

A special thanks to my beloved wife Nicole whose English is better than mine. She has ironed out the inconsistencies, improved the style and eradicated my errors of grammar and spelling.

FOREWORD

*It was just after I had come out of hospital, having finally come to my senses and dried out, that my brother was reported missing. His ex-wife phoned me. She could not face going round to his place. I wasn't really up to it but who else was there? Anyway, I went and found everything remarkably tidy. The police, who had been putting pressure on him, had had a quick look round, but finding no suicide note and nothing suspicious quickly lost interest. I accepted the story he had told me over the phone - that he had simply decamped to his beloved France. He had nothing much to detain him in Earlstone. The red box files stacked on a shelf in the cupboard were a puzzle until I happened to look in the tenth one - a blue one. There was a note addressed **to whom it may concern** asking that names found there - apart from one - be kept anonymous. It turned out to be typewritten account of a mystery never solved. When I read it through I badly wanted a drink, but knew that the drug patch inserted into my stomach would cause me immediately to vomit. My brother has not yet returned. I have decided to edit his story and knock it into some sort of shape. I have respected his wishes regarding secrecy.*

I wanted to call this story by a girl's name - but I have been reliably informed some other posh author already used it.

THE MAY BLOSSOM

There used to be a tobacconist's on Earlstone High St in the early seventies. The blended aroma there of sweet and more muscular tobaccos has hardly faded in my memory. With my beard, my wide-lapelled powder-blue jacket and my extravagant tie I thought I cut a dashing figure back then - and a pipe was the accessory which all students - even some of the girls - had to sport, whether they liked it very much or not. God knows how bad we would all smell in the fresh air of today, and back then I suppose even the noses of non-smokers were mercifully benumbed by the general background fug. A native dropped in from the rain forest would have no doubt been appalled, an equivalent experience being perhaps for a modern person to be whisked back to a medieval city to be overpowered by the all-pervading smell of shit. What commonplace of today, I wonder, will nauseate our descendants twenty generations hence?

Those pipes you could unscrew were at once the worst and the best; the worst and best because they trapped the bitter, foul-smelling tar in the little metal bowl, and the best because they made you realise what was steadily going into your lungs. I gave up the pipe which had come to revolt me with its goo and stench - but to which I had become a slave - in my mid-thirties. One Friday night after a week of nagging by my wife I drank about ten pints of beer and sat up puffing away non-stop until 5 am. When I woke - and it was a minor miracle that I ever did - my chest sounded like a great church organ and my head pain was unbearable. Except in my guilty dreams I never smoked again.

But I reckon there are few wholly negative experiences and so it was with the pipe. That summer

I decided not to stay with my uncle in France and returned to Earlstone for a while in to cut my snooty dash amongst its plodders in their cloth caps armed with patchwork leather shopping bags on their way to their miserable, squat Building Societies, inwardly sniggering at the squat tarts in their PVC gear which was long out of fashion in the South where I was based - and decided one morning I would go into Wiggins to acquire my Three Nuns or Parson's Pleasure or some other treacherously named preparation - remember Whisky Flake and Condor? None were called Black Lung or Tar Breath, and I suppose had they been, some of us would have sampled them out of perverse curiosity.

And there she was. My pipe nearly fell out of my mouth and she blushed - and squirmed even - to see the effect she had made on me. It was not fair for anyone to be so pretty. In that split second I saw Delight Incarnate - dark curly brown hair around a peach of a face with eyes - oh what eyes - dark blue, long-lashed and sparkling with mischief. Her slender body had been wrapped tight in a white coat emphasizing her lovely curves. What hips! What a bosom! I was obliged to speak because she had asked if she could help me. I had been a stutterer in my boyhood and now the habit returned horribly to finish off what was left of the air of sophistication I had studied. With a mixture of babbling and pointing I managed to make myself understood, paid and left. Glancing back through the glass door I saw her almost doubled up with laughter and what I took for a cruel streak in her tempered my admiration. But like the deceitful aroma of the tobacco in the shop the image of her would not fade.

I was nearly twenty-two and she was about eighteen. I had a feeling I had seen her at school when I was in the sixth form. I recalled a hot day in June when a group of young girls had been laughing helplessly in the tennis court. Their voices had carried on the crystal air and looking up from my revision notes on the field I had been beguiled by a distant huddle of long legs in white PE skirts and dark shapely mops of hair shaking with mirth. Had she been the eye-stopping girl of medium height my eyes had singled out?

Without being too obvious about it, I managed to find good reasons to be in the High Street quite often those two weeks before I went off to work on the campsite to which I had written off. Most times she did not notice me as I sauntered past, being engaged in serving customers or with her back to me reaching down sweet jars, cigarettes or tobacco. On one occasion she stood examining her nails, on another the ends of her lustrous hair and I stopped to look into the shop window next door where bras were on display, glancing up occasionally to admire her. On a third occasion the bra woman gave me such a Gorgon stare that I hurried away.

But imagine my delight and astonishment when one rainy afternoon as I was passing she smiled and waved. I turned to look behind me but there was no-one there. Her smile had to be for me! I should have waved back but I had already plodded past and was too shy to return. The next afternoon I was leaving from Naunton to catch the boat train. I prepared a little speech which in the end I pared down to *Whisky flake, please*. But when I went in that morning old Mr Wiggins was behind the counter, not her. Glumly he asked if he could help me. Glumly I responded. He duly reached down the round green tin I required and put it on the counter. Two years previous we had become quite chummy but now he seemed not to remember me. I asked him where his pretty assistant was but his reply was not encouraging.

"Not turned up today. Put me in a right mess, my wife being so poorly back there."

I told him how sorry I was to hear that. I counted out the coins onto the glass dish.

"You know, Mr Wiggins, I've got a feeling I know her from school. Is her name Shirley?"

"No. Emma."

“Emma.” I savoured the word like that sweet aroma of tobacco. “Emma *Smith*, I seem to recall.” He said nothing and continued to stare. *Would there be anything else, young man?*

“Y-you don’t happen to know her address? I’d like to l-look her up. Only I’m going away tomorrow. To France. I could send her a c-c-card.”

His stare grew stonier as if, by admitting I knew her, I was to become her whipping boy. Even if he knew, he said, he would not tell me. There were some *funny folk* around *these days*. And for him I was so obviously of their number.

So my mind turned to many other things and I left for the Vendee. There were enough randy young women - campers and workers - to push lovely Emma into the background that July and August, and my colloquial French improved dramatically - as had been the whole point of the job. But as September arrived and I made my way home I found her on my mind again. Of course, she would have boyfriends better looking than me. And three or so years between us was quite a gap at that age. Even so, going up town was one of the first things I did when I got home. Wiggins was closed and the blinds were down, and when I went the next day they still were. I went into the bra shop - I had grown much more brazen - and asked that grim woman with the hideous butterfly spectacles if Mr Wiggins was ill. No, she said, but Mrs Wiggins had died and he had gone to live with his daughter in Oxford. The shop, she added with great distaste was going to be - *over her dead body* - a chippery. The smell of grease was not going to get into *her* bodices, she had told the planning committee. *Bodice*. The very ugliness of the word clashed violently in my head with the soft silkeness of the charms it was designed to protect, like the metal catches on the straps of bras. I found the paradox weirdly erotic. But *bodice* left nothing more to be said so I hurried out. I walked up and down the street, wondering how on earth I could find her. She became such an obsession that for days on end I spent time in town just hoping to bump into her. And then, on the eve of my departure for Chartres University to spend my compulsory year abroad, by the cruellest of twists I saw her; on a Midland Red double-decker turning the corner to head off for Leicester. I was coming out of a pub late that night with my brother when I heard a shout. She was at the top light waving and shouting like mad. I began to run after the bus, but stopped when the lads she was with pulled her back onto the seat and a vile youth began to give me frantic V signs. The last image I had was almost identical to the one in the shop. She was laughing. At me.

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I graduated and married a beautiful nurse I met at a cousin’s wedding in 1974. I more or less forgot Emma. If ever I thought about her, it was to decide that her beauty had faded and that she was definitely shallow and brainless. Once the veneer of her attractiveness had worn thin, I reasoned that the intellectual chasm between us would have been disastrous. What a disgusting snob I was back then! I imagined those voluptuous grapes beyond all reach to be as sour as possible. She became like an old photograph in a drawer that you come across from time to time. You take it out, look, shake your head and sigh and put it back.

