had deleted the low chatter in the room told me that I was not the only one beguiled. She walked in slowly and sat down to the right-hand side of me, facing me so that I would be able to fully appreciate her - (and rue even more keenly the loss of Jane). Then in walked her partner walked.

My half-brother.

He was dressed in a slate-grey suit. His sapphire eyes and wavy blonde hair, the set of his face, the genial mouth made him unmistakably my father's son. Only the chin, fuller and longer from some other casting, was different. He sat down with his back to me. There was even that slight thinning on his crown, which in time, in his forties, would become a slap. He too was beautiful. I could scarce believe it. Into my life, out of the dark, had wandered my brother, and my heart ached to tell him so. I felt weak and dizzy. My ears were ringing. When I heard her whisper "Tim" to him the first pang of recognition, now became a bolt of absolute conviction and pierced my breast. I slipped the trembling photograph out of my pocket to compare them. No, there could be no doubt. In his bearing, with absolute good reason, there was pride and self-assurance. Yet here I sat within inches of him, holding evidence of which he was utterly oblivious, which would, should he see it, completely reshape the vision he had of his own origin, his life, his position in the order of events. I drank deeply on my wine. This creased and cracked image of a father with his sons on the back lawn of a pub, many miles and years away from here, had innocently captured a truth which years later had developed the potential to do enormous damage to this person not then formed; him, Timothy, an accident-about-to-be; my brother. It was my weapon of his destruction. I very carefully tucked it back into my pocket..

My meal was now cold. I pushed it away and lifted my glass. I sat in an ideal position to keep them under observation without arousing their suspicion, forced as I was to look past them into the room. I aimed my glances up, down and around them, never directly at them. Or so I had calculated. Now she was whispering to him and glancing at me. Now he was turning and looking. He stood up, came over and placed his hands on two edges of my table, smiling affably but with the dangerous glint in those eyes he had inherited.

"Excuse me, I'm sure you don't mean to do it but you keep staring at my wife. She feels a little uncomfortable. So if you wouldn't mind....."

He had spoken courteously and confidentially with a clear voice, only slightly under the influence of the northern accent. I found myself staring into that same look of paternal reprimand, delivered now by a younger version of him. I really was lost for words. Then I heard myself saying in a somewhat slurred voice, under the influence of the white wine and the shock I had had, "I'm very sorry...if I caused any...offence, but truth to tell, your wife is..... a very ...beautiful woman..." and here he nodded curtly and made to turn back when I couldn't help but add "...But in truth, it was more you that I was intrigued by..." He stiffened and not quite so pleasantly now said without intonation "I.... intrigue you." I told him that his face was so familiar. Perhaps he had a double?

"I don't think so." And now unsmiling, glancing at my glass and bottle of wine, he gave me a last look and sat back down. Had I really said what I thought I had said? Now I had to keep myself in my shell. What a total creep I must have seemed, here on my own, with nothing but a bottle of wine, a half-boned fish and a beautiful couple to keep me entertained. I felt slightly ashamed, especially now that I had been forced into a strict introspection, underlining how much I had feasted my eyes upon them previously. He had whispered to her and she had briefly stared over at me in resentment. In jealousy? Had they taken me for a homosexual? For heaven's sake, *why* hadn't I just given him an indignant glare and blurted out "Well, where do you recommend that I look? Into this fireplace? At the ceiling?"

As their dinner plates were being cleared away he quietly said to the manageress that they wouldn't have a dessert, just the bill. Their ease had deserted them. Their unease had seemingly been brought on by me, since the woman was muttering something in an irritated tone and looking at me again. They left. I couldn't help but watch them go. He gave me a brief quizzing;

she a brief glare of scorn. As soon as I saw them pass the window I rose to follow them. I was out just in time to see them head to the right, off the main street and down a flight of steps which led to a car-park. He opened the passenger door of his sleek car and helped his wife in before returning to the driver's side. He looked up and saw me. This time he glared. Then he got in and roared off. The plate in the lamplight read 2 FMN. So where, and who, was 1 FMN?

I returned to The White Lion to a scene of flap and consternation. Had there been a problem? Hadn't I enjoyed the bass? Why had I zipped off so quickly? I explained that I had needed to fetch something from my room from across the way. The restaurant manageress had become distinctly frosty and I could tell from the way that she held her head back that she most probably found the smell of my winy breath rather unpleasant.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I was interested in the couple who left just before me. I thought I recognised them from years ago here...."

"Well, to be perfectly honest with you, Mr Bevin, they were quite interested in you...."

"Oh?"

"His exact words were, as he paid...who's the man on his own in the corner who keeps staring at us?"

Even when being blatantly frank these Haworthians have a knack of maintaining an irreproachable politeness.

"Staring? I didn't mean to. And did you tell him who I was?"

"Yes, seeing as he asked."

I asked her after a pause who he was. She replied very politely that she would like me to settle the bill first. I threw in a hefty tip to sweeten her a little.

"I really and truly did recognise him - not her - but I can't remember his name. I think it might start with an F...."

She folded some napkins with her colleague and said "Fairman"

"Ah! That's it! Tim Fairman"

"And his wife Scheherazade. The Fairmans are very dear customers of ours, very important people around here."

"Whereabouts do they live?"

Now she made it pretty clear, as she flounced into the restaurant with the napkins, that she had turned herself into a stone from which no more proverbial blood would be forthcoming. Her colleague at the reception however was of a more voluble disposition, and made it clear by pulling a wrinkled face like a prune at the disappearing manageress what she thought of her pomposity. She whispered, "They live quite a way out, at Hennybrooke, tiny place about fifteen miles away. Millionaires' hamlet they call it. Drive through Oxenhope and keep going. But if you don't keep your eyes peeled you'll miss the road sign"

In the bar I looked for the Haworth equivalent of a Potty and after a few blank stares and shrugs an elderly couple proved only too eager to tell me all they knew about the Fairman clan. It turned out that James Fairman had made his money in Bradford. He had bought a place and turned it into a bingo hall, then another and another. Then he had got into fruit machines and gambling. He was building a casino. Worth an absolute fortune now, finger in every pie.

"What does he look like?"

But neither of them had clapped eyes on him, though the woman had seen the Mrs Fairman once.

"She was very pretty with blonde hair and a lovely smile"

"Was she called Wendy?"

She thought not. She had met her briefly at a Conservative Party dinner. Wendy didn't ring a bell at all.

### **Thursday 3rd November**

For the next day the forecast was for fine weather after a dull start and I fancied clearing my head with a walk. After breakfast I phoned Potty.

"There's been quite a lot of interest in you. You're in big demand according to Em. Your police station rang you. Someone else asked if you'd left and when Emma said yes they just put the phone straight down."

Probably Mr TCP, I thought. "Anybody else, Mr Potter?"

"Yes two more. Well the first one walked in, didn't ring. Emma said it was the same man who asked after you after the quiz night."

O'Meara. "What did she tell him?"

"Like you said to say. You had decided to go home. The other one was a phone call from the local paper, reporter called Sunita. She had some important news."

I wrote down her number. "Thank you Mr Potter. Anything else?"

"No but Emma sends her love, and to tell you that the manager at The Regent has had the push. Tills don't add up, apparently. Had his dirty little mitt in there.... Oh, and by the way Coleen sends her love and best wishes. Same goes for me, over and out, till tomorrow, same time..."

I asked Mrs B what she knew about the Fairmans. She said they were into all sorts of things,... very rich, very powerful people...but, no, she had never seen them.

"Not even a photo in the paper?"

"Never"

Before I went on my walk I decided to drive to the nearest branch of the local paper and asked for all they had on the family. Why was I not surprised when I was politely shown the door? I phoned Sunita. Could she try and get a photo of the Fairmans, of Hennybrooke..

"Look, Mr Bevin, I want to take a few days leave and come and see you. You have really stirred things up here. Tom the editor is on gardening leave. As for the people you just mentioned the answer's definitely NO."

"Why ever not?"

"If I tell you, will you tell me where to find you?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I think you're onto a big story. And this could be me big chance. I'm sick to death of covering charity events, his worship the mayor and his fat wife opening fetes and such like..."

"But it could be risky if I've stirred things up."

She said that "risky" sounded really brilliant to her.

I realised I needed company and she sounded fun. "Alright", I said "As long as you do as you're told and stay well back from the edge of the platform. I'm at Haworth, at Heathcliffe's B&B.

Now why can't you run the Fairmans for me?"

"Because they are part of the syndicate that own us. I checked at Company House like that big gorilla told you to. I daren't take the risk asking questions round here. I haven't got much of a face but I do quite like it as it is. And not re-arranged."

"You've got a smashing face Sunita and a lovely voice. I'll book you a room somewhere. Come and see me tonight. We'll have a meal and I'll tell you all I know."

Just in case somebody shuts me up, I thought. When I returned to Mrs B's for my jacket I was informed that a rather tall gentleman had delivered an envelope for me. I described Mr TCP and

she nodded. She hadn't liked the look or sound of him. She was probably thinking "smell" too but was far too polite to say. I went into The Black Bull, the dissolute Branwell Brontë's watering hole, brought a pint of Tim Taylor's and took out the letter.

Dear Mr Bevin,

Please find enclosed a cheque for £10,000 for your mother, or for you to dispose of as you wish.

I admit I am Wendy O'Meara, or rather used to be. That phrase "used to be" makes me feel now like it was the life of someone else. In so many ways it was. I read Monday's newspaper. I was horrified to see it all exposed, like a corpse I had long buried. You have been very clever. You must be a first-class detective.

The article was particularly poignant as my husband died last week. He it was who witnessed your own father die. He knew he should have come forward. He didn't. And he never forgave himself. He had tried to stop the fight but couldn't. He was scared.

I know that you could expose me and bring the full story out. To do so would hurt and embarrass me and possibly lead to my prosecution for withholding evidence, to which I would naturally have to plead guilty. But that would be of no consequence to me whatsoever.

There is, however, a far greater anguish which could result and I think that you, a man of great acuity now realise what that is. It concerns my son.

I am given to understand that you bumped him to him last night, as fate would have it. He particularly enjoys that hotel, evidently a taste which, unfortunately, you both share .

You cannot have failed to notice how closely he resembles your own father Charles. That is because Charles is his father too. In a small town, many years ago, a young, lonely, very unhappy woman made a mistake. Except that what seemed a mistake then has blossomed into the most marvellous son a mother could ever be proud of. My husband forgave me and brought up Timothy as lovingly as any good father would.

I am telling you that I will do absolutely everything to protect him from the truth. He and his wife already have enough to cope with. They have a mentally subnormal child, ten years old, your half-nephew.

So let us remain, now, since my bereavement, the only two people on Earth who know the truth. I would dearly like to meet you but it would be impractical and unwise.

I know that you too, if you are truly your father's son, will be as kind to me now as he was then and agree not to wrong a totally innocent bystander, my beloved son, your own half-brother by exposing me. To do so would of course disturb the peace of mind of those nearest and dearest to you, as the shock-waves of such a great rock would not stop at the borders of this county.