Ironically, the passion I felt for my wife Gwendoline declined inexorably in direct proportion to the weight she put on around chin, cheeks and midriff and the growing delight she found in a pallet of tastes in all fields of distractions and entertainment most disgusting to me. But it was principally the weight. Out of the corner of my eye I watched her popping chocolates into her fat jowls as she chortled at the most brainless of programmes and I kept wondering just how

enormous she would be by the age of fifty. Like many nurses she was obese. Walking the corridors with pieces of paper and files is not healthy. Most marriages are a mistake. But you can't tell until they are. One afternoon when I was just a few weeks from forty she amazed me by saying that she had *met* someone. Amazement was my first reaction. My second was disgust - to imagine a sweaty heaving bed and her quivering libidinous fat; my third reaction was to be *understanding* - we had not had sex for ages - and to offer her sympathy and a way out. Here at last was my chance to get shut of the stupid fat woman I had put up with for the sake of my daughter - who was - if I was perfectly honest - equally as fat, insensitive, idle and dim and who bore no resemblance to me whatsoever - even though I loved her dearly. So they left to move in with a painter and decorator who had his own business and a large house on the more salubrious outskirts of Earlstone with a view of the woods, a swimming pool in the garden, guinea pigs and a dovecote, a Mercedes and a huge television. I was inconsolable for about half-an-hour. But gradually something very strange and unexpected happened to me. I tumbled into a depression. It began with an ear-worm which burrowed deeper and deeper into my brain - *not your daughter, not your daughter*. ...Physically she was out of the same marrowfat pea pod as her mother. I began to convince myself that Gwendoline's infidelity was not a novelty- I had spent a lot of time away from home as a commercial interpreter in the seventies when trade with the Continent exploded - but I was far too proud to ask her about it. Being no angel myself, it was not particularly the thought of her deceit or of my being deluded all those thirteen years - sixteen if I included the time before she became pregnant - but something far worse: that I had been feeding a fat cuckoo in my nest. I was now around half way through my life and it began to feel like a fruitless journey. I had stumbled onto the wrong train. Where was I? And where should I go now?

I began to think of Emma again and the journey I might have undertaken. A kind of paralysis overcame me which only people who have been depressed can sympathize with, and I could not face looking at the translation work which had become more of a hobby than a necessity. And obsession set in.

I began to wander around in town again. Wiggins had become a boutique and the bra shop a charity shop. I closed my eyes and wished with all my might I could travel back those twenty years to stand again on the same spot *then* I occupied *now*. I would stride in and tell that lovely girl how much I adored her. And that would have been the magic incantation needed to change my life. My focus returned to the miserable present and I saw my time-beaten head mounted on the slender, waxen neck of a mannequin staring back ludicrously at me from the boutique window. To make the poignancy sharper, a tubby assistant nudged her colleague's elbow and they both smirked at me.

I just felt sure that Emma was still in the area. Might we perhaps be just missing each other by a few moments at various places? I started to spend five or ten minutes longer at the supermarket - and visited ones I did not frequent - sat in car parks and cafes longer and changed my routines. One night I dreamt of the scene on the bus again, running and running after her while she blew me sarcastic kisses. I woke up with a start and realised I was in danger of going mad. I had to do something conclusive. Hire a private detective? How expensive? I knew I could afford one. My finances were very healthy, especially with my move downmarket after the divorce, and I had started doing lucrative work for a solicitor whose clients were into the new fashion of buying property abroad - but I reasoned that it would not be too difficult to track Emma down myself by applying a little science if she was in the locality. Were there to be no sign of her, then I could

forget her and mend the wreck of my life. It never even occurred to me at the time that there might be a hundred reasons why she would have absolutely no interest in me whatsoever. Nor I, after all, in the person she had become at thirty-seven or eight.

Where should I start? I could ask around men and women of around her age - *Emma - a very pretty girl - had a little job at the tobacconist's in the summer of 1971 - curly dark brown hair, blue eyes* - but there were all sorts of reasons against that. I might strike lucky but I decided to make such a desperate tactic my last option. I could return to my old school and ask some of the teachers if they remembered her. No, not too clever either. Maybe I could track down Mr Wiggins in Oxford. I calculated he would be well over ninety. Naturally, he would have a clear recollection of a name and address of a temporary assistant who had let him down in 1971, and would be only too willing to help me. I was left with only one proper option - the best and, as it turned out, the most fateful. Did someone once say that the past is a corpse we should not dig up?

The Earlstone Gazette is a weekly paper. Even if only a fraction of Earlstone folk buy it, most of the rest who turn their noses up will leaf through its pages at some point during the six days before its next issue. I decided that I would put out an appeal for her in the dating pages. *Remember me Emma? The young man so struck with your beauty that he could hardly ask for his pipe tobacco at Wiggins in the summer of 71? Please get in touch.* If she was happily settled she would not. Or probably not. If she was miserable enough to be tempted to be intrigued, then she would surely call. Or an intrigued friend or relative would.

But after a week of silence and one stupid hoax call I grew so disheartened that I honestly began to contemplate suicide. Emma had come to represent a happiness beyond attainment. Then one morning the doorbell rang.

There stood a stranger.

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The man in the armchair opposite me had managed to convince me he was a retired policeman who had seen my appeal. When I asked him how he had found out my address from the phone number in the advert he continued to stare *into* me and said nothing. I offered him a cup of tea but he did not respond. If his aim was to unnerve me he succeeded. To my shame and fury I began to stutter and so immediately clammed up. A faint smile twisted the corners of his mouth, as if to register a point won. I looked out of the window as if I was deep in thought. He had put my back up. It would have to be him who took the initiative. Ages seemed to pass. I was about to invite him to leave when he took a deep breath and spoke.

“Why are you so nervous? Are you hiding something?”

“No. You make me nervous. Staring. What’s this a-about?”

“You have no idea?”

I shook my head. He took out his wallet and showed me a cracked school photograph. It was Emma, more or less as I remembered her. I groaned. Tears even stood in my eyes. He waited. I handed the photo back.

“How well did you know Emma? Was she a girlfriend?”

“No. She was just a girl in a shop I fell stupidly in love with. I never told her. I was too shy.”
He put the photo back into his wallet and considered what to say next.

“What’s your name?”

I told him and he made a note of it on a tiny pad.

“Have you always been local?”

“What happened to Emma?”

“You don’t know? Weren’t you around in September 1971?”

“Yes - for a while. I was a student. After a few days I left for Chartres to spend a year there as part of my course.....”

“When? When did you leave?”

“I don’t know. It’s nearly twenty years ago!”

“Think.”

I tried to think. I had arrived back from the camping job in early September. About two weeks later I had gone.

“Emma Robinson went missing one September night. She went out to the pictures with a girlfriend and never came home.”

An icy shudder went through me. His eyes burned with an indescribable excitement.

“I was the Detective Inspector who headed the enquiry. My name is Loveday. Jack Loveday. I’ll have that cup of tea now, if it’s still on offer, Mr Prince.”

He watched me struggle to my feet and watched me out of the room. Would I stumble?

Collapse? Confess? I took a deep breath in the kitchen and came back with a mug of tea I later had no recollection of making. My hand trembled.

“If you have c-concluded that I had anything to do with it, you are very wrong Detective Inspector!”

“*Ex* DI. Thank you.....Just how I like it. Not too strong.”

He sipped as if nothing of importance had been said.

“Might she not have just run away? To London? Lots did in those days.”

“And still do. But no, not little Emma. She had a disabled younger sister she was devoted to and she helped her mother to look after her. The mum had her problems too. Depression. You know....”

“Perhaps it all got too much for her. People under pressure do odd things.”

He emptied the mug and put it by his feet. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and scratched a spot amidst his sparse grey hair. He had the keenest blue eyes and in his heyday must have been a formidable opponent. Now he was slow and overweight.

“You seem” he said at last “To be very keen to have her remove *herself* from the area. I must ask you now - and you do not have to answer of course - do you have any idea what happened to Emma?”

“Of course not! That’s why I put the advert in. I’ve split from my wife...and Emma - who’s always been somewhere in my heart - has come back to haunt me.”

“Haunt you? Does that mean you know she’s dead *for a fact*?”

“No! An unf-fortunate choice of words. Look - I resent being subjected to this - you aren’t even a serving officer and you’ve made up your mind I’m guilty of rape and murder!”

He sat back in his chair as if preparing for a nap. He closed his eyes. Outside a diesel van roared past. I saw he was waiting for me to deliver myself up to him. I knew how guilty my nervousness made me seem. But my trump card was the fact of the advert. If I was her kidnapper and assailant, would I be asking for news of her? With his eyes still closed he spoke quietly.

“Jacob. If he you refuse to speak to me, then I’ll simply report you to the force. Gilliver would head the enquiry. He’s brutal and you would suffer - nothing that would show - but it would be very unpleasant. Of course Gilly wouldn’t get anywhere - he rarely does - he fails to realise that browbeating a suspect puts up their shutters - but he wouldn’t get anywhere with you because.....you aren’t guilty....”

“Th-th-thank you!”

He sat up straight and leant forward.

“But that doesn’t mean you don’t *know* anything! I want you to tell me everything you know about her and every time you saw her. Every *single* thing. I swore to her mother I would find the bastard who took her off and killed her. Mum is still alive. Just. So you start at the beginning and leave *nothing* out.”

As soon as I began mentioning the tobacconist’s and my regular visits to stare in at Emma through the window, he closed his eyes and grimaced as if in physical pain.

“So it was *you!*” he almost yelled. “Shit!”