So I urge you, John, in all sincerity, to be content with this and accept it as the absolute truth you

have sought, to leave us now in peace, to be at peace yourself, and go home.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Fairman

I read the letter twice more and admired its skill. Its eloquence was designed to flatter me, charm me, move me, threaten me and, of course by its reference to a rock and shock-waves, put me under moral pressure in turn. I was almost taken in by it until I recalled the aggressive tactics previously deployed and Mr TCP's winning ways at the newspaper office, the damage to my car and the bucket of rancid pig's blood thrown onto my bed.. Had someone on the get-rid-of-Bevin committee successfully argued for the deployment of more subtle tactics in the light of the failure of the first? And had someone, the same someone, with a violent temper and background, reluctantly given way to Wendy as long as he could resort to more extreme methods should her sweety-pieness fail? I doubted whether Wendy was the Don. And if she could lie, by withholding the truth about Charlie's death and co-pocket the massive proceeds, however it had been amassed, thank you very much, she was certainly capable of a fictional burial of Jim. And the cheque for £10,000 was a trifle to them but a nice amount, a nice fat bribe to anyone else. Yet how could the money possibly be used? To give it to my mother would raise all kinds of difficulties, equally around the rest of the family. If I paid it into my own account I might be walking into a trap, a snare of corruption designed to buy my unconditional silence.

And yet, reading the letter again, I could see that her key motive, of keeping the big, bad truth-wolf away from Timmy, was genuine. I considered what more there was to discover and concluded very little. Did I care if Jim was dead or alive? Not a bit. Now suddenly the tantalising thought struck me: had I ever been close to bumping into Tim on my previous four or five outings to Haworth? What would I have made of it had I seen him? Would it have set all those bells ringing, from an entirely different angle, as my chat with Uncle Wilf had done?

What I needed to do, I realised, was to write a reply, telling her everything I had found out and how clever I had really been. I would drive over to Hennybrooke, admire the mansion, walk up to the door as bold as brass and post my envelope, with, of course the shredded cheque inside, jump into my car and drive home, never to return.

. I thought of Sunita and immediately phoned her to tell her to turn back. To tell her that there was no big story. But her mobile was switched off. I went back to my digs and asked if there was a room free for a police woman colleague who was on her way up. (There was). It would only be for one night and I too would be leaving in the morning as my business had not taken as long as I had thought it would.

Then I went for my walk, my last here ever, with my mind turning over phrases to put in my reply to Wendy, selecting, examining and rejecting adjectives for being too maudlin, too bitter, too abrasive. Fortunately the weather had turned fair; the early rain clouds had rolled back, taking the brooding wraiths that too often haunted the moors into abeyance. The staring sheep, looking at me with their black heads and ears like a prelate's hat, bleated out in alarm, as if astonished that anyone with a choice would venture out here. At the Brontë Bridge, where we had always paused for a breather, I stared long into the thin waters washing over the coin-stones of russet and gold, the same stones which the three sisters must have contemplated too on their expeditions. Had I ever missed Tim here by being a few seconds too early or too late? Had I ever walked past Jim and Wendy on the moors or on the streets of Haworth?



I looked back at the rock-steps from where the stream trickled down on good days, spurted down on bad, and thought of the first time when I had climbed them laughing, with Jane, in our search for the secret source of this mighty river. Now I went up a few feet and then stopped. I was not as fit as I thought, for the ascent to Top Withens, the ruined farmstead, had me gasping for breath and my knees aching. This ruin was thought to be the original Wuthering Heights, the very place which had inspired Emily to write her tale, shocking to Victorian taste, and which is still savage even by today's unsubtle standard. Finally I was there. A group of hikers were being pestered for their sandwiches by the sheep; ewe and son, ewe and daughter, ever two, which the bleak wilderness had stripped of all timidity and shyness. The hikers' amused astonishment to come across aggressive sheep was slowly turning to irritation as the beasts persisted. Yet to look around at the flat billiard table of the sward, the burnt-out blackness of the gorse and the brittle gold of the bracken was to understand their yearning for a change of fare. I walked around the back of the old farm and entered through a doorway. What had been a floor was now an amorphous series of humps and hollows, overgrown with weeds and wilting wild flowers. It was impossible to conceive that here in relative warmth and snugness human beings had once and, for many generations possibly, endured summer and winter storms on this desolate moor. Yet the walls, still sturdy in the main, testified to their silent determination to make the best of a life they had not asked for, did not particularly enjoy and would not particularly regret the loss of. The dissolution of those lives, like the dissolution of their dwelling underscored for me once more the vanity of material wealth and acquisitiveness.

I thought again of Branwell's flat depiction of his sister, the tight-lipped, Emily. However ineptly two-dimensional it was in its depiction of her features, he had, probably by accident, laid bare her desolate, grim pessimism, the same that ran through her story like the blackness in the rocks in this landscape, a savage pessimism about human nature and the human condition. Her horrified sister Charlotte, the most conventional, least talented and least interesting of the three in my opinion, had persuaded Emily to bowdlerise the novel with an absurd, flannelled-clean, happy ending, anticipating the Hollywood treatment by nearly a century. I fancied now that I was Emily, looking around at this same cruel beauty, dreaming up out of its substance those characters who would so shock the measured and sedate dwellers in the more serene valleys and genteel townships beyond.

I heard the desolate cries of the sheep, the mews of the hidden curlews and the truculence of rivulets sidling unseen through the black unkemptness; and now admiring no beauty in it at all, I descended by another path into the nearby village as quickly as I could. I popped into an off-licence for a half-bottle, bought some stationery, and sat at my bedroom table to compose my letter to Mrs Fairman.

Dear Wendy Fairman,

There is no need for you to attempt to buy my silence; or to pay back to my mother the money which my father, Charles Bevin, doubtless offered to you and James as compensation for disturbing your marriage. I have found out more about you than you think. I know from Kathy and Flo just how unhappy your early years in Hope Street were. You write that you made a mistake and that Timothy was the result.

A mistake it doubtless was but you should know, for your comfort that you were not the only one to succumb to Charles's charm. He was the proverbial sailor with a woman in every port. He also

had private funds in those parts, as in yours, to support his other secret dens. He was a mesmeriser, a seducer. I have discovered, without really trying, at least five other women with whom he had affairs. As well as a half-brother here in Yorkshire, I suspect I also have a half-sister in a seaside racing town.. How many more half-siblings do I have? You were vulnerable and he took advantage; I am under no illusions about my father. He could be a cruel, self-seeking man as well as the beloved life and soul of the party.

When I came north I had already spoken to people who knew him well enough. The jigsaw puzzle of his secret life began to come together nicely. I soon realised that his death was to all intents and purposes accidental. I could not condone your husband's actions but could understand his motives. I might have gone home at that point had I not been threatened. Whoever chose to adopt such a foolish strategy, against a police officer, should take note.

Your innocent postcard to Flo put me on to you in Haworth. How bizarre that such an inconsequential card, such a trivial act, should acquire such prime significance years later!

Now I consider the matter almost closed. If you send me a copy of your husband's death certificate you will buy my irrevocable oath of silence. Money cannot do it.

And wasn't it so sweet of you to think of my mother all these years later! Better late than never, one might say. By the way, Mrs Bevin (she never remarried) is, in case you were wondering, very comfortable and cheerful in her old age and, like your son Timothy, blissfully unaware of one whisper of any of this.

May it so remain,

Yours sincerely,

John Bevin

After many redrafts of this letter I stared at the finished version and satisfied that I had pulled no punches and had left nothing out, I sealed it and wrote FOR WENDY on the front. On the stairs I heard the bustle of a guest arriving. It was Sunita, breathless and all eagerness. I told her to get settled in and then come over to The White Lion. I would be in the bar. I secured a table for two in the restaurant. The manageress again seemed faintly off with me and troubled again by my aura. In the bar I ordered a gin and tonic to freshen up a little. Sunita came in and we moved into the restaurant.

"Shall we have wine?" I asked. She apologised and said that as a strict Muslim she didn't drink. I apologised and said that as a strict alcoholic I did, and plumped for a bottle of red. She chose the vegetarian option of the stuffed aubergine with cous-cous. I ordered the carnivore option. Lamb. I took her hand and said that I was sorry that she had come all that way on a wild goose shoot. Disappointed, she slowly withdrew it and asked me to explain. And I began to tell her, without naming names, the story so far. The food came. We ate it. I gradually emptied the bottle of wine. The plates were cleared. She ordered ice cream. I ordered a coffee and brandy. She looked more dispirited and said, very quietly, "Mr Bevin" (she wouldn't call me John as I had pressed her to do),

"Mr Bevin, if you drink any more I shall get up and leave." This shocked me into silence.

"You've been telling your story to the whole room" she whispered. I grinned.

"You know, Sunita, you remind me of my wife. She nagged me about the brandy. Look, I'm really sorry, I've had a very trying few days, been assaulted....found things out about my own parent...things that no son should ever find out...."

She sympathised. When the brandy came I pushed it and the final half glass of wine to one side. I needed to pull myself together. Tomorrow might be a trying day. I would need all my wits, as sharp as sharp could be.

### **Friday 4th November**

The day began in a more trying fashion than I could have imagined. Over toast and marmalade I phoned Potty. His voice was strained. He said that no-one had been in contact with The Regent. I could hear that his heart was pumping his old lungs into quite a rhythm. Then he said "Listen John. Would you mind if I phone you from now on?"

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked. He seemed to think this over. Then, as if reading from a prepared script he said "I think my phone might be going on the blink...hello?...are you there?"

I spoke to him but he just kept saying "hello?" and rattling the receiver, until he said "Ah! I can hear you again now...but you keep fading out...and it happened last night when my sister rang..."

I stiffened. Potter had told me that he didn't have one living relative....

"Here's my mobile number then...."

"No not your mobile, John... too expensive to ring....Give me the number and the name of the place where you are staying...."

"Potty. If there's someone with you just say yes." When he did say yes, I froze. "Potty, put him on"

"It's a he.....and a she," he said. The next moment I found myself speaking to a woman.

"Well Mr Bevin. We meet again. Remember me? The poor little jilted girl, with the sob story? It didn't take much to pull the wool over your eyes did it, Mr Sherlock Holmes?"

"What do you want?"

Then I was speaking to a man. Instantly I recognised the brogue of Paul O' Meara.

"Mr Potter was kind enough to tell us last night in The Regent all about your little arrangement. Said he had been in military intelligence in the war. Intelligence? Fuck knows how you Brits won it then, if he was in charge...."

"Put Mr Potter back on this minute..."

"I'm really sorry" he said totally crestfallen "They told me they were from the police.....Showed me some ID...Plied me with brandies...said your life was in danger.....You had disappeared.....Did I have any idea where you were?....."

"Don't you worry Mr Potter. It isn't your fault. I should have known better than to involve you. Are you alright?" The phone was whipped back by O'Meara.

"Old Potty's fine at the minute. And his doggy. Both ate a good, hearty breakfast. Now, whether they have their lunch depends on how quick you tell me where we can meet you in two hours. And in case you're already thinking of letting the cops into our secret, my colleague here is going to take yours here for a little spin, and the doggy, until she hears from me again "

I thought quickly. Sunita had come into the breakfast room. Should I write her a message to phone 999? Then I thought of the local police station, of DS Rogers and the probable speed of

response. I changed my mind.

“OK you win. There’s the Black Bull in Haworth. 12 o’clock on the dot. But if you harm a hair on his head - or the dog - you’ll get sod-all out of me. Look, you have my word that I will not contact the police. At twelve o’clock before I say a word to you I’m going to phone Potty to make sure he’s alright. And both of you are to come, whoever you are. I have absolutely nothing to hide. You obviously don’t want to just come and shake hands. If I can help you, I will.”