Astonished, I asked him what he meant. He glared. I had, it seemed, been one of the chief suspects, the young pipe-smoking mystery man described by Wiggins and other shopkeepers. I had not come forward despite many appeals. No-one had responded to the artist’s impression which had appeared in the paper and on regional news.

“Why? Surely somebody who knew you had recognized you from the description?”

“That’s easy. Until my second year away I was painfully shy. I stuttered. I was one of those characters nobody noticed or wanted to hang around with at school. A real loner. I was hardly here my first summer as a student - and by my second summer I had grown a bushy beard. It would click with nobody I might be the suspect. Certainly not my mother and brother. My dad was dead. And I couldn’t come forward. I was blissfully unaware of all of this - in France.”

He asked me if I had noticed anyone else hanging around the High St; if I had noticed her talking to anybody - particularly an older man. I shrugged and told him only that Mr Wiggins had been annoyed with her for letting him down.

“I interviewed him twice. She had a good excuse for not turning up - her sister had been very poorly - and he forgave her of course. She worked for him until the end of July when his wife died and he shut up shop. Thanks to her friends we know almost all her movements for August and September. Did you ever see her again?”

“Yes. Once. That night before I left for Chartres.”

“What night was that? Which day of the week?”

“A Thursday. Definitely a Thursday. It was payday for my brother and he only ever went out on Thursdays back then.”

He sat forward eagerly. “Hang on. Was it more likely to be the 9th or the 16th of the month? They were Thursdays”

“More likely the 16th - I *must* have been back a couple of weeks - there were lots of things I needed to organize and I had to sort out a problem with my visa. I went out with my brother for a farewell drink on the Thursday night.”

He sat back and stared at me with his mouth open. I asked him if he felt alright.

“When and where did you see her?” he demanded.

“On a double-decker bus - on the top deck. Heading for Leicester. It must have been about the last one because we were more or less thrown out of The Fox at just after eleven.”

“She was on a BUS?”

“Yes, upstairs with some mates. Two or three of them.”

“Two or three? Girls or lads?”

I examined the snapshot my head had taken back then which was still as clear as ever.

“There were two. I’m pretty sure they were boys but one had its back to me. Friends of hers.”

“They were friends?”

I saw again her at the open window-light, waving like mad.

“Yes. They were having a good laugh at my expense. She was taking the mickey. Shouting.”

“Shouting what?”

“It sounded like HEY. Then she was pulled back down laughing.”

“Who pulled her down? Both of them?”

“Hard to be sure. No one person in particular - I think it was mainly the lad in front whose face I couldn’t really see. There was a tallish youth in the seat behind her - I assumed she had told him I fancied her because he started giving me the V. Then the bus turned right at The Clock and disappeared up Council Hill.”

He sat very quiet and very still, then spoke. “Good God, man. Apart from the killers you were probably the last person to see her alive. Emma went missing that very night. The 16th September 1971.”

“Her killers? But these were kids - and she was laughing!”

“Did you *hear* her laughing?”

“No - the tall lad slid the window shut.”

He clapped his hand to his forehead as if he at once saw it all.

“She wasn’t shouting HEY. It was HELP! Watch!” He grimaced as if in pain and laughed.

“Don’t you get it? The face muscles make the same contortions for laughter as despair. She wasn’t *laughing*, you bloody fool. She was screaming in terror.”

He had jumped up and rushed out leaving me feeling guilt and bewilderment. Half-an-hour later he was back and could not disguise that he had been crying. I wondered if they were tears of bitter frustration or if he had come to fall into a kind of love with her as I had. He would have been in his early thirties in 1971. His self-assurance which had so disconcerted me had vanished. I made more tea.

“What an irony!” he finally exclaimed. “If you hadn’t gone to France the next day, you would have come forward. We would have caught the bastards. Was your brother not in the picture?”

“Totally plastered I’m afraid. He’s a heavy drinker. He’d remember nothing now.”

“We always assumed she had accepted a lift from a passing motorist. The bus had been late and the driver had no recollection of picking up a young girl. It was gone eleven when he left Earlstone Bus Station. Emma’s friend lived a few streets away, Emma lived in Bragwell. The friend was scared of her dad and left her waiting at the bus stop. A witness came forward to say she had seen a girl getting into a red car. We followed the wrong fucking lead!”

“But surely if she was yelling for help upstairs the driver would have heard her. And what about other passengers?”

“If *you* thought they were having a lark, what might anybody else think? Were there other passengers upstairs?”

“No idea.”

“Even if there were some downstairs, would they want to get involved with a gang of teenagers last thing at night?”

“But surely one of them would have come forward! Perhaps she was attacked *after* she got off the bus.”

“The bus was late. It was a wet, windy night. Remember? Perhaps there were no other passengers. If there had been, then the cowards would never have attacked her.”

“How would they have got her off the bus?”

“Hand clapped over her mouth....perhaps she had passed out - or was already dead - and they just walked her off making believe they were talking to her. God knows. Describe the taller one.” I had never forgotten his horrible scowl, his twisted, sarcastic mouth,; his pretty-boy face, his smooth dark hair, his semi-circular eyebrows and his sideburns; those big fish eyes; and his absurd hatred of me.

“Fish eyes?”

“Big and round. Eighteen or nineteen he was.”

“My God. Oh my good God! Can’t be....”

“It rings a bell?? Who?”

“I can’t tell you - I need to be sure. I need to do some delving. And I’m sorry, you will have to talk to the police. The real ones. You have crucial new evidence.”

“But you said Gulliver....”

“Doesn’t exist. I was playing good cop, bad cop. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. But you didn’t need to frighten me. I would have told you everything, anyway.”

“I didn’t know that at the start.”

He said goodbye and left, saying he would contact the right people.

And that was the last I heard or saw of him.

Five days passed. The official call I expected to receive failed to occur. I slowly began to entertain a completely different interpretation of Loveday’s visit - the preposterous and paranoid idea that I was the victim of an elaborate hoax. And then a far more sinister thought hit me like an iron bar. Had I in fact been sounded out by a murderer or someone acting on his behalf? Had my information proved so innocuous to him that I could be safely ignored? Might I even become a suspect, the victim of his anonymous tip-off? Wait. If I really knew the identity of the murderer, might he even now be planning to silence me? This terrified me so much that I considered moving out for a while. My brains turned to mush. How could I even be sure that Emma Robinson - if that was her name - had in fact disappeared? She might be out shopping with her daughter even as I sat pondering. I debated for days about calling the police to ask about ex DI Loveday and about Emma. I could have called the Earlstone Gazette. And then one evening the phone rang. I heard horrible rasping breath. When I asked who was there the line went dead. I explained this away as a wrong number call from a heavy breather. But when the same caller rang again the following night at the same time I had to face the fact that I was being intimidated. When I closed my eyes now, it was not my delightful Emma I saw, but the obscene bus-boy smirking at me.

The next night when the phone rang I almost did not pick it up. I heard a woman’s voice. She spoke slowly and with little emotion. Why was I looking for Emma? Who was I? I told her my tale very briefly and that I wanted only to look her up. There was a long pause in which I could hear a cage bird chirruping and a distant male voice - possibly the television.

“Emma? Is that you?” I dared to ask. The silence continued but then the breathing on the other end quickened. I kept my fingers crossed. Now she spoke.

“How - how on earth could you - how *could* you be so utterly cruel to taunt me!”

“That’s enough” said another voice - a man’s voice - very softly. “It’s a sick prankster. I told you. Put the phone down.”

I stood for an age feeling very ashamed. It must have been the mother. The visitor had told the truth. Emma was dead. But where was Loveday?

I went out the next morning - a Friday - to buy the weekly Gazette to see who I could contact. There was a list of phone numbers on the inside page for various reporters and various lines of enquiry. I decided I would contact the editor. I flicked through the pages and scanned the readers’ letters. Europe and Britain’s role in it was the main issue.....A petrol lawn mower had been stolen from a garden.....Villagers were campaigning for the lowering of a speed limit.....Strange lights had been seen again in the eastern sky.....I turned the next page and was taken aback to see a photo of my visitor. Who was dead. He had been discovered by his wife in the garden the day after his visit to me, eight days ago. He had suffered - it was believed - a massive heart attack. There were tributes from various serving and ex-policeman but the most telling was from a magistrate who testified to his integrity and sincerity. He was to be buried that very afternoon in the village churchyard of Fairleigh Parva.

I drove out early the four miles to that exclusive hamlet and waited. At three the hearse arrived and three funeral cars. The widow could barely walk and had to be supported. I thought straightway of what Loveday had said about a lifeless Emma being escorted from the bus. There was now a throng of mourners stiff against a keen March wind, including many in uniform, one of whom - a substantial man in a peaked cap - was pretty obviously the Chief or similar. The people entered and the doors closed. When they opened again most of the congregation dispersed but the funeral cars remained. The interment would be a private family matter. Half-an-hour later the stumbling widow and her nearest returned to the cars and I followed. I only needed her address and as soon as I had it I drove home.