In the silence I could hear them conferring. Then he came back on.

“Here’s the deal, take it or leave it. My friend will take your friend around her house and look after him. As soon as I phone her and tell her you’ve told me where that bastard Jim O’Meara is, she’ll take him back home make him a cuppa, feed the dog, tuck them both in and never bother him again.”

I knew it would be useless to tell him his bastard brother, Jim O’Meara, was dead. The letter! I would have to show him Wendy’s letter and bluff him from there onwards if I could.

“You had better not do anything to harm him....”

“DI Bevin, What kind of people do you take us for? Do you think we want to hurt an old soldier? If anything goes amiss here, if there’s a tragic accident, you will be to blame.” The phone went dead. I tried to phone back but there was that dire sound of an unobtainable number. He had evidently wrenched the line out.

“What’s wrong?” hissed Sunita. I told her to get on with her breakfast. I needed to think. I called Mrs B over. Was there any way we could stay another night, no two nights, as something else had cropped up? There was no problem. Did I want any more tea or toast?

“Tea, yes please; toast, no thank you.”

Kathy..... Kathy what? Oh damn! I raced upstairs to my room and flicked back through my latest exercise book until I managed to find it. Kathy Dell. I flung open the door of the breakfast room and grabbed my mobile.

“What’s going on?” asked Sunita again, in mid-munch of her flakes.

I dialled the number of the police station, praying that Dell was indeed a spinster, and had been put on hold while they tracked down DC Carpenter. No, I couldn’t speak to another officer. It was vital that I spoke to her. Finally she was there. I told her I was Bevin. Did she want to make a name for herself? She went quiet. “Make a name for myself? How?”

“You need to say that you have had a tip-off - anonymous but convincing - that an old man called Victor Potter has been kidnapped...”

“Have you been on the brandy?”

“Listen. He is being held by a woman called Kathy Dell. I’m deadly serious. He is in great danger ”

“Address?”

I told her that I didn’t know her address, that this was where detective skills might come in handy. She went quiet.

“Carpenter? ...LOOK.....IN.....THE.....PHONE.....BOOK! As soon as Potter is safe call me straight back on this number.” Then, seized by a sudden intuition, I added “And if you draw a blank on Dell, try K or P O’Meara!” Then I rang off. I told Sunita to hurry up and finish her breakfast if she wanted a really good story.

“Put your coat on. We’ll go for a walk.” I looked at my watch. It was half-past-nine. O’Meara would probably be on his way by now, hopefully oblivious to two very significant facts: one - I had shot his potty fox; two - I knew all about him. With any luck I could get now get to the very bottom of my dad’s death because I had suddenly had a very odd feeling, a premonition, that I

was still only part way down that dark old shaft. Had Sunita brought a tape-recorder with her?. She frowned and said she hadn't.

"You didn't make the finals for young reporter of the year, then?"

We found an electrical store and acquired two, one for luck, and a mini-cam. We sat in a café and made sure they were all working. Sunita began to record the details of Potty's kidnap on cassette. "I'm going to phone the editor and tell him that I'm onto a big story about a kidnap."

"You will - when I've taken a certain phone call, and not before....."

"But what if someone gets there before me??"

"You told me that you would do as you were told and..."

".....and stand well back from the edge, ....or summat..."

"You know what, Sunita?"

"What?"

"It's so wonderful to look into your ....dark...massive...exotic....mysterious eyes....and....."

"And what?" she demanded indignantly

"Hear that broad Yorkshire coming out of thy lovely gob!"

Beneath her mahogany skin she reddened and she gently slapped my hand. We finished our coffee and ordered another. Then another.

At just gone eleven my mobile rang. It was Carpenter.

"DI Bevin? It's good news. One Victor Potter is here with us safe and sound having a cup of tea (keeps wittering on about his dog though) And a very abusive Catherine Alice Dell is currently in custody being interviewed, wanting to know if some bastard called O' Meara had double-crossed her!"

"Brilliant! I'll buy you a drink when I come back, Carpenter."

"Well, maybe just this once. I was part of the arrest team....and it's Cheryl, by the way....."

I turned to Sunita and told her to make her call.

11:50. In position. Sunita had taken a seat across the way with a plastic shopping bag on the table, one corner of which has been snicked open to allow a lens to observe the corner where I was waiting for my man. I was drinking tonic water. At twelve on the dot he walked in. He bought himself a pint at the bar and nodded in the direction of my glass. I mouthed "tonic water" and he screwed his mouth up in surprise. I gave Sunita a little nod and she reached into the bag to fetch out a purse and start the camera. I started both tape-recorders. O'Meara sat down right next to me and felt my pocket. "Put it on the table" he said, very quietly and pleasantly. I handed it to him, he turned it off and put it into his pocket. "Now that is not a very good start, DI Bevin, is it now?"

I stared at him in pretended admiration. "No flies on you..... Mr...?"

"Mr Never-You-Mind. Do you remember what you said about us not harming one hair on your colleague's head? Well, it put ideas into mine. In fact, all I have to do now is to phone this number, let it ring three times and your colleague, tied up by mine will start to lose his hair, strand by strand, by the appliance of pliers, until I let it ring again, twice, to say that his colleague is, as you might say, helping hers properly with his enquiries....."

"There is absolutely no need to hurt Mr Potter"

"I hear what you say...But what exactly did you intend to do with the sweet tones of my voice?"

"Let's just say it was a kind of insurance. I haven't got a clue what you want."

"Stop playing silly games, Bevin. I want to find O'Meara. So do you. It's best if we work together. I've been looking over thirty years and got nowhere. You've been looking a few days

and you're onto something."

"I'll tell you all I know if you tell me why you're looking for him."

"Show me yours and I'll show you mine? Is that it?"

"It sounds like a fair deal to me. I know where he's lying low."

He stared at me and took a drink.

"And I know," I continued "That he is a multi-millionaire. There, now you owe me two."

"If you're lying!" he said, suddenly snarling, picking up his mobile.

"Why should I? O'Meara killed my father or stood and watched my father killed. To send you along as an avenging angel would be a nice irony. But I need to know what all this had to do with my father and how he was involved."

"It had nothing to do with your father. He was never involved. I never clapped eyes on him. But it was his fault that O'Meara scarpered with a lot of my and other people's money."

"His fault? You mean that it was his fault he died and inconvenienced you all?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes it was. If he hadn't been such a bloody cheat he'd be sitting in an old folk's home wetting himself now....O'Meara phoned up the site manager to say that this Charlie fellow hadn't won fair and square. Did they want the chance to get their money back? So off they trot, bloody idiots....breaking their backs all week just to gamble their wages away...."

"Hold on. You were on the site but had nothing to do with it?"

"Not a bit. I never gamble."

"But what money was it that Jim had? You said your money, and others'. Where did it come from?"

"It was thousands of pounds he had in safe keeping, that's all I'll say. And I want it back, with interest, lots of interest. So, tell me where the bastard is or Mr Potter will have a new hair-style....and that'll only be the first part of his makeover...."

He reached again for the phone. In response I handed him Wendy's letter, from which I had cut her surname. I looked across at Sunita (who looked as much at home as a nun in a massage-parlour) and gave her a swift wink.

He examined the pale blue, expensive stationery and inhaled its perfume deeply.

"Oh what webs we weave! Did the bard say that or something to that effect?"

"No. Sir Walter Scott."

"Really? Now, do you honestly, in your wildest dreams expect me to fall for this confection, this forgery?"

"It's true. If you tell me what your little earner was that made you all those thousands in old money, I will give you the square that fits the hole in the letter."

He picked up the phone and very slowly began to key in the digits. "One more and it will ring, Bevin."

"If it does, you could be on a murder charge. Potty's got a dicey ticker. It's a wonder you haven't already done for him. And to be honest, it's going to take more than a few strands of hair from a chap I hardly know to get me to reveal this lady's name, a dear lady who my father probably loved, to put her at risk from a psychopath such as you."

"Loved?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure he was having an affair with her."

He thought this over. Clearly this was making its mark and rhyming with other notes from that time. He told me he was fetching himself another drink. Did I want one? I would have loved a brandy but resisted the urge. When he came back he said he was prepared to swap.

"It can't hurt now, and it'll be your word against mine anyway...." He took a big swig and

wiped the froth from his mouth.” We were working a fiddle. Pinching diesel, spares, equipment, anything, everything we could lay hands on. Once a whole JC frigging B disappeared. O’Meara was off-site and looking after the cash. Thought we could trust him.”

I stood up. That was the signal. I held up the second tape recorder in my left hand and said as solemnly as I could “Paul O’ Meara, I’m arresting you for kidnap and theft. You are not obliged to say anything....” But the rest of the caution was drowned by his frenzied scream in which little made sense. As he drew a knife the three officers in plain clothes who I had prearranged to be present were rushing from the counter to overpower him. “Oh, and carrying a dangerous weapon and intent to cause grievous bodily harm....”

The cuffs were on but he was still screaming and writhing. “Your old man got what was coming to him, you TREACHEROUS BASTARD.”

I knelt down and whispered in his ear, “You know, I don’t entirely disagree with that.”

After they had gone I went to a very shaken Sunita. “I’m having a treble. What do you fancy?”  
“Lemonade”

“Well, have you got a good story?”

She got hold of the camera and switched it off. “You’ve just made my fortune.”

### **Saturday 5th November**

That night I had had a little too much to drink. I woke early with heartburn and could hardly doze after that, in that horrible half-world between sleeping and waking. Then I had the most awful nightmare. At first I found myself staring into Dad’s coffin, but instead of him it was Tim, glaring at me and saying “Do you mind?” Then I was on the railway bridge. Now my father was saying 46208! over and over again, only to turn suddenly into Uncle Wilf, laughing “Bet with you Charlie! No fear!” and turning to me, a child in short trousers with a train-spotting pad in a column of smoke. He suddenly shouted “Look at his legs! Look at his legs!” And I was shouting back at Wilf- “The lion’s going to bite him!” My dad, in his lovat green suit was taking his bloody, swollen head, just like on the police photo, out of its mouth, shouting “No, not me!” I woke up in a sweat and a panic. Today would definitely be a day on the wagon. When I came down that morning Mrs B was smiling mysteriously. Finally she could keep her secret no longer and told me that Santa had been - really early!

“What on Earth do you mean, Mrs B?”

She showed me into her kitchen where her even plumper sister was turning sausages and bacon in a huge pan and pointed into the corner. There was a case of champagne, a hamper and a large yellow envelope.

“What did this Santa look like?”

“It was that large....anti-septic man....Just walked straight through with it all in his arms, put it down, smiled and just cleared off. It must be for you...after yesterday and all.”

The arrest had been the main story on the regional news. Quite a shock to such a quiet place! I looked at the label on one of the bottles and whistled. The card read -

Thank you, John. I could hardly believe my eyes when it came on the news. Paul O’Meara was not a good brother to my husband. He foolishly allowed himself to be persuaded to break the law for him. Now he can’t hurt us anymore. It’s a great relief after all these years. So please accept these gifts and go in peace,

Wendy

After breakfast I asked Mrs B for precise directions to Hennybrooke. Sunita was excited until I told her that she couldn't come after all.