I waited out a decent number of days and then wrote this.

Dear Mrs Loveday,

I was very sorry to read of your husband’s death. The very day before he died he visited me to discuss the case of Emma Robinson, a teenage girl who went missing in 1971. We established that I was probably the last person to see her alive. I gave your husband a description of her companion and this clearly shook him. He told me that I had vital new evidence which he would be obliged to report to the police.

I have heard nothing from the police and I can only assume that he did not make contact. He gave me to understand that he might know the identity of Emma’s abductor and since his visit I have had some strange phone calls. You see, I placed an innocent advert in the paper for Emma to get in touch, having no idea she had vanished. This led your husband to me.

Eventually I do not doubt I shall have to go to the police but I am afraid they might suspect me. If I had the information your husband knew, I would feel in a stronger position. Could I possibly come to visit you when you are feeling stronger?

I loved Emma and I know from speaking to your husband that her disappearance caused him

great heartache. I know this is a terrible time for you, but my only motive now is to bring Emma's killer to justice.

I included my phone number with the request that she contact me if she felt able. I called the editor of the paper and asked him to confirm that an Emma Robinson had indeed gone missing in the autumn of 71. He told me he had only been in post two years and was not a local man. He would have to check - and wondered why I wanted to know. I told him I had been in Australia since 71. I gave him not my number but the number of the callbox I was in. Ten minutes later he called to confirm a terrible fact of which I was already almost certain. When he began to get nosy I put the phone down. Naturally, he would wonder later why I had been so devious. A day or two later Mrs Loveday phoned me. She sounded drunk and when I went round as invited I found that she was. She was quite a large lady and reminded me oddly of Gwendoline. She was as unsteady as she had been at the funeral. She offered me a glass of wine and to be sociable I accepted. I had absolutely no inkling what was to follow next. She commanded me to follow her. We entered a small library.

"There!" she shouted. "You can have them all! He spent the last twenty years with his nose buried in them! He couldn't face he had failed. Him, the super-sleuth! That bloody girl! If she had been ugly he wouldn't have given a damn. She became more important to him than his wife and kids!"

"Mrs Loveday. This is very awkward and difficult for me. I'm sure -"

"Difficult for you? Difficult for you?"

The glass fell to the floor and smashed. She crashed down on a chair and wailed. I put a tentative arm around her. She did not flinch. I counted nine red box files on the shelf she had waved at. Her wails turned to sobs which gradually faded into a brooding silence. I found a dustpan and brush and cleaned up the mess at her feet.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You shouldn't be."

"I know. You're very kind. Please pour me another drink."

I hesitated then fetched the bottle in which barely two inches of wine remained. When I rejoined her I found her gazing into space and shaking her head, as if examining a distressing past which she was unable to return to and alter. I recognised the signs.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'm sorry you had to hear that. You are *very* kind."

"Not at all...." (I thought with a pang of shame of all my secret loathings - there could be no less a word - of my ex-wife and daughter. Kind was the last thing I was). "Mrs Loveday, on the day before he died, did your husband mention a new lead in Emma's case?"

She gulped her wine. I wondered if her alcoholism had pre-dated her husband's death or was just a passing reaction. She did not have the tell-tale harshness of complexion - in fact just the opposite - the dryness of skin tone of an addict, such as my brother had.

"It caused a big fight," she replied dreamily, as if reviewing those very events. "He came home really excited and had forgotten to pick up my prescription. He said he knew who had killed Emma. I just flew into a rage. He usually kept quiet until the storm blew over but this time he got so mad, he made himself ill. His heart....the surgeon said it was just a time-bomb in need of a fuse....."

I waited while she trembled again with grief. I told her not to blame herself if that was the case.

"It should have been me! Look at the state of *me!*"

I noticed for the first time how beautifully furnished the house was. The large oil painting of a rainy, dripping Parisian street was an original; the carpet was oriental spread out on what looked to be floorboards of orange yew. The ceiling rose was of exquisite porcelain, the chandelier of a delicate and sparkling crystal. Wealth was in abundance there. But not peace of mind.

“Did he mention a name?”

She shook her head and nodded at the files. If it was anywhere, it would be in there, she murmured. He had photocopied every scrap of information from the official record over time. I could take them with pleasure. She never wanted to look at them again.

“If you want to inherit his obsession, they’re yours. I hope you have a patient wife.”

I had not been in touch with my brother for weeks. He was two years younger than me and would be about the same age as the bus-boy. So he might have known him in 71. My brother had moved away to Loughborough in the eighties and continued to fight a battle there with alcoholism, a bottle-littered field from which his poor wife had eventually withdrawn in exhaustion. He greeted me cheerily enough when I phoned, and I had the feeling he momentarily had the upper hand in his private war. But when I mentioned that rainy night in question he laughed. I was surely joking. He could remember I had gone to France for a year but that was all.

“You can’t remember me running after a bus - and a girl shouting at us?”

“Yes! But that wasn’t in Earlstone. We were in Atherstone. It was my eighteenth. There was a gang of us. Starkie nearly got himself arrested!”

I had heard that story many times but had not been present.

“OK, bruv. It doesn’t matter. Listen.”

I described carefully the youth in question and how he had behaved. He said he would have to think about him. He might phone some of his old friends to ask if they had any ideas.

“He sounds a right *twat*. Why is he so important?”

“Just someone who might know a girl I’m trying to find.”

He cheered. A girl! He was glad I was finally pulling myself together and looking around.

Later, a young police officer was peering in through my lounge window. I turned my music down and let him in. He was quite a stout chap and I would not have bet on him catching many villains in a foot race. Perhaps under equal opportunities legislation, fat people had as much right to enter the service as anyone else - and I supposed that the weight of villains had increased as well, so it was only fair to be pursued by a lard-arse.

It was just a routine call, he said. I made him tea and waited for him to speak. This time I was more wary. A Mrs Boyles, it transpired, had made a complaint about me. It was not strictly a police matter but in view of the exceptional circumstances, his sergeant had decided I should be paid an informal visit. There was no breach of law involved, he assured me.

This peculiar line had drawn me so far away from what I secretly dreaded that when he went on to mention my advert and Emma Robinson, a slight change in his genial demeanour told me I had flinched. I decided to play the part of a total innocent, having no intention of getting involved - at least at that stage - as a witness - or worse; a suspect.

“What has my advert to do with a Mrs *Boyles*??”

The answer was wholly unexpected and my surprise must have registered again. She was the younger sister of Emma, he said. He watched me very carefully as he spoke his next words.

“Emma disappeared in 1971 and was never found.”

“Good God! I never knew! She was an old school friend I wanted to look up.”

“I told the sister it was probably some other Emma you were trying to find. But she said something in your advert left her in no doubt. She thinks whoever put it in is a heartless prankster. Which is not against the law but.....”

He seemed about to launch into a tirade against such foul behaviour when he stopped and looked puzzled. He leafed through his little notebook and stopped.

“You are Jacob Prince, born 1951? A local man?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been living away?”

“I was in France for a time. At Chartres University.”

“When exactly?”

I told him, he clicked his pen and jotted my answer down. I felt hot and tense.

“1971 to 72? So you never found out Emma had been abducted?”

“No. It’s a great shock.”

“But hold on. You said she was an old school friend - but nobody ever told you between 72 and now - in twenty years - that she had gone missing?”

What a stupid error! I felt a stutter coming on. I tensed my lips and told him she was in fact someone I admired but had little to do with.

“Was she a friend or she wasn’t she, Mr Prince? When exactly did you leave for France? Which month?”

“August.”

He flicked to another page. Having read it, he relaxed. And so, mistakenly, did I.

“Poor Emma disappeared after you left. 16th September. Theory was, she got into a car when the last bus failed to turn up.”

“What a dreadful shame. She was a lovely girl.” I almost managed a tear.

“But if you weren’t a really a friend and she didn’t know you in fact - why were you advertising for her to get in touch? She wouldn’t know you from Adam would she?”

I had utterly underestimated this portly bobby. I went to speak but could not. Eventually I managed to stammer that it had been a little bee in my bonnet - (a poor choice of words as a B is a formidable letter for a stammerer) - and that I had always fancied her. “But she was a-always...you know.....”

“No. I don’t know. You tell me.”

“B-b-beyond reach. I’ve just been divorced.”

He flicked to another page in that notebook and read me word for word what I had had put in the paper. I felt my colour rising. He looked up and told me he was duty- bound to say something I would no doubt find unpleasant.

“Mr Prince. You’re lying. You’re hiding something. Your story does not hold water.”

My heart was pounding. How ridiculous! I was wholly innocent. But my silence began to look like evasiveness - and I dared not speak! He flicked back through that - horrid - little notebook which I felt like tearing out of his pudgy hands and looked at me with a new expression. He was excited, I realised with some disgust; as if some enormity had just occurred to him. It was easy for me to construe what.

“Mr Prince...You were at uni in Chartres?”

“I was.”

“Did lectures begin in *August*? I did psychology at Leeds. We started late September. I thought France came to a complete halt in August. Might you be mistaken? Might it have been September?”

“It’s twenty years ago. Possibly.”

“August or September? Which?”

“I can’t remember.”

“If September, would it be early or maybe mid-September?”

“Early.”

“So it was September!”

“I told you. I D-DON’T REMEMBER.”

“Do you normally stutter - or is it when you’re nervous?”

I refused to answer and glared at him with all the contempt I could muster. He asked me which English university I had been based at. He made a note. He was bound to check up. My story would unravel. He would place me in the town at the time of Emma’s disappearance. He would win his pips. When he left we both knew he would be back. And not alone.

OK. I had lied. But my main argument was unshakeable. Why would I draw such attention to myself with an advert if I were the murderer?

- *Because you have always felt so guilty and it was time now to turn yourself in*

- *Because your conscious mind had buried the event away - and your subconscious mind had always longed to make amends*

- *Because you are such a callous prat and craved the extra delight of torturing the family*

- *Because you could taunt the family and the police using the armour of the cast-iron argument of the advert and the evidently absurd notion of incriminating yourself. A devious, inverted logic. **Perverted** logic.*

- *Because you wanted to cause a sensation and wallow in the publicity.*

- *Because you were leading a dead-end life of such futility that it did not concern you whether it continued inside or outside prison. Your marriage had failed. You needed your life to feel significant*

Emma humiliated you. You ran after the bus and got on at the next traffic light. You followed her home and killed her. Then you went off to France as if nothing had happened. You have blanked the whole thing out. You admit you had had a load to drink. Where were you between midnight and six am on Friday 17th September? You have no alibi. Your mother is dead and your brother is a drunk.

These invented arguments became more and more convincing on the sharp tongue of the chubby bobby who I imagined chivvying me as I lay in the dark of my bedroom. My rational mind argued back fiercely; there could be no evidence - only circumstantial theory - and I would never be charged unless I confessed. But - my fearful face replied - if I was arrested and interrogated for days on end then the publicity surrounding such a strange event - tinged with nostalgia - would be so immense that the expectation and pressure for the charging of the *likeliest* culprit would become irresistible. Even if released without charge - or charged but later exonerated - I

would be found guilty in the court of public opinion. What would life be like then?

It was four in the morning. I felt afraid and very lonely. I saw that I had stumbled blindly into yet another moraine.

I sat on my sofa drinking coffee. To disappear and to remain were equally impossible. To hope for the best and get on with things was impossible. To sit there hour after hour was impossible. I stared at the nine red boxes I had stacked next to the television. Somewhere in there was the key to the mystery. For the sake of everybody - except the killers - I had to find it.

*

How could such an innocent encounter between a shy, silly boy and a lovely shop girl lead to this nightmare? My life in review took on now the shape of an absurd tragic-comedy of errors. From almost every contingency and event a fateful consequence hung; my foul pretentious pipe; Emma's extraordinary beauty which, if a little less unusual, might have caused my head to turn once but no more; my crap marriage; my decision to live where I had grown up - a place I loathed; my advert; my daft white lies. Who would ever believe in the bus-boy now I had lied? He would be dismissed as another fabrication to save my own hide. The most awful irony was the chief beneficiary of this madness would be the killer. Whenever he smirked at me now - which was more often than ever - it was with a crueller laugh and a more twisted mouth. How I longed to wring his slender white neck.

But in this labyrinth - phenomenal and mental - who had suffered most? Me?? What a self-centred view of events I had been forced to take! I contemplated the vulnerability and fragility of beauty, that thin veneer on the coarseness of things. It was Emma's beauty - her curse - which had fated her to become an object of cruel desire. How she must have suffered in those moments between Earlstone and Bragwell: - slapped, stifled, fondled, humiliated, exposed, terrified and used as a thing of others' selfish lust; I heard her plead with them for the sake of her sister and mother who loved her so unselfishly and were loved unselfishly in return. I imagined their cynical laughter - the thin, forced laughter of the unloved and unlovable - as they took possession of the most intimate and sacred parts of her - those half-humans incapable of empathy. I would not let them escape their delayed just desserts - nor would I serve their sentence for them. Admittedly, I had been very stupid to have been so evasive - but had that not been a reflex conditioned by police credulity, laziness and lack of imagination? *Jacob Prince would do nicely to solve the case - why look any further afield?*

It was time to mourn a person I did not know. I went out and bought wine.

I had known a mother for 37 years and when she died I could not grieve. She had been at best distant and I had no memory of ever being kissed, embraced or stroked - at least with affection. I remembered her impatience with my stutter, the ill-concealed loathing for my shyness which I did not "take after" her for. If I had the Devil's choice of bringing one or the other back to life I would have no qualms about which. I staggered up to bed thinking of suicide. I watched myself walk the short distance to the tracks, climb the embankment and lie down ceremoniously to wait. I felt the tremble of the steel and saw the train increase in seconds from a tiny dot, to a large square - to a glaring monster. But my suicide would confirm I had been Emma's nemesis - now

fearful of shame and exposure. I watched the obese bobby rise to his feet with his fucking little notebook dwarfed by his great hand and nod at the grim men and women opposite him and then address the coroner. *I believe he sought the oblivion of suicide rather than face an investigation. He was evasive. He stuttered. He lied. He blushed.* He flicked in his notebook and savoured the open-mouthed admiration of his auditors for his competence, his rosy face and spotless black uniform. Everbody was looking for glory. Even Loveday had been looking for glory and to shout *I solved the crime! That's why I'm punching the air!* But not me.

I was looking for Emma.

I woke up. Strange thoughts. Who in their right mind would try to abduct someone the size of Gwendoline? Could they get the boot lid to close on her? Could they ever hope to get a ransom? And when they were “done” with her - how could they hope to conceal the body? No, people like Gwendoline were safe. They had stolen chocolate from the gods and their size was both their punishment and their salvation. It was the little beauties of this world who slipped away unnoticed in the night.

*

BOX 1

The first box was a collection of articles from newspapers both local and national. They began with the 17th September edition of the City paper and ended with one from the Gazette in May 72. The photograph which kept cropping up was the school one which Loveday had shown me - and underneath the clippings I found it. I reckoned it must have been taken when she was about fifteen. If anything, she was even more exquisite then - I sensed she had been exhorted to smile to overcome the self-consciousness caused by the camera, and had responded by projecting all her mischievousness and fun-loving spirit into those wonderful eyes.

I returned to the articles. The elapse of time could not allay the poignancy of that photo combined with headlines in which MISSING and FEARS dominated. There were pictures of a tearful mother - who hardly resembled her - and of a grim Loveday, sporting a collar-length hairstyle, basin-cut, and sideburns. As I leafed through, he became more central to the story. He was the dashing detective in a quest of the gorgeous girl. I began to understand why his failure had developed into such an obsession. The earliest reports were the most interesting. Her friend, Anita Clifford, pictured, an ordinary blonde, told of how she had left her in the bus shelter in a near-deserted town centre. She told of how guilty she felt to have done so, but that Emma had laughed and told her she would not talk to any strange men. I found a photo of the shelter and in the background was The Fox Inn. It was an almost unbearable irony that after all my searching that August, she had actually stood in that shelter while I had laughed and joked with my brother, finishing my last pint in The Fox, barely fifty yards away from her. The caption read - **Did you see Emma here as you walked or drove past that night?** To me, it felt like a rebuke. A bus driver interviewed in a later article was adamant that he had not stopped at that shelter - because there had been no-one waiting. I worked my way through the box reading similar stories. One told of thorough searches being made of Earlstone's many alleys and adjacent back yards, commercial and domestic. And then in early October the emphasis shifted dramatically. A witness had come forward to say she had recalled a young woman getting into a car just outside the town centre. The theory was that Emma had started walking the bus route when the bus failed

to come. The witness was sure that the car was a red Mini or Mini van. The clippings became more infrequent by date and the tone increasingly retrospective and gloomy. These were clearly from days when news was thin. There was a February report of a sighting of Emma in Derby and in the next edition a desperate mother was appealing to her - no matter what was troubling her - to come home and talk it over, to phone or write. I imagined the delight of the murderer- or shame? - at the raising of such false hopes. I read everything in the box twice, saw nothing remarkable and closed it up. But then I decided to cut out the report of Loveday's death and the obituary from the Gazette and put them in with the rest. Perhaps one day the archive might be of interest to a local historian.

BOX 2

The second box contained a small number of articles from the years between May 72 and all the intervening years. They were very infrequent - in most years there were none - and the same picture was used. It was not really a wonder that I had managed to miss them. I had worked in Belgium and France a lot till the late seventies and I only ever bought the FT. Any glance at the news stands - and I had obviously not glanced on the right days - would have enlightened me. The chubby PC and his superiors would scoff at my ignorance but it was the truth. I read through the articles carefully, and seeing nothing new, put them back and closed the box.