"This is something I want to do on my own. It's the last part of my quest."

"But I'll stay in the car. You promised I could see all those big houses."

She was such a child, almost on the verge of tears.

"If you promise me not to write anything about the Fairmans."

"How could I? They own the paper."

What looked no distance at all on the map turned out to be quite a trek, up and down the moors, between dry stone walls, twisting and turning. Twice we took the wrong turn and had to come back.

"Why can't females navigate?"

She snorted and threw the map, which Mrs B had pencilled on to show the best route, onto the floor.

"And WHY do you always get so annoyed when that simple fact is pointed out to you?"

Finally we were there. To right and left, set well back from the road, behind flat expanses of lawns and beautifully manicured shrubs, very, very well pleased with themselves, were some of the biggest mansions I had ever seen. I glanced at Sunita's face. She was staring open-mouthed.

"Work hard and this could all be yours too!" I said.

But which was the Fairman house? I found the biggest and pulled up. There was no-one in sight. I told Sunita to stay in the car. There was not a shop, not a pub, not a post-office. The place consisted of one narrow road and ten or eleven residences. And on the edge, where the moors resumed again, a tiny stone church stood at the centre of a small graveyard. A chaffinch was cheerfully going through his routine, singing that he was "happy-to-see-me" and then broke off, as if a hand had been suddenly clapped over his tiny beak. I opened the wrought iron gate and it moaned and clanged behind me. The church door was locked. I walked around the back and froze as I saw Timothy and Scheherazade putting a posy on a fresh grave, marked with a simple wooden cross. They had their backs to me and did not notice me. Just in time, as they turned, I ducked against the wall behind a yew and managed to edge my way back round to the front. Unobserved in the porch I watched them pass, open the gate and walk down the drive of the huge palace opposite. I slipped round again to the back and read on the cross JAMES FAIRMAN. I returned to the front of the church and after a safe interval I went straight down the drive and posted my letter. Behind the trees to my right, hidden from the road was a garage with the whole stable of cars lining up, from FMN 1 to FM 6. But there was a gap where number 5 should have been. At the top of the drive by an enormous clump of golden, black-hearted rubdeckias, still in their prime in this mild autumn, I turned and saw in a far high window, amongst all the other expressionless ones, the pallid face of a faded, pretty woman and knew instantly it was her. She stared at me and seemed suddenly to understand who I was because she slightly raised her hand. I posted my letter and waved back. Hello and goodbye.

So my quest was over. All my questions were answered. I was almost ready to go home and try to make things right with Jane. Suddenly, after these years of drift and growing apathy this quest now appeared to be the really vital one. We would confess all our secrets, draw a big, heavy line under the past and begin afresh. As I drove back the curtains of mist decided, after hours of wavering, that they would draw back after all, revealing a beautiful, optimistic sunny sky and moor. I asked Sunita if she fancied a pub lunch. She said she was hungry. I suggested making a



detour to the largest town in this vast wilderness (as long she thought she could find it and then find our way back to Haworth from there.) On the edge of that town we discovered a lovely old inn and sat down to a delicious smoked salmon and prawn salad. At least I did. She had the vegetarian quiche. We drank tonic. Sunita looked up. "So what can I put in my story about you and that family, without mentioning names?" I gave it some thought. "Well, as a follow-on to the story about me on Monday, linking it to Paul O' Meara you could just say that, thanks to the publicity and interest generated by that excellent organ of the press by which you are employed, I had found Mrs O'Meara and fully accepted that her husband had had nothing whatsoever to do with my father's death. Jim had died and taken the secret of who attacked my dad to his grave. Throw a few juicy adjectives in like... poignant...mysterious...intriguing...and you ought to have a good story."

"Should I mention place names?"

"Absolutely not. Do you promise me? Do you want to get yourself into trouble, going round telling the absolute truth?"

"So it's OK for a few people, or just you, say, to know the truth? Strange world."

"Surely the only people who should know the truth are the people who really need to. Do you always tell the truth?"

"Always! Unless it might hurt somebody's feelings."

"What private thoughts have you had about me?"

"Not telling you."

"There you are. If we all went around blurting out our true feelings and all our secrets there would be chaos. Do you read all about celebrities in the magazines?"

"Sometimes. Why?"

"That's my question. Why? Why do you wish to know all about their tedious sex lives and silly habits? What's it got to do with any of us? How do we benefit? Would you like your secrets splashed all over your newspaper?"

"Haven't got any secrets. And I'm not rich and famous. Who would want to read about me?"

On the way out of the car-park she told me to turn right, but within a minute she realised that we should have gone left and were now heading straight into the town centre. She swore under her breath. I laughed. "Sunita, why don't you leave journalism and get a job as an RAC mechanic? You would probably....." But I had stopped speaking because there, on a corner above a large window picturing racing horses, on a sign of dark, glossy red, partly in block capitals, in black, was written the name **Johnny FAIRPLAY**.

I drove on as if I was dreaming again. I stared again at the death-head of the photo and Wilf was shouting from my dream "Look at his legs!" Suddenly Sunita was yelling louder. "Look out!" Automatically I braked. Just in time to avoid killing an old man riding a motorised wheelchair across a zebra crossing.

"Yer bloody fool!" he shouted.

Yer bloody fool. Instantly I recognised the chime of the sing-song accent of my own locality.

"Watch aht wheeer yer a-goo-in."

I stared at his ruddy face. Now leaning out of the window I said simply "Mr Coley?" His fury and indignation instantly became utter astonishment, and he was off. As cars began to pile up and pip behind me I leapt out and caught up with him easily on the far pavement. Pedestrians were stopping. I stood right across his path. "Mr Coley. I'm John Bevin, Charles' son."

He shook his stick at me. "I'm not Coley, and I doont know any Charlie Bevin. Now out of mi'

bloody way!”

“WHERE’S my dad?” I screamed.

He bumped me. I stood aside and let him pass. Forgetting my car I ran back to the corner and went into the betting office.

“Who’s in charge here? Police! Get me the manager!”

He had popped out to the dentist, I was told by the shocked woman behind a counter. A motley day-shift of punters looked up from their papers and studied me.

“Who owns this place?” I yelled. She was new, she told me; she didn’t know but it was quite a big company, with about seven branches. As I left a tiny man in a flat cap said “Got proper eyes in your head, ain’t yer? Johnny Fairplay owns it. Him out at Hennybrooke.”

I ran back to the pedestrian crossing. An exasperated driver from a disgustingly huge off-roader behind was getting into my car to drive it off out of the way. I yanked him out, got in and sped away to laughter, shouts and jeers.

“What ON EARTH’S got into you?” shouted Sunita.

“Look on the back seat under my jacket. There’s a file there....”

As soon as I could I pulled over. I thumbed through and found the photo again and compared it to the family snap once more. I looked for all of five minutes. Nothing made any impact on me, so I said to Sunita that I wanted to show her a really grisly photo. Could she face it? She gulped hard, probably thinking about her lunch, and nodded. She stiffened up when she saw it and looked away.

“No, come on, if you’re going to be a proper reporter you’ll likely see worse than this.”

So she took a deep breath and looked again “Is that your dad?” she asked quietly. I nodded and showed her the family snap.

“Who’s that?”

“My dad.”

“And the other was your dad?”

I said nothing and waited for a reaction. She shook her head slowly and sadly. “You just can’t tell, apart from the hairline. The ears look the same, and the jaw....”

I looked again at the dial of his watch. His wrist was resting on his chest. The other wrist was visible too, stretched out on the paving stone.

*Look at his legs!* - But I couldn’t look at his bloody legs. They weren’t on the bloody photo! Sunita was still looking. “He must have put some weight on since the first photo”

“Well he did have a bit of a beer belly....”

“The suit jacket looks really tight. Look how the sleeves are pulling up.”

“And the socks would be showing too..... if we could see his legs.” I said quietly, realising now at some level in my lower consciousness what the message meant.

It dawned on me now what I was meant to do. I rummaged through the file and found the post-mortem report. Height: 6’1. Dad was a tall, impressive man. To a child. But had he been over six feet???

I phoned my mother. “Mother, I went to see Uncle Denis....He sends his love.... and Nora.....Listen, Mam, I want you to settle a bet. Denis reckons he was a good two inches taller than Dad.....”

“Well he were taller but I can’t remember by how much.”

“Look, can you get his old passport from the biscuit tin and see what it says in there?”

I heard her sighing and rummaging and then the sound of shuffling as she came back to the phone. “Five foot eleven. Denis must be about right, then.”

I thanked her, told her I'd be in touch soon and rang off. Sunita was examining the edges of the photo. On one corner she was picking off the tiniest shard of paper. Had someone once guillotined the edges off and the legs as well? A monstrous possibility began to take shape in my mind, one I could hardly entertain. I stared again at the photo. I took my glasses off and held them at a distance to use them as magnifying glasses. I examined every inch of the picture minutely. When I came to the cracked white face of his watch I paused. I could just about make out the hour hand. Was it pointing to six? Why was it pointing to six? Was the time of death wrong? How could that be? There had been a post mortem. And the landlord had found him .....I flicked quickly through the papers until I found his statement.....at five-thirty. How could he have been attacked and killed after the body was discovered? Sunita seemed to understand what I was deliberating over, took my glasses and looked long and hard at the watch. I said "The hand is pointing to six isn't it? I'm not imagining it, am I?"

"When was the time of death?" she asked. I told her 12:17. She looked at her own watch. It was twenty past one. Suddenly she took it off and strapped it back on again. "What time is it now?" she asked. I glanced back. Now it said ten to seven. She took it off and wound her watch back further until it read 12:17. Then she turned it round. It looked now as if it said an odd-looking quarter to six. "He was wearing his watch the wrong way round," she concluded. I looked at her earnest lovely face, so close to mine and kissed her on the cheek. Astonished, she demanded to know why. I slumped back into my seat. "Not for your....map-reading skills.....that's for sure." "But what does it all mean?" she asked. I looked again at the suit. It was crumpled yes, but not anywhere near as blood-stained as the shirt was. He was wearing someone else's suit...another lovat green one, but a size smaller. There was a smear on the lapel. And then the whole, impossible truth suddenly rushed out at me in one great gush. I got out of the car and took a few deep breaths of the fresh air. I laid my dazed head on the roof and looked back down the road towards the town we had driven out of. Sunita got out and stood opposite me. I looked at her but hardly knew what to say. It sounded too absurd, inconceivable, ridiculous. "Tell me what it all means" I heard her say again above the traffic. I got back in and we sat side by side. I took her slender hand. This time she let me keep it. I put my wild thoughts in order.

"It means that whoever attacked and killed my dad took his suit off, got it dry-cleaned in the middle of the night, which made it shrink, then put it back on him, took off his watch, slipped it back on over his hand, upside down by mistake, and then left him to be found. Oh, and they also put the card from his B&B in his pocket just to make sure the police found his property in his room."

"But that's crazy" she said. I collected the pages from the floor where they had fallen from my lap, shuffled and tapped them back together meticulously square, put them into the folder and threw it onto the back seat. I looked out of the window and saw a pub. I asked her if she would mind driving as I needed a drink.

"No, I'll drive, of course I will, but what does it mean?"

Still looking away, embarrassed almost, unable to believe it myself I said "It means that whoever that cadaver was, there is one thing for certain. It was not Charles David Bevin."