BOX 3

The third box was of more interest but full of irony. It consisted of pages and pages of red minis and mini vans - and then other dark colours - registered to drivers in a twenty-five mile radius of the town. A large paper clip kept together all those who were male and under fifty, another collected together under-thirties and yet another all those with a criminal record. Highlighted were the few with a conviction for violence. There were copious printed interview notes of these and of one in particular who had a conviction for an assault on his wife and who could not properly account for his whereabouts on that night. His wife had given him an alibi and Loveday had scribbled on her statement in red *I wonder why?* The man had been, it transpired, arrested and interrogated three times and there was a newspaper article which was headlined **Emma Suspect Released Without Charge**. As I read through the notes which Loveday had written prior to his interviews I could only admire his thoroughness and preparedness, and it saddened me that he had been led to bark up so many wrong trees. In one sentence he summed up the frustration of one who, having pursued such a promising route found himself in a cul de sac: *I can't break the bastard's alibi and his wife won't budge. But my little bird is telling me he's not the one anyway. So obviously a nasty piece of work - wouldn't Emma have preferred to get soaked???* So Box 3 was crammed full of red herrings. I closed it and went to bed. I lay there thinking of all the time he had wasted on Minis when an obvious idea occurred to me. Maybe she had gotten off the bus at the next stop to escape the attentions of those jobs and had out of necessity on a foul night accepted a lift after all. I could not drop off. I went downstairs and re-opened the third box. The suspect's name was Richard Collinson.

But it had been my description of the bus-boy which had made Loveday's pulse race, I told myself when I got up the next morning. I had just finished making myself some toast when the knock at the door I had been expecting came. The chubby chap - who was called intriguingly PC Puddephat and a gaunt man in his forties in plain clothes stood there. I had decided to be absolutely honest and begin by revealing Loveday's visit. I admitted I had lied to Puddephat

about my departure to France because I had seen how my presence in the town that very night would be construed. I took the initiative and it seemed to work. I did not stutter once. I was invited to make a statement to Puddephat and did so while the detective - Peach - who looked so gaunt he might well have spent the whole night shivering outside in the cold - silently kept me under his gaze. I supposed that they were trained to know what signals to look out for in the eyes and faces of liars. I was offered a cigarette - less out of friendship, I suspected, than out of curiosity to see how much I might shake - but I said I was a non-smoker - and I refused Peach's request to be allowed to smoke in my house. No doubt my spineless compliance would have been taken as a sign of too great a willingness to please due to feelings of guilt. Peach began to cough so badly I fetched him a glass of water and I realised what his taut features and thinness were due to.

Anyway, they seemed satisfied with my explanations and said they would be in touch if they thought of other matters. I had told them Emma had waved at me - alone - from the passing bus and never mentioned the bus-boy. I would wait until I had dug him up, so to speak, before telling anyone about him.

It was early spring and the rain had cleared. It was a good day to do the job I had planned since learning of Emma's disappearance. I went into town and began to walk the bus route out of the centre, noting where all the bus stops were. I had bought an exercise book and drawn a diagram. It was almost inconceivable she would have been taken off the bus on built-up roads and I did not take much notice of the surrounding areas until I had walked past the cemetery and passed the last house on the Stapleford road where the flat fields began. If the bus-boy lived in Bragwell then he would surely have dumped Emma out there and walked home. Bragwell village was quite a large ribbon development and was followed after a few houses by the much bigger village of Earlthorpe. Other passengers would have surely got on in Bragwell to travel on to Earlthorpe or the rest of the route to Leicester. Had Emma still been alive then, the alarm would have been raised by her or someone else. It seemed certain that along this two mile stretch of road Emma was still lying. Had it been searched in 71? I would doubtless find that information in one of the red boxes. Just before the right turn to Bragwell was an area of land called Raw Dykes, a series of low-lying marshy fields. I surveyed the hollows out of which fresh spikes of marsh grass were growing and had a feeling she lay there. It was a large expanse and I reasoned they - or he - would have taken Emma well away from the road to rape, kill or bury her - or all three. But it was so obviously a place for a body to be hidden easily that I could not believe it had not been extensively searched. I walked back.

BOX 4

The fourth box was fascinating because it was all about me. Again, there were articles from the press Loveday had cut out, the last one dating from April 72. They were all appealing for the young chap who smoked a pipe to come forward and eliminate himself from the enquiry. Shopkeepers in the High St had been asked to describe the smartly dressed man who had been so interested in the shop girl and had hung around so much that summer. Potty old Wiggins, interviewed in Oxford, said the customer had wanted to know her name and address - so that he could offer her a job (!) He and two other shopkeepers - no doubt one of them had been the bodice woman - had independently of each other assisted in shaping three identikit pictures. One of them made me laugh. It showed a grim-faced fellow with a head like a football and a Mexican moustache. The other two were similar and resembled me more closely but the nose was too long

and the beard far too bushy. They were correct in showing me with fair hair and an oval face and were pretty accurate around the eyes, but no-one who knew me would have leapt up shouting out my name. All were smoking a pipe and the first fellow looked particularly ludicrous. Then it occurred to me that if Puddephat or Peach decided to check out the evidence boxes at the station then they would find exactly what I was looking at now. But so what? The lovesick young student hanging about proved that I was telling the truth about my encounter with Emma. They did not prove I was her murderer!

Other newspaper reports simply reiterated that neither I nor the other fellow had come forward and there was one article about a hoaxer who had been let off with a severe reprimand. I was about to close Box 4 up when I saw I had left one article out. It was turned upside down and as I picked it up my eyes were drawn to a small article through which Loveday's scissors had snipped. The headline read **us Driver On Drink-Dr** and stopped at the cut edge. Further down I read

**tember Hughes was interv
nection with the disappear
8 year old Bragwell girl E**

From what was left lower down I could make out that he had been arrested one April night at the wheel of his bus following a shunt at traffic lights in Leicester. I felt hot. Loveday had completely missed this. Might the bus driver have for some reason told him a lie that September, or, more plausibly, if he made a habit of a late night tittle, had he simply been confused? Due to his snipping haste in compiling his collection, Loveday had continued following the wrong lead. But what a colossal oversight by the police! If Hughes had been arrested, however, by the City police, perhaps it was a case of the left and right hand not being aware of each other.

BOX 5

The fifth box was full of statements taken from three groups. The first group were Emma's friends and it was fascinating to find out lots of things I had always wondered about her. She had had two boyfriends that summer. The first, a seventeen year old called Tim Hartley had been given his marching orders in late July, it seemed. His statement made me wonder if he might be the bus-boy. Asked how he felt about being rejected he said he had been very disappointed, but not surprised because Emma was such a flirt. Had he been angry? More upset than angry - he had gone out straight away with another girl called Angela. A statement by Angela Morton further down in the box confirmed this. I looked in vain for a photo of Hartley but there was none. Was this the boy Loveday had seen face-to-face and who had sprung immediately to mind when I had mentioned him? Significantly, he had no alibi for after 10pm on the 16th - he had been out to see mates in Naunton in Warwickshire and had left them around ten (confirmed by three statements.) He did not drive a Mini of any colour. He rode a motorbike.

But, hang on! Naunton was on the Coventry to Leicester bus route! How had he travelled *that night*? There was no record of the question being asked - but why should it be? Loveday had convinced himself that Emma had been picked up in a red Mini. I wondered if I had stumbled on something. Frustratingly, Lovejoy had written no negative post-interview thoughts on the photocopies pertaining to Hartley, such as *nasty-looking piece of work*. Perhaps then he was not. In the second week of July - as it turned out the week before I spotted her when she had started

to work at Wiggin's - she had holidayed in Bournemouth in a caravan with three girlfriends, Heather, Celia and Anita who had all stated she was her normal happy-go-lucky self. She had met a couple of boys - but nothing serious had developed - and there were no signs of her being followed or pestered by anyone. During my time on the French campsite she had started going out with a fellow sixth-former called Ian and it was clear from his statement and Loveday's attached interview notes that he had been utterly devastated by her disappearance. He had a cast-iron alibi for the 16th having been confined to bed with the flu - hence Emma's trip to the cinema with her friend Anita Clifford.

In Box 5 I had read an account of a perfectly normal teenage girl's gaddings-about. In a sombre report the headmaster - *my* headmaster too, a humourless man called Ridgewell - paid tribute to Emma's cleverness, infectious good humour and contributions to the musical life of the school. I wondered what instrument she played or if she had a lovely voice. What a bloody crying shame.

Where was that murdering bastard? He had to be in the boxes somewhere.

The second group of interviewees consisted mainly of family members. None could shed any light on why Emma might have run away, nor give any indication she had been followed or pestered by anyone. Her A Level teachers were interviewed - she was doing English Lit, Music and History - and all said she was bang on course for good results, had been up to date with her work the previous academic year and coping easily with their courses.

In the third group there were potential witnesses from the night of the sixteenth who had been shown Emma's picture. The theory seemed to be that Emma - and Anita - might have been followed by a cinema-goer. The manageress of the cinema had no recollection of her leaving and the usherette thought she might have sold her a choc-ice. Amongst these few papers I found one statement I had been particularly looking for - that of the bus driver - and I quote from it extensively. He was Raymond Hughes, 28 years old and lived in Leicester.