"NOT YOUR Dad??? Well who was it then?"

I suddenly thought of what Paul O' Meara had said to me in The Regent that evening, about his mother getting cards from her son Jim until 1973 or 74. How could she have? Then it came to me. What a clever ploy! Wendy was clearly in possession of a devious, criminal mind or had thrown in her lot with someone else who had one. Someone who had operated an illegal bookie's business, had counted black twos and had stolen the flower show funds from The Pauncefote.

“That body - and I am willing to bet my pension - is of one James O’ Meara. And he is now lying in a quiet village graveyard in Leicestershire, in a plot that has over the years had attention lavished on it by a woman he never met, and a man eaten up with guilt who couldn’t cry at his funeral.....because the man he thought was in the coffin .....the man who had been mean to him.....the man.....the father....he thought he hated..”

“Let me buy you a drink.”

I patted the other hand, which she had laid on my arm “I accept.....but the question we should now be asking is, where on earth is my father, Charles David Bevin?”

In the pub there was quite a crowd of lunchtime drinkers, which suited me. No-one took any notice of what must have been a pretty lamentable sight. Me. I sent Sunita into town for some paper and envelopes. Huddled in the corner I sat and observed the jolly drinkers with an increasing sense of irony. Why had I delved? Look at me. I was becoming a wreck. As I picked up my brandy glass my hand was trembling. I tried to hold it still but it still quivered. Sunita came back and gave me a pen and paper. I thought long and hard about whether I should tell Wendy that I had guessed her secret and what exactly I should put. She had lied to me. She thought that she was now the only person in the world to know this one, awful truth. Should I disillusion her and say that two others knew? What was the point? Did she not now have peace of mind? Why not leave things be? In the end I wrote my mobile number at the top and then underneath

I’m Johnny Fairplay  
Never known to run away  
Catch me up another day  
I’m Johnny Fairplay!

I sealed the envelope and asked Sunita to drive me back to Hennybrooke. This time Sunita took it down the long drive and posted it. Then overwhelmed by the mansion, afraid to be challenged, she sprinted back to the car

“Where to now?” she asked. I told her to drive out a couple of miles and stop in a lay-by.

Within an hour my phone was ringing. The woman caller had a gentle voice with the subdued, though not erased lilt of a Birmingham accent.

“Hello? John Bevin? This is Wendy Fairman. I think it’s time that we met after all.”

“I think it’s time we did. If you drive out past the church, I’m in a grey Rover in a lay-by on the right, not very far out”

Within five minutes a Porsche, FMN 3, had pulled up in front of us. I told Sunita to wait for me there, got out and went to join my father’s bigamous wife. I sat in the passenger seat. She was still an attractive woman. Her money had bought her a new face and a stay of execution on the final ageing process. Her honey blonde hair was swept back deliberately carelessly behind her ears. She had stared just as inquisitively at me as she had quietly revved up the engine, as we sat still there.

“You know, he was right. You are absolutely nothing like him.”

“I take after Uncle Wilf, Irene’s brother,” I said automatically. I took out my precious photo and showed it to her. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth and closed her eyes tightly.

“That’s Alan,” I said quietly. “He sobbed his heart out. For days.”

Now she was weeping. Suddenly she took herself in hand, put the car into gear, glanced over her shoulder and roared off. She drove very quickly and then, as she grew calmer, she slowed down. "Your brother's the image of my Tim," she said.

I replied that Alan was bigger built, heftier. He owned a nursery in Warwickshire, I told her, and yet felt how pointless it was to say so. Now imposing brightness, even enthusiasm on herself, as if it was suddenly alright to make chit-chat, she said that she knew that, and she knew that I had become a detective, Charles had hired people to find out.

"So, his old family still mattered a little bit to him..." I could not help but add with a touch of bitterness to deflate her absurd cheerfulness. We had evidently arrived at the spot we were headed for because she now dropped her speed to a crawl, and around the bend we pulled into a car-park on the left. The unreliability of moorland weather was now confirmed, for ragged bundles of dark clouds had drifted in steadily from the west, wiping out the sun and all the day's bright optimism. A spatter of rain fell onto the windscreen. She looked at me and said like an anxious mother. "Your jacket looks rain-proof. Let's walk." From behind her seat she took a waxed jacket of her own. We took a rising path skirting the side of a great stack of slate sheets, like a huge deck of cards which had been tilted up by long extinct forces diagonally onto one corner. When we reached the top of the mound, in front of us, sweeping away for twenty miles was a vast expanse of savage beauty, a turmoil of purple, grey, olive, dark gold and black, punctuated with the white dots of motionless sheep and lined with far broken walls, running away like scratches into the distance. On a nearer hill top a solitary tree, with its horizontal branches espaliered to the sky, demonstrated by its leaning how the local wind prevailed. This seemed a fit and proper place to discover finally the bare truth which now Wendy was clearly struggling to give proper vent to.

"Your father died peacefully in his sleep ten days ago. He had an inoperable brain tumour."

I realised with a start of surprise that this virtually coincided with the final episode of my long recurring dream.

"He always had a feeling you would come. He said how clever you were and that if anyone could find out the truth, you could."

"Well, it's true, I am good at my job but I have had a lot of luck. There were lots of Ifs. If you hadn't set your Great Dane onto me I would probably have gone home."

"That was a mistake. I told Stephen, no violence, just persuasion..."

"Is that Thunderbird 5? Mr TCP?" I asked. She threw her head back and laughed.

"And if I hadn't bumped into your Timothy, if we had turned left, and not right, this afternoon and missed seeing the bookmaker's sign and ....Coley...And if my rooky assistant hadn't spotted - me, the great sleuth missed it - that the body had its watch on upside down...and if you hadn't sent Florence a card...."

She looked across at me and nodded. "That bloody card! Charles told me not to send it. I ignored him...."

"There. You broke your vow of obedience. Almost serves you right."

"Nonsense!" she snorted in mock indignation. "We didn't marry until the late seventies!"

"Marry! Aid and abet a bigamy you mean." I watched her flinch. "So what first name do you use now, Mrs Fairman?"

"Still Wendy." We walked on towards a dry-stone wall and stood against a stile.

"Did Dad bring Coley up here to work for him? Bit of a risk, wasn't it...?"

"How did you find out about Coley?"

"I bumped into him. Or rather he bumped into me."

“Bob had relatives up here. Charlie turned a corner and came face to face with him. Coley fainted. Charlie swore him to silence and made sure he and his sister, poor thing - she had crippling arthritis - were always well looked after. Some would have bumped a danger like Coley off.”

“Dad was a lot of things but he could never have done that.”

She stopped and looked to the east which was now being overrun by the low cloud. Her shoulders told me that she was crying again. My instinct was to comfort her but as I took a step towards her she suddenly span round, and now shaking in hoarse fury, yelled

“What makes you think you knew a lot of things about him? And why did you make up all those filthy lies in your letter about him? Why did you want to hurt me?”

“You dare talk to me about lies, Wendy O’ Meara! What lies? Your whole life is just one fat lie.”

I had gotten up so close to her. Her eyes, her huge blue eyes were frightened now. I could not help myself. Some sudden crazy impulse made me take her and kiss her steadily and earnestly on the lips. To my astonishment she did not object, indeed she responded, like a woman long deprived of what she loved best. She broke away and looked up at me in sudden embarrassment, then rested her head on my chest for comfort. I patted her shoulder in apology and drew her further along the path. A burst of rain spattered us and then stopped as suddenly as it started.

“What you said about his.....women.....It wasn’t true.....He told me there was only ever me....He only loved me....”

I responded with a low chuckle. “Wrong. He loved my mother.” (And her sister-in-law; and his slender blonde in Yarmouth whose name I would never know.)

“He loved your mother *once*. What you don’t know is that she was threatening to leave him....”

I stopped dead and looked into her face for a hint of spite. I saw none.

“Yes, that’s right. You think you know it all, but you don’t know half of it, John Bevin!”

“Then tell me. I’m not scared of the truth. Tell me everything.”

“EVERYTHING?”

I felt something hard in my jacket pocket, realised with a kind of joy it was my brandy flask, took it out and swigged. Emboldened, I breathed fire and said, “Tell me the whole shabby, horrible, stinking truth. I DON’T CARE.”

“Right. You asked for it.. Don’t you dare interrupt, though. When Charlie, your dad, first came up to Witherbridge he just impressed me as a lovely, genuine bloke. He said how nice the place was, how comfortable the bed was, how delicious the breakfast was....he was a charming man, a gentleman. When he booked the second time I was pleased and the third time I was really delighted. I could tell that Jim was brooding about something - again; he was basically a very jealous man. I knew within a few weeks I had made a bad mistake in marrying him, but still in those days it was a case of, you’ve made your bed and now you’ve got to lie in it. Well to be honest I didn’t exactly have a satisfying married life, if you get my drift. On the Saturday afternoon, when Charlie had gone off to the races with his pals, Jim just starts having a go at me....shouts, how clear it was that I fancied him, “that bloody bookie.” I screamed back at him and we had a foul slanging match. Fact is though, afterwards when it had all calmed down I realised Jim was absolutely right. Jim went off in a huff and when your dad came back from The Lion he was in a great mood. He had a few but he was just so.....cheerful. I was upset....I couldn’t help myself.....I was angry and ...you know....frustrated.....and Charlie was.....so.....wonderful” She paused and got her breath. “Well a week or two later I missed my period and I knew I was pregnant. I swore to Jim that it was him and nobody else and I must have been brilliant, deserving of an Oscar, because he believed me. I wanted to believe it myself

but I knew in my heart it was Charlie's child. I prayed to God that it would look like James. They both had fair hair, Jim and Charlie, and there was a bit of a resemblance, but when Tim was born I was totally certain. Jim was overjoyed. I think he must have forgotten what Charlie looked like. He was only one of lots of guests. I tried to phone Charlie on the number he had given me, his local, and tell him not to come again; that we had shut; to go somewhere else to stay. But I only spoke to his brother. Anyway, I thought the fates were on my side because weeks went by and there was no booking. Then when I came home one day from the shops, I looked in the book and there was his name. I nearly had a fit. He had booked through Jim at the last minute. I tried to phone him at home but the phone just kept ringing. I tried his local again but they told me he hadn't been in for ages. So I trusted to fate. At first, on the Friday evening when Charlie and the others had arrived, I thought I was in the clear. We all looked at the baby, Jim was cheerful and everything seemed fine, though I sensed that Charlie felt a bit uncomfortable. As the next day wore on though, Jim began to get gloomier and gloomier. I knew we were in for a terrific storm. Well, about five o'clock all hell broke loose. If Charlie had walked in at that point Jim would have stabbed him. Luckily Jim went out and didn't come back till about eight. I just sat in my room. I heard Charlie and the boys come in and go out again. When Jim came back I confessed and begged him to forgive me. That seemed, strangely, to calm him down. He went out again, found Charlie at The Regent and they came back together and we started to talk it over, over a cup of coffee.....and.....," Now she was clearly upsetting herself again.

"Was Sunday not so good?"