On 16th September I was nearly twenty-five minutes late arriving in Earlstone bus station. A woman had tripped and hurt herself going up the stairs at Naunton bus station and an ambulance had to be called. When I arrived in EBS the shelter was empty and having dropped off a few passengers I got going straightaway. I am quite sure that the shelter in Bond St, the one nearest the Odeon cinema was also empty. I had to stop for the lights. My next stop was on the Stapleford road just before the turn for Bragwell. Nobody got on and a few youths got off. My next stop was outside Bragwell post office - I remember because I got moaned at for being so late. There were one or two fares in Earlthorpe.....

The statement concluded by saying that he had arrived at the Leicester terminus eleven minutes late. I stared at the phrase *a few youths got off*. Emma had surely been amongst them. What were the chances Hughes still lived at his given address? I read through his statement again, and like the bus my eyes stopped at the lights. *The lights*. He had to stop for the lights! Had Emma run frantically after the bus - having given up waiting and started to walk- and jumped on unnoticed through the middle doors which he just might, in his haste, have not closed? By the time the lights had changed she would be upstairs and within a few seconds riding past me as I came out of The Fox. This would explain all the contradictions.

“You put an advert in the Gazette for Emma Robinson to contact you. Why?”

The tone of the caller was very aggressive. I asked him politely what it had to do with him.

“To do with me? We were all but engaged.....”

I had just been sifting through Box 5 again.

“Are you Ian by any chance? Ian D - something?”

“Ian Dewis! How the f - how the bloody hell did you know that?”

“I spoke to Jack Loveday before he passed away. Your name came up.”

“Loveday? The policeman? If you’re police, you’d know Em’s been gone these nineteen years! What exactly is your game? Don’t you know her mum’s still alive? And you really upset her sister. If you’re taking the piss.....”

“Give me your phone number Ian.”

“WHAT FOR?”

“Just do it.Right.....I’ll phone you back when you’ve calmed down. I might be on to a new lead. And I might need your help.”

I hung up.

In fact he called me back five minutes later much calmer and within half-an-hour he had pulled up outside. He was a smart, good-looking man with fine features - he and Emma would have made a handsome couple. I told him a much edited version of my story and a little about Loveday’s visit.

“When I described the lad on the bus to Loveday he had a Eureka moment. But he couldn’t or wouldn’t give me a name - said he had to go off and do some digging. The next day he died.”

He demanded I describe the boy on the bus to him - he had been in the local in-crowd and knew just about everybody. I had hardly finished when his mouth dropped open.

“Ben bloody Gane!”

“Ben Gane?”

“You don’t know Mr Ben high-and-mighty Gane?”

“No. Should I?”

“Are you a local man?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on!”

He rushed out and ten minutes later he thrust the Gazette under my nose. He told me to find page nine. And there he was - now all smiles, handing over one of those huge cheques which fundraisers pose with in local newspapers. Dewis stared at me.

“Well?”

“It’s not him.”

His mouth fell open in disbelief. I really thought he was going to grab me and shake me.

“Look again! If it *was* him, you’d better tell me! The bastard who killed Emma ruined my life! I’ve been married and divorced twice - I could never forget her... You tell me.....”

He was in tears. Even so, when I looked again I shrugged. He grabbed the paper and scattered it.

He yelled at me that I should take no notice of his Mr Charity act. Gane was a nasty little toe-rag.

“The Ganes were so bloody special. His dad threatened to sue the school when they threatened to expel him.”

I got up and poured us both a whisky.

“Expel him? Why? What had he done?”

“If it’s not him, why should I tell you?”

“Well - if he’s a fraud...I’m just curious.”

He told me how one Sports Day Gane and another boy had grabbed a fifth year girl - *admittedly a bit of a tart* - and had more or less stripped her naked down a grassy bank.

“Before that, him and his mates broke into the chemistry store and stole acid. Everybody knew it was him - but he slithered out of it and his mates took the blame.”

He picked up the page he had thrown down and implored me to have a really good look.

“Imagine him with more hair - slimy black hair - and without glasses.”

“Look, Mr Dewis...Just because you hate this guy can’t make me say he’s the one if he’s not.

Why do you hate him so much? I know it’s hard but try and leave Emma out.”

“He put everybody’s back up. The Ganes moved up here from London and he went into the sixth form, even though he was dead thick. His dad bought the old sock factory in Bragwell, sacked everybody, closed it, knocked it down and built the Magnolia estate. Ben used to get driven to school in a bloody Bentley and then when he was seventeen he had a sports car. One night he went out, got pissed, wrecked it and got nicked. We heard he had been let off. Daddy pulled a few strings. They thought they owned the place. Now they more or less do!”

“Doesn’t make him a murderer because he’s a shithead.”

“He asked all the nicest sixth form girls out and they told him to get lost. Finished up fingering the fifths and the fourths - bloody creep. Tried it on with my a friend of my cousin’s - turned up to take her for a walk with a duffel bag and her dad found a ground sheet in it and a pack of three. Threw him out. Dirty, little creepy bastard. ”

“Did he ever ask Emma out?”

“He wouldn’t have dared! Tim Hartley was rugger. He’d have flattened him.”

“Tim Hartley? Was he her boyfriend?”

“For ages. Then she packed him in for me.”

“And how did that go down - with Tim?”

“He was really mad. But he would never have hurt Emma. He had a temper but...no...not Tim. We got to know each other pretty well after she went missing. He was almost as cut up as I was.”

“Where did this Gane live? In Earlstone?”

“Earlstone? No! Great mansion just this side of Bragwell. It’s a private nursing home now - well more of a private hospital. That’s just one of Gane’s businesses. You’ve never heard of Ben Gane? Are you a recluse?”

I did not know really how to answer, not ever having given it much thought. But then I admitted to myself that I was.

I had a phone call from PC Puddephat. They were conducting routine enquiries again amongst some of the key witnesses and needed a photo of me from 71 so that I could be eliminated. *Eliminated* made me go cold. However, not to comply with this request would be not only suspicious but also potentially obstructive. I had no choice. The best I could do was a photo from 74 - my graduation photo. I had shaved my bushy, ginger beard off by then. Of course, they would find my choice of that one equally suspicious, but apart from a school photo of me as a frightened rabbit of a boy there were no others. I dropped it in at the police station and thought no more about it.

The Gazette photo of Ben Gane was inconclusive. I had not let on to that hothead Dewis, but as soon as I saw it I had a strange feeling that he was the bus-boy. It was the eyes. I still needed to

see a photo of him from that era to be absolutely sure. I decided to visit Mrs Loveday. I found her sober, meek and full of apologies but with a smile I waved these away. I told her I had a name for her. Ben Gane. She raised her eye-brows. She told me that amongst other things he was the vice-chairman of the rotary club and owner of Earlstone United.

“Did your husband give you no clue about the person he had in mind that evening?”

“No. I told you. We weren’t speaking.”

I tried another tack. Had her husband known the Ganes, either professionally or socially? She thought about it. Her husband had not been much of a social animal. He had played a bit of golf at one time. He might have met the father or son there.

“Is the father still alive?”

“No. He died years ago. Phil might know something. But if you reckon a Gane was involved with Emma, you’d be on dicey ground.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s a powerful man. He has influential friends. Lots.”

“Who is Phil?”

“Jack’s boss - well more like a father than a boss. Jack carried him and covered for him when he started to go downhill. He retired twelve years ago. They kept in touch. He managed to come to the funeral. He couldn’t believe Jack had gone first - when he - Phil, I mean - had so many things wrong with him.”

She gave me his address and I left.

Philip Tom’s daughter did not want to let me in. In the end he shouted something and shuffled to the door on his stick. He had an artificial leg. When I told him I had come on a mission from Mrs Loveday, he insisted - and the door opened wide.

“Years of bloody smoking did for me. A leg cut off and a paper-thin heart. But I still keeping cheating the reaper. Not like Jack. Bloody shock.....Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.Such is life....Sit yourself down....Now then, young man. What’s the crack? There’s an old war film on in a bit. You’ve got ten minutes.”

“I won’t hang about. You must remember the Emma Robinson case. The pretty Bragwell girl who went missing in the early seventies.”

“Of course I remember. I was the officer in overall charge. But Jack basically ran it. It ruined his career. Well, it held him *back*. He was bright enough to go to the top - and if he’d solved the case he would have done.”

“Before he died he came to see me. It turns out that I was the last - innocent - person to see Emma alive.”

“Get away. How -”

“I don’t really want to bother you with all the details - but I described a teenage boy I saw that night with Emma to Mr Loveday and his reaction was - to put it mildly - amazement. Did you have anything to do with a Ben Gane - or his father?”

His rubicund face darkened. His cheerfulness ebbed. It would take a lot longer than ten minutes for him to give chapter and verse on the Ganes, he said. He shouted his daughter to come and set the *sodding* video - *he didn’t know how to do it*.