"No. The next morning he was really gloomy again, in a terrible mood. Now he wanted money, was threatening to tell your mother all about it, was saying he felt like killing somebody. Charlie didn't know what to do. He had left his bank book in a drawer last time he had been with us. He had wanted it to make a withdrawal on the Saturday morning but I had to tell him that I had forgotten where I had put it. He wanted to get going but then he remembered that he couldn't leave without his money anyway, and he felt it was too risky leaving me and the child with Jim, the state he was in. Charlie was in a real mess. He told Jim he had debts and couldn't begin to pay them off, never mind Jim's blackmail. Anyway, by the afternoon Charlie made his mind up. He was going home. Jim could do just as he pleased. His marriage was on the rocks anyway. So Jim locked him in his room when he was fetching his things."

"How did Charlie take that?"

"There was total silence. I think he just went to sleep with all the exhaustion of the worry and depression."

"But how did it come about that they went out together on Sunday night? That doesn't make sense"

"Jim had been drinking again. It was weird. A certain level of intoxication seemed to cheer him, made him make light of everything. A few degrees either side turned him into a monster. He told Charlie he had arranged a card-school with the Irishmen. He would have a chance to win a few bob more. He told me I was forgiven. Charlie could hand over his race winnings and what he won at brag. Jim wanted to see again how he did it. Then we would all be quits. What choice had Charlie got? He agreed and Jim let him out, I made them some supper and off they went, like two pals on a night-out.....Crazy."

It was raining again and we turned and started back for the car. Unconsciously she took my arm and was walking with difficulty. Her make-over(s) had clearly not extended to her hips or her knees.

"So tell me about the attack. What really happened?"

She seemed to compose herself as her mind ran back over the details. “It was the worst week of my life. They should have been back at about eleven. I kept looking out down the road. By half-past I was sure Jim had done him in. At twelve I just lay on the sofa waiting for his footsteps. Nothing. By half-past I was wondering what I should say to the police. Should I phone them myself or just wait for them to come round? Suddenly there was a bang on the back door. I could see a dark jacket. It was Jim. But there was no Charlie. I just shouted - What the hell have you done to him, you crazy bastard? He whispered back- *It’s Charlie!* And there he was in Jim’s jacket and trousers, sleeves up to his thumbs, turn-ups over his shoes. I actually laughed. So he sat me down and told me he had something terrible to tell me. Jim was dead. I gasped. *How? What had happened?* I was sobbing. He took my hand and said that a gang had set on him by mistake. They had been so drunk and it had been so dark behind The Lion they had taken Jim for him. Then he told me he loved me, wanted to stay with me, start a new life. I told him he was mad. No, he said, now he couldn’t turn back. If he did, he would be on a murder charge. He had swapped his suit for Jim’s, put it on him. It had always been a bit on the big side for him and he had managed to get it on Jim at a pinch. He had smashed his own watch and put it on Jim’s wrist, taken the notes out of his wallet and put it back in his own suit jacket. Murder with robbery, if he was caught would mean a long life sentence. I shook my head and asked him how he could hope to get away with it, if his wife was asked to identify him. Jim, he said very quietly, was such a mess that his face would hardly be recognisable. He was prepared to bet that his brother-in-law who was as blind as a bat would be the one who would come up to identify the body. He looked at me and said, it was a 100-1 outsider but he had decided to stake everything on it.”

At once No..46208 rushed into my head like the engine it had been stolen from. I tried to comprehend the enormity of the gamble. What guilt and torments my dad must have gone through that week! To inflict such misery on us was appalling enough, but one unusual detail spotted by a observant bobby, like an upside-down watch, the whole reliance on Wilf’s myopia, any unseen witness who had spotted him shuffling back to Hope Street, any one of a host of unforeseen contingencies and ironies and his outsider would have gone crashing over the hurdles, unseating and confounding its desperate rider.

“But that was not the worst bit,” Wendy was saying. “Charlie made me go to his body to put our card in his pocket.” Now she stopped and gazed into the distance.

“Whatever for?”

“He said it would be the best way to ensure that the police would not suspect my involvement, if the truth ever came out. He knew what terrible rows we had. I had told him how public they were. So I had a motive, Charlie said. If the card led them straight to my door and they found Charlie’s belongings straight away they would be less likely to suspect anything underhand. That’s how he reasoned anyway and I agreed to take the card. So I crept out at half past one in the pitch black when there was not a soul about. I had a torch. In the main road I could hear a noise like a cow howling to be milked. In the alley I shone my torch. I’ll never forget it...my husband, now without a face was sitting up groaning. So I picked up a brick and hit him as hard as I could on the side of the head. He went straight down. I killed him. And you are the only person I have ever told. I never knew how Charlie would take it so I never told him. When the police called early on Monday I just mentioned, when they asked, that my husband had gone to Ireland the Saturday previous for a funeral. I kept thinking, surely they must be able to see I’m lying! A missing husband and a dead guest should have set somebody thinking of a connection.” She stopped and looked up at me again.

“I admitted that I had had a row with my husband about the cost of going to Ireland. I could tell



that the younger officer didn't believe me and wanted to press it but his boss had already made up his mind."

We walked on in a silence which only she could break. I drank from my flask. She refused my offer of a drink.

"So that was that," she said simply. "Now I had no choice. I had to go along with it."

"And did a woman called Kathy, from the dairy, come round to see you?"

"She was Paul's woman. She tried to get me to tell her where Jim had cleared off to. I kept stalling her, telling her that he had promised to come back in a few days."

I slowly shook my head and felt suddenly disconcerted that I had been taken in so comprehensibly by that sharp-eyed woman.

"Wendy, you need to tell me about how you were using the bank book."

Now she stopped and looked at me. "I told you I couldn't find it."

"That isn't true Wendy." I replied almost regretfully. I told her about my visit to the building society branch near Hope Street, and about my conversation with Paul O' Meara.

"Alright, alright. It was Jim's idea to put all the money from his brother's racket into Charlie's account. In case the police got a search warrant. Paul kept phoning as well to see where Jim was and when he was coming back. I told him that we had a row. He had gone off to cool down. Then I remembered the pass book. Well, when I showed it to Charlie he was speechless. The next day was wet and windy, so he put Jim's raincoat on, pulled the collar up and he walked into the building society as bold as brass, and withdrew all the money as a cheque. Then he got on a bus to Haworth with a bagful of Jim's clothes I had altered, and we joined him there a couple of weeks later."

"Was it you who had the police photographs tampered with?" I asked. She looked at me with wide startled eyes

"Oh, you don't miss much do you!" She kicked a lager tin into the ditch and looked into the sullen sky. "I told Stephen to make the call as soon as the newspaper article appeared on Monday. It suddenly flashed through my mind how much of Jim's socks were showing between his turn-ups and shoes as he lay there in the alley. I had tried to pull his trousers down tighter. I knew that if the case was re-opened you or somebody else would spot that gap straight away. Charlie had a list of "contacts" in, shall we say, positions of influence. Gambling addicts and debtors are in every walk of life and are very useful people to have around if you want something fixing or deleting, like Tim's speeding offences."

"Like the editor?" She smiled and looked away.

Now we were back at the car. 2 FMN suddenly pulled into the car park

"Oh no! It's Shez and Tim" she cried.

Her daughter-in-law stayed behind the wheel. Her son got out grim-faced and came towards us. He stared at me and said to her, "Everything OK, Mum?" When she did not reply - and I could imagine the terror she now felt - he said again "You OK? Is this person bothering you?"

Again I had that eerie sensation that I was staring at my own father's censorious face.

I reached into my jacket and showed him my ID. Now Sheherazade was out and saying "Isn't it that man at the restaurant the other night?" I looked over to her and nodded.

"I told you I recognised you. I wasn't spying on you and your - beautiful - wife at all."

He looked puzzled and asked what we were then to each other. Wendy had clearly got a story ready but I told her to let me explain.

"Many, many years ago I came to Haworth on holiday. I was walking on the moor with my wife and I slipped and fell. Your father helped me up. My ankle was badly twisted and he gave me his

arm, he more or less carried me back to the village. When I saw you I couldn't place you for a while. I'd had a few to drink. You probably noticed. Then it came to me. They told me at the hotel who you were and that your dad had recently died. So, I thought I'd come out and pay my respects."

Now he relaxed and smiled. I gave him my hand and he shook it.

"From what I've found out about him it seems he was a remarkable man."

"So he was" he said and put his hand on his mother's shoulder. I studied his eyes for any trace of doubt or dissembling. Had Charlie a stable of secrets here which Tim had begun already to suspect? Apparently not, for the sapphire blue of his eyes was quite unclouded.

Wendy said, "You two go back now. I'll drive DI Bevin back to his car."

But Sheherazade was still staring. I could sense that she did not believe one word of my story.

"But now I remember!" she shouted. "You were on the news; you were arresting some crook. Even though you're not from round here."

"True" I said with assurance, although inwardly I was beginning to dread losing my footing on this slippery slope. "He was wanted in my parish for demanding money with menaces. I had joined forces with the local force to nick him. We tricked him to come to Haworth."

She thought of something else and went back to the car. She looked behind the driver's seat and returned with Monday's newspaper. The headline WHO KILLED CHARLIE BEVIN ? and my own face were staring at me. I could feel Wendy on the verge of despair as my web was threatening to unravel. Now Tim was staring at me and at his mother, in turn.

"I remember... You used to call Dad Charlie sometimes, Mum."

Wendy said nothing and got into her car.

"Your mother's upset. I'll tell you because she's too shy. Truth is that your mother was a friend of my father before she got married to your father. And she knew Wendy O' Meara."

I left them both trying to make sense of all that nonsense and rejoined Wendy in her car.

"WHAT did you tell them about the article?"

"I said that you knew my dad before you married James, that's all. You were friends with him and you knew the O'Mearas."

"What am I supposed to make up out of that?" She kept glancing in me in fury as she drove.

"WHY did you have to come up here and stir everything up, you meddling BASTARD?"

Everybody was perfectly happy with the way things were..."

"Everybody that is, except ME!" I retorted. "You're a good story-teller Wendy O'Meara, I mean, Fairman! If you could lie your head off to Jim, to the police, to Kathy Dell, to Paul, .....to me....

I'm sure you'll cope now. Drop me off at the car. You just drive round for an hour and get the story all worked out. I've given you the beginning!"

We rounded a bend and there stood my car with the shape of Sunita in the driver's seat. Wendy pulled up behind her. For a moment we sat in a brooding silence. Then she reached into the glove compartment and drew out slowly a brown padded envelope.

"You said you wanted to know everything?" I looked at her and the package and nodded.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked again. In reply I took it out of her hand and told her that she would never see me again. With one last look, and an unsettling smile, she drove off. A minute later her son and daughter-in-law, in animated discussion and looking perplexed came past, took the bend and disappeared too.

"So what's the story then?" asked Sunita eagerly.

"There is no story. It was my father's body after all. Wendy told me that one of the navvies had

stolen his watch from his wrist, seen it was bust and had thrown it onto the floor. Brave Jim had tried to help him, got knocked out for his pains and when he came to, he found the watch and put it back onto Charlie's wrist, obviously the wrong way round."

Sunita stared. "And you believe that? What about the suit? And his height? And why did you go nuts at the pedestrian crossing in town and run round like a maniac?"

I looked at her and smiled. "Let's say it was all the result of an over-heated imagination, perhaps fuelled by too many sleepless nights and too much brandy over the last few days."

As we approached the hamlet again I asked her to pull in. The soil on the surface of the grave had dried to a light rusty colour, hinting at the iron that dyed the streams trickling below the gorse on the moor. I picked up a small lump and crumbled it between my fingers. They were now stained red. I had walked across the field at the back of the church and climbed over the wall. Here, back at his fresh-dug grave, the one he could never escape from, I pictured his sleek coffin settling into the wet, deep, dark below, and pictured him in its satin dark inner, hands folded, in his shroud, finally clasped by the death he had cheated all those years ago. Unwittingly I had tracked him down to here. Ironically six feet - although it might as well be six light years - separated us still. There would still be no interview. How did I feel? That he had chosen on the spur of the moment to reject us all, even the ones close to him, was a grotesque enormity. I ought to be horrified but I felt cold and unmoved; I stood now by his second grave feeling just as empty as I had by his first as a boy of fifteen. What should I now say out loud as a parting shot? Call him, in futility, a bastard? All I could think was that a truth of enormous power had come into my possession. I could make a claim on his estate. Get him dug up, get the DNA tests done. Or I could blackmail Wendy, could be rich and retire to the furthest exotic island of my choice. Now here at my sleeve was Scheherazade, creeping up on me like the graveyard ghost. I glimpsed her profile. Truly, she was a remarkable, an exquisite woman, rendered more so by her solemnity. She smelt of lavender and honey. Now she turned her face to me and appealed to me with her grave, dark blue eyes and said, "What was he? Who was Johnny Fairplay really? What was he to you?"

"Nothing." I replied after a pause.

She had a half-familiar accent which I could not place, a lovely soft burr.

"I already told you, Mrs Fairman, I met him once. He helped me."

"Don't you tell *me* fairy stories..... please..... I'm not a dunce or a child... .. Wendy is in there now lying her head off to Tim. I can tell. He'll believe her. He wants to. But I want to know what I've married into. Tell me. I'll say nothing. What is really going on?"

*You'll say nothing*, I thought, with a wry smile. I looked at her. In another lifetime Charlie was my father! I almost began to say it. What a bombshell I might drop! What an effect I might relish to see emerging in that lovely face! I was so tempted. How beautiful would she look in utter astonishment? But I swallowed the urge. The phrase *in vino veritas* sprang to mind. One day, after her first resolution and resolve had faded, in an argument, in her cups, on a dark impulse, in her sleep, as a parting shot of spite, in her growing resentment, one day, she would blurt it out. So I said "You're right. He was absolutely nothing to me. We never met." And then, unable to resist, I added "What did you think of him?"

She thought it over for a while. "At first I thought he was great. I met him and Tim at the races in York. I'd just moved up there from the east coast. At first Charlie was all over me; treated me like his own daughter, couldn't do enough for me. And then, almost overnight, he changed. One evening, I remember, not long before we were to be married, we sat looking at photographs of Tim growing up and I happened to show Wendy one of me and my mum on the beach near our

house. She died of cancer when I was fifteen. She had the loveliest honey blonde hair. Well, Charlie asked to see it and he went totally pale. Like he'd seen a ghost. He just got up and went out of the room. From that day he became distant, more polite than friendly; he looked at me almost...it sounds weird...as if he was afraid of me. I tried to get him to tell me once what the problem was...but he smiled and denied that there was one. Then our son was born ...severely handicapped." She paused, as if she needed a deep breath, having brought herself to say the phrase. "Around that time Charlie virtually stopped speaking to me, as if he blamed me. ....Detective Inspector, if he was nothing to you, personally, as you say, what are you doing here? Was he involved with the man you arrested in Haworth, O'.Whatshisname?...O'Meara? Answer me truthfully...was Johnny Fairplay.....a criminal?"

I took her slender hand. She did not resist and, thrillingly, even returned the squeeze I gave it. This was a clever woman. I needed to throw her completely off the scent. But how? Eventually I said "Charles Fairman did not have a criminal record and was not known to the police. The truth is, Sherry, I came all the way out here just.....to see you again."

She cringed and withdrew her hand. "Why did you call me Sherry?"

She looked at me in horror and walked rapidly away. I smiled at her, drained the few drops left in my flask, saluted the grave and walked to the gate. As she crossed the road, taken by a sudden impulse I cried out to her, "Sherry!"

She turned and glared at me in the same way she had in the restaurant. "What?" she asked crossly.

"Whereabouts on the east coast? Not Yarmouth?" I said, going as close as I dared to her. Her mouth dropped open. She looked at me with that look my father had given me at the circus in Southport, began to say something, stopped, turned on her heel and walked back up the drive.

### **Sunday**

After we had breakfasted and I had settled up for the rooms I told Mrs Boscombe that I would be back some day but she could tell, I think, my eyes must have betrayed it, that I never would. She gave me a kiss and I hugged her. I walked out with Sunita to the car park next to the Brontë vicarage.

"Well, lass, as soon as you can, apply to a proper newspaper."

"Well, I can do even better than that! My brother called last night. The BBC want to talk to me!" I offered her my hand to shake, but she ignored it and threw her arms around my shoulders. When I looked down she was looking up and in her great, jet eyes there were tears. I smiled and tweaked her ear-lobe. "You're a good kid. If I get a juicy story, you'll be the first to know."

"Watch the booze" she said and let go. I waved and watched her drive away, then went to bid my farewells to the inhabitants of the graveyard. The low gloom of yesterday had not lifted. I mounted the steps which take the visitor past the vicarage. It is ever a house with blank windows, with rooms full of death-abandoned samplers, letters, gewgaws, tiny garments and secrets. What unfulfilled yearnings had turned in the hearts of those gloomy spinsters? Only Charlotte had been briefly married. Whatever reluctance she had had in delivering herself up to a connubial bed, was, judging from her last few cheerful letters, soon overcome by the experience. Yet her married bliss, if that was what it was, was short-lived. She was soon to be carried, the last child of Patrick, to be permanently installed in that church in 1855. What a silent, empty place the vicarage would have been then to him in the long decline of his life. In the churchyard the rooks were still squabbling and the raised graves still heaving. I walked on and found a secluded bench. I fiddled with the unopened envelope in my inside pocket. In sweetie-pie Wendy's face there had

been a strange look which I could not identify. It troubled me. Was it pity? Perhaps. Triumph? Revenge, even? Here I sat, the great judge of character, unable to decide. I took out the envelope and had a strange foreboding. Near to me was a rubbish bin. I could, if I willed it, make up my mind now that I had heard and seen enough of the truth; that I had, like some patient archaeologist, brushed away enough dust from the bare bones of that ancient monster and should now be content. I threw the package in the bin, got up and walked away.

I was nearly at the gate and on my way when the fading inscription on a listing grave arrested me. I tried to read it but could not make it out. I began wondering whether its incumbent, Mr Chandler, had, on the whole, enjoyed his life. Only to him and his forgetful descendants, inheritors of his genes, some even now going bustling about their business, had his brief flame in the darkness mattered. And what would signify any pain which I or anyone else might presently suffer, in a few years time, when the coffin-lid had sealed away the restless lights of the world for ever? Then the overwhelming urge to know the absolute truth, come what may, made me return to the bench. Casually I fished the brown envelope out of the bin and tore it open. Inside was a white envelope. On the front was my name. I opened it. With an indescribable pang I recognised my father's own block-capital style of writing and the total absence of comas, full stops and apostrophes which I had last seen on an absence note addressed to my form teacher, long ago, in another life.

DEAR JOHN

IF YOU'RE NOW READING THIS WELL DONE LAD I HAD A STRONG FEELING THAT YOU'D FIND OUT THE TRUTH ONE DAY I KNEW YOU WERE A USEFUL DETECTIVE AND ALAN GOOD OLD ALAN A USEFUL MAN OF THE SOIL. I KEEP TABS ON YOU I HAVE MY WAYS AND MEANS.

MAYBE WENDY'S ALREADY EXPLAINED HOW MATTERS STOOD BETWEEN ME AND YOUR MOTHER AND WHAT A PICKLE I WAS IN THAT AUTUMN WHEN JIM WAS ATTACKED BY MISTAKE I WAS IN THE TOILET BEING SICK I WAITED TILL THEY HAD FINISHED WITH HIM WHEN I FOUND HIM I SUDDENLY SAW A CHANCE TO ESCAPE. I GAMBLED ON BLIND WILF BEING THE ONE TO COME UP TO IDENTIFY THE BODY

IT WAS THE BIGGEST GAMBLE ON THE BIGGEST OUTSIDER I HAD EVER TAKEN AND I WON

JIM WAS NEARLY DEAD WHEN THE NAVVIES BUGGERED OFF ONE EYE WAS BROKE LIKE AN EGG SO I PUT HIM OUT OF HIS MISERY WITH A BRICK IM NOT PROUD OF THAT SON I HAD TO MAKE SURE THAT HIS FACE WAS A BIG MESS IT MEANT NOTHING TO HIM HOW HE LOOKED IF HE WERE DEAD

IT WAS HARD TO CUT MYSELF OFF FROM YOU AND ALAN YOUR MOTHER AND EVERYBODY ELSE I KNEW HOW HARD ALAN WOULD TAKE IT I HAD A FEELING YOU WOULD GET OVER ME SOONER RATHER THAN LATER. WAS I RIGHT? WE WERENT PALS WERE WE? TRUTH IS I HAD ALWAYS HAD MY DOUBTS ABOUT YOU YOU WERE DIFFERENT WEIRD SOMEHOW.

THEN ONE NIGHT WHEN WE WERE HAVING A ROW ABOUT A WOMAN YOUR MAM SUDDENLY BLURTED OUT THAT I HADNT BEEN THE ONLY ONE TO HAVE FLINGS. SHE MENTIONED A NAME AND A TIME AND A PLACE. WHICH ALL MADE SENSE

TO ME SHE WAS PROBABLY JUST GETTING HER OWN BACK BUT IT STUCK THATS WHY IN THE END I COULD HARDLY BRING MYSELF TO TALK TO YOU I COULDN'T STOP THINKING THAT YOU MIGHT BE THE SON OF A MAN I COULDN'T STICK YOU WONT REMEMBER THIS BLOKE BUT WE USED TO FISH ON HIS LAND I OWED HIM A THOUSAND QUID LIKE A FOOL I TRIED TO BLACKMAIL HIM ACCUSED HIM AND THREATENED TO TELL HIS WIFE THAT HE WAS YOUR FATHER IT BACKFIRED HE SAID HE WAS GOING TO MAKE ME DISAPPEAR. IF I DIDNT PAY UP AND SHUT UP

BUT I NEVER REALLY KNEW FOR SURE .ITS PROBABLY NOT TRUE ASK YOUR MAM. SHE WILL TELL YOU THE TRUTH AND PUT YOUR MIND AT REST

I'M SORRY FOR EVERYTHING BUT IT CANT BE HELPED NOW IM SOMEWHERE WHERE NOTHING MATTERS ANY MORE AND THANK GOD I TAKE A WORSE SECRET TO THE GRAVE THAN ANY OF ALL THAT FAR WORSE THAN YOU OR ANYONE ELSE CAN IMAGINE

LOVE DAD

\* \* \* \* \*

But I have already guessed your big sorry secret, Charlie. Sheherazade, your illegitimate daughter, married to Timothy, your illegitimate son. She told one tale too many. But was there yet one more secret, an even bigger one than her to discover?

Where am I now? I am still on the A1. I turn off and head for Newark. I drive into a lay-by. I read the letter over and over again. I am irresolute. I get out of the car and look around. Behind me to the north the weather really is abysmal. Above the horizon long strands of rain are wavering like the broken strings of a vast harp. I look south, towards home. It is brightening. A silver lining! I phone Jane again. Still no answer. I decide to drive on. The landmarks now are familiar; Cropwell Bishop and Cropwell Butler; Wymeswold. Just north of Leicester I phone her again. Still no answer.

I round the final bend of our road in Earlstone and there, reassuringly, still stands our house, not burnt down as I always suspect it will be, whenever we return from holidays. I pull onto the drive. But the house is dark and the windows are giving everything away. I persuade myself, against all the evidence, that she must have gone shopping to Fosse Park and is not yet back. I reverse out and drive on to the village to drop in on my mother. She is all surprise.

"Where's Jane?" she asks.

"Shopping."

I go to the toilet and while she is making tea I creep to her bedroom and slip the photo and death certificate back into the old biscuit tin. I push the lid down firmly. Returning to the kitchen I tell her that Denis and Nora were well and then fall silent.

She sighs. "So you've got nothing much to tell me then?"

I look up at her and force myself to smile.

"I had a nice letter from Margaret," she says. "Wilf didn't suffer much at the end. They gave him a lot of morphine. Poor lad." She looks up at the ceiling and shakes her head.

“After your dad’s death he changed you know. I’ve often thought he didn’t tell me the whole truth. I reckon he was more knocked about than he let on. I think he was sparing my feelings.” I drain my cup and look at her. “Best remember him as he was, mother.” But she replies with a strange shrug and raises an eyebrow, as if wondering what exactly he had been. Before I leave I kiss her on the forehead and stroke her hair. “I’m lucky, anyhow,” she says “To have had two such loving sons.”

The rooms are deserted and cold. There is silence. I switch on the kitchen light. Propped against a cat ornament is another white envelope with my name on it. But I do not need to read this one. Pointlessly I check upstairs. Her wardrobe is empty, but there in the corner of it, where she must have hidden it long ago, stands a full bottle of brandy.

\*

How quickly a house without a loved-one becomes cold, uncaring and uncared for. The pile of letters on the hall rug has reached alpine proportions. I have a mind to sling the whole lot into the bin. So I almost miss the rolled up newspaper amongst all the junk mail and it nearly goes the way of the free paper. I take the bundle into the little toilet, sit down and begin to read through, as I always did whenever we returned from a long holiday. One envelope is very self-important. It turns out, as I immediately suspect to be from a snooty firm of solicitors with a triple-name title. It informs me of course that my wife is instigating divorce proceedings against me. I tear it into shreds and drop it into the pan beneath me.

The newspaper, I notice, is from the little town where I had stumbled on the truth. The postmark on the paper collar says Haworth. As I tear it away and unroll the newspaper a sheet falls out. It reads,

From an old friend: this is a weekly newspaper, and is the edition a week on from a certain person’s death. Read the obituaries. And that was all. I turned to the obituary page. I scanned it several times. But there was no mention of John Fairman.

Or Johnny Fairplay.

## APPENDIX

### FOR THE VICTIM OF AN UNEXPLAINED SUICIDE

She knew she had a duty, to be, for you.  
Perhaps her love had died? She dared not tell?  
Or had she withered in some inner hell  
Whose witchery love’s spell could not undo?

She confides to death the answers to your questions.  
Her secrets safe to keep, deep death has sworn;  
And greets your wondering eye with silent scorn  
And slyly shakes his head at your suggestions.

And what of you? You never shall have peace.  
Your crippled love may slowly turn to hate.  
Her bequest to you, a misty, vast estate,  
The Past, to ponder why, has life-long lease.

The turmoil of your heart she does not feel  
For instantly that tortured skein unwound  
And nowhere shall the spindle sharp be found  
Which span her woe upon this spinning wheel.

#### MOGG'S EYE

While Jane slept sound upon the sand  
I walked and found a tiny shell,  
A pointy, swirling, pearly bell,  
And gently laid it in her hand;  
She woke and looked at every band,  
Where each began could hardly tell,  
But whence its shape from heaving swell  
Could not begin to understand;  
Yet it was there and so were we  
Beneath that blue, grey-dappled sky,  
Three entities of bounteous birth,  
Two staring at the roaring sea,  
Full of futile questions why  
Diverse abundance blesses Earth.

#### LOCKWOOD'S LAMENT

D' you see a clutch of buildings yonder  
Huddled in thin rags of mist?  
Or kindred blocks, split, hurled asunder  
By furies they could scarce resist?

Intruder sun-shafts shall not cheer  
For there is nought of joy to light  
Amongst hard sandstones toppled here,  
Long scoured by winter gale and spite.

In gorse and wall stones, slabs and slates,  
In storm-cloud plummeting carrion crow  
A darkling spirit broods and waits  
To stunt and blight what dares to grow.

In youthful breath infections spread,  
Consuming heart and flesh and lung



Till ruby cough and frenzied head  
Unpick brave lingering hopes that clung

To narrow edges of precipices  
Above the harrowing void of death  
Neath thin-floored chambers deep abysses  
Whence spares them but one shallow breath.

Upon this scarred and barren moor  
An agent of the devil fell;  
Or did he form from distant tor  
To plot the rugged schemes of hell?

To twist the tender heart with hate  
And prime the weakling soul with bile;  
Not love, not faith could dissipate  
The sour concoctions of his guile.

If urges he could not satisfy  
To gain his blackened heart's desire  
Then her he could not have must die  
And none would scape his venging ire.

If raging fires had charred the bloom  
The taint its every seed would bear  
And germinate in soot and gloom  
And halt and wilt in poison air.

As bequest of ancients, this vasty waste,  
In frost-plumed death-rail, jet-plumed hearse  
In crag stones spurned in ice-melt haste  
A chill, still weathering out, dark curse.

## FROM HAWORTH TO TOP WITHENS

1        HAWORTH CEMETRY  
We tread, by the church, the path they took,  
Now by towering chestnuts spanned,  
Whose screaming rooks in a roaming band  
Dispute each pinnacle-flower filled nook.

At odds in death's eternal gale  
A surging, blackened mass of waves  
Slump and heave, the jilted graves,  
All lap at masts in May's full sail.

2        HAWORTH MOOR

The chatting finch of rapid song,  
With lyrics barely changed at all  
From ancient years, renews the call  
To cheer the brooding girls among  
The fangs of nettle, coils of fern,  
Thistle darts and hawthorn sprays  
Of those few blue and open days  
For which their souls, sequestered, yearn.

3        THE BRONTË BRIDGE

And then we sit beside their bridge  
And mount with eyes the stairs of rocks  
Which trap the pools within like locks,  
Secret-sourced at the sombre ridge...

...And there they stand in flowing skirts  
And count the shallow treasures cold,  
Flat hoards of stones, dun, red and gold,  
All pursed by lapping water spurts.

4        TOP WITHINS

The path gives up at a ruined door  
By a bleating lamb and a jeering ewe.  
Padre-hatted, ever two,  
They roam the bracken, heathen moor.

Here dreams one girl of darkest plights,  
Whose depth the vale-folk scarcely gauge,  
Undoes her heart of pent-up rage  
And breaks the tale of Wuthering Heights.

ON BRANWELL'S PORTRAIT OF HIS SISTERS

The grim beauty of these three Brontë faces  
Of eyes that shall have the elusive truth  
Transfixed by earnest stares of youth  
Is born of brooding moorland places  
Unvarnished, stark and uncontrived  
As hard and dark as that startling stone  
A beauty far better left alone  
That on a flattery never thrived;  
But does there glint a flame of yearning  
That genius shall be recognized  
That dreams of fame be realized

Behind those stares, ambition burning?

And there, besides, a quiet despair  
That fame in life they would not share.

#### JANE EYRE

As Charlotte's ward of Providence,  
Whose sturdy virtue, faith and trust  
Are rewarded well, as evidence  
That God does smile upon the just,  
The waif is steered by a Hand unseen  
To fortune, kin and her heart's desire  
Past antagonists perverse and mean,  
The devil-dolls of Charlotte's ire;  
Absurdities of pomp and pride,  
Of haughty, frivolous self-regard,  
Through Jane are well exposed and tried  
And crushed beneath a judgment hard.

Shall those who writhe in cruel despair  
Be comforted to read Jane Eyre?

#### AGNES GREY

A modest lamb, resigned and unassuming,  
Ready to lead a life in lorn obscurity,  
Beneath the rich, whose callous stare  
Is fixed on pomp beyond her reach;  
Full rotting in their heart and in their soul,  
Is a withered spirit sentenced long to die,  
An antidote to which no wealth can buy,  
The pestilence itself that stamps its toll.  
Sweet Agnes finds her riches on the beach  
And in the tide, of jewels her scattered share  
From dawning sun, reward for simple purity  
That casts away her dismal shadow looming.

And words she only thought in dreams to hear  
On gentle sea-breathed air are calm and clear.

#### THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

Brave Anne incurred sententious wrath  
By her brave and earnest honesty  
Exposing vile hypocrisy,  
Depicting what a dismal slough  
Could be the married woman's lot,  
In the grip of such as Huntingdon,

Who Helen by dissembling won  
And hid his face of gambling sot;  
Anne dealt him such a knave obscene,  
That monster rotten to the core;  
He smelled the doom he had in store,  
Dissolving slow with gangrene.

Shall Anne go down in history  
The greatest of the Brontë three?

#### THE WORTH VALLEY LINE

Ingrow West.....a swarthy church.....a ruined mill  
Manufacturing many a rueful smile,  
Cottage-boxed and stacked upon a hill.....  
On the moor beyond the railway stile  
Bare trees are writhing by fleeing brooks,  
Turning, dancing out of sight  
Juggling with tawdry nests of rooks,  
And on the brow a farmhouse light  
Is gliding by with dusk pursuing  
While the quickening moon with the train keeps pace  
Night gathers and leaves no time for ruing  
As its wings envelope every space.

The dark is our looming destination  
Waiting in Oxenhope, the final station.

#### BEYOND HAWORTH

The spring in early May full fledged  
In woods below this sullen moor  
Can scarce ascend to winter's store  
In tortured heather hiding pledged;  
In headlong spate abandoned flows,  
From bracken beds down sandstone stairs,  
Past plaintive curlews' secret lairs,  
In iron-red ways alone it knows,  
A twisted stream in breathless haste.  
The bruised descending cloud now swells  
And bursts on crags and fills the wells  
Which percolate this senseless waste

All in contempt for those who tread  
Past staring sheep to Withens Head.

## SCHEHERAZADE

She sought a tale to tell to stay her doom  
And sheathe her sultan's jealous blade each night;  
By day she laboured frantic at her loom  
To whet the cuckold tyrant's appetite,  
By weaving fantasies which never ended  
Yet did not start to lose their fresh appeal;  
On this her lovely slender neck depended  
Beneath his stark misogynistic steel.  
With miracles of story-spinning skill  
She enchanted him with deed and escapade  
And shy and slyly plied him to her will  
Until he came to love Scheherazade.

Beguiled he never thought himself deceived  
Yet knew, deep down, no word should be believed.