He told me a story which in the end set my heart racing. In the days before the CPS, he said, the police had more or less total say about who got charged and who did not. And with what. In early 1971 he had had to deal with what could have been a very nasty road traffic accident. A

young man had lost control of a sports car and had narrowly missed a parked vehicle in which a courting couple had been sitting. The car had ended up in the ditch of a lay-by and by some miracle the driver had got out without a scratch on him. The car was a wreck. His name was Ben Gane and he proved to be a few milligrams over the legal limit. Taken into custody he had begun to scream and struggle - *Did they know who his father was? He wasn't drunk! The breathalyzer was a fix!* His father had been contacted and had arrived with a solicitor. A very pushy solicitor. "To cut a long story short, the whole thing was taken behind my back - above my head, whatever you want to call it, and the case dropped. I even got a rocket for not properly looking after the lad at the station because he was a minor. I stuck the nasty little bugger in a cell. Of course we were all fuming - including Jack. The Ganes became the Untouchables. I even had to write a letter of apology to the parents because he hurt his precious little hand banging on the cell door. Bastards."

"And Jack would remember all that of course, wouldn't he? If only I could get to see a photo of Gane when he was arrested."

"No chance! All the evidence would have to be destroyed." Then his expression changed. "Are you saying Ben Gane might have had summat to do with Emma's disappearance?"

"Maybe."

He thought this over and shook his head.

"Well you might as well forget it." He nodded towards a chess board on the coffee table. "I play chess. Do you?"

"I used to. With my brother."

"Well, imagine that king surrounded by knights, rooks and bishops - and you only have a couple of bloody pawns. What chance would you have of getting through - for a mate?"

I shrugged and thanked him for his time; but he was already turning on his war film as I was getting up to leave.

*

It was just gone seven in the morning when I was arrested and cautioned. The early spring birdsong seemed ludicrously cheerful when I was escorted to the waiting car. I did not have to say anything of course but I had already prepared myself for this eventuality and I had plenty to say. The greasy stink of the custody suite, greasy with the sweat and fear of detection and its institutional neglect made me feel sick. It was deliberate. Only in such an inhumane environment could the defiance of the guilty be battered down and only there could the innocent be slowly transformed like pupae into the guilty. Having foregone the right to a solicitor, I had a statement pushed under my face while the gaunt Peach pulled on his cigarette and aimed a killer jet of smoke just past my nose. He really was the ugliest, most hollow-cheeked man I had ever seen. It was not the chubby PC who sat with him but DI Bowman, a woman with built up shoulders - as if she was about to play American football. The import of the statement did not really register at first but when it did I laughed. I looked up at them and shook my head.

"You're fitting me up. You asked me for my photo on false pretences. You know I have nothing to do with Emma's disappearance. You're immoral. Amoral. You couldn't find Emma's abductor *then* so you think you can browbeat me into confessing now. You're pathetic."

I had not stuttered. Peach had started the tapes rolling. The woman spoke as if I had not spoken and told me they had tracked down bus driver Hughes and shown him my picture. It had jogged his memory. A young man like me had got on his bus after the traffic lights on Council Hill. He

had told him to either put his pipe out or go upstairs.

I considered how best I should respond. The shoulder-bolstered woman glared at me as if she expected me to collapse into a pathetic, simpering heap of confession.

“I did not get onto that bus. I walked home with my brother. We got a bag of chips in London Road, had a bottle of beer each and went to bed. The next morning, around eleven, he drove me to Naunton, I got onto the Euston train, got the underground to Victoria, caught the boat train to Dover and sailed for Calais. I’ll write down his number. Phone him and ask him.”

I kept my fingers crossed he would be sober.

A while later a WPC came in and whispered to Peach. He raised his eyebrows. He coughed and for the first time I heard him rasp out a comment. There had been no reply at the Loughborough number I had given. In fact the number had been discontinued due to a non-payment of a bill. It was registered to a woman called Leslie Brightmore. At this, the bolstered woman seemed to inflate by about seventy percent, as if about to float up to the ceiling like a helium-filled balloon. I managed to keep my nerve. They both leaned forward, sure that they had me on the back foot. I wondered out loud who had mentioned the young pipe-smoker first, the policeman or the bus driver when he was interviewed.

“As for my brother, he is a bit of a maverick. But I know he’ll vouch for me.”

“Have you put *him* in the picture then?” asked Peach gruffly. “Sown a few seeds yourself?”

“Not at all.” Now it was time to unwrap my little surprise. “Drunks have a very hazy recollection of events and are open to suggestion. As far as Mr Hughes is concerned, even a very average brief would demolish him on the stand in seconds.”

The woman was shocked. She had not mentioned the driver by name, and the name had been scrubbed out on the photocopy I had been shown. She was infuriated by my impertinence. She asked me how on earth I knew him. I knew *of* him, I replied.

“You presumably know he was convicted of a drink-driving offence in spring 1972? Arrested late one night at the wheel of a double-decker. Convicted and dismissed. You did your research, I suppose?”

They did not need to speak - their faces said it all. The WPC was recalled and sent on another errand. The tapes were stopped. We sat in an uncomfortable silence. Peach flipped up the top of his fag packet but a quick glare from Bowman made him think better of it. The WPC returned ten minutes later and handed Bowman a paper. She read it and deflated. She asked me how I knew.

“Ah well, you aren’t the only ones capable of doing a bit of digging.”

“Digging? Where?”

I replied that I was *not obliged* to say anything. She retorted that it was a criminal offence to withhold evidence.

“Evidence? How is Hughes’ alcoholism of relevance to Emma’s disappearance? Let me tell you - on tape - what is going on. You thought you could drag me in here first thing in the morning - disoriented - a quivering wreck - and get me to confess. But you have no body, no forensic evidence and no witnesses - apart from a drunk you’re trying to prime. I did not kill Emma. You know that. I loved her. I still do.”

Peach flipped the lid of his cigarettes again, then slammed them down.

“Mr Prince.” she continued in a soft, pseudo-sympathetic voice which reminded so much of Margaret Thatcher. “Have you ever been diagnosed with a serious mental illness? We *can* get hold of your medical records...”

Here we go.....

“Only depression. After my wife went. She was so dear to me, you see.”

“No history of schizophrenia?”

“You think I have a split personality? You thinking of my advert? The right hand not knowing what the left is doing? No. I didn’t kill Emma and bury the memory. You’re clutching -”

“How can you be sure you didn’t do it? If you did bury it?” said she. “Please. See all this from our point of view. Not only were you - and still are - *sexually* interested in Emma Robinson - may I say, obsessively so - but you also just happen to see her on the last night - we presume the last night- of her short life. Had it just been a case of the latter - you just a witness - then fair enough. But the two in combination? An amazing coincidence? You have to admit it looks suspicious. You do agree?”

I leant back. She did have a point. She leant further forward. I nodded. And smiled.

“Mr Prince!” she yelled. “This is not a game! An eighteen year girl was disappeared and murdered. I mean to find out by whom!”

So did I. But I resisted the temptation to say so. I assured her that I would do everything I could to assist the police.

“But I’m not giving myself up for a crime I did not commit. I am not confessing - even if we sit here all day, all night and all tomorrow. You need to put me on that bus - you can’t - or you need me to confess. That’s it. I have no more to say.”

“Mr Prince. You knew about Hughes. I congratulate you. You just said you would help us? What else do you know?”

Was I under a moral obligation to mention Gane there and then? I almost did, then realised it was premature - and preposterous - to name such a pillar of the community merely on the basis of Ian Dewis’s loathing and a photo in the paper.

*

By ten thirty I was on my way home - on foot. I had just put the kettle on when the phone rang. It was my brother. He was on a payphone - he gave me the number and I rang him straight back. He told me that he and his partner had forgotten to pay the bill and had been cut off. He was trying hard to hide the slur in his voice. He was in a bit of a jam, he said- could I send him a cheque for say £200 - till the end of March? I agreed and told him to listen really hard.

“I was questioned by the police this morning. They have this crazy idea I abducted a teenage girl in 1971. You might remember the incident...a girl called Emma. Remember I mentioned a girl I was looking for? Her. She went missing the night before I went to France.”

“Bloody Nora. What did you tell ‘em?”

“That you were my alibi. Try to remember. We came out of The Fox dead late and I turned to you and said I’d seen a bird I really fancied on the 658 and this slimy git had given me the V.”

“That’s right! You went running after it.”

“What?”

“But we weren’t in Earlstone. We were in Atherstone. I told you before. You can’t have forgot - Starkie nearly got himself arrested!”

He could not suppress a belch and a drunken laugh but I managed to keep my patience at this foul, stale story.

“No. Now, you listen to me bruv. Atherstone happened when you turned eighteen. You were *nineteen* in 71 when I went to France. You’re getting two entirely different events mixed up! I

was never in Atherstone with you. No, listen! I was up at uni in June 1970. How I could be there and in fucking Atherstone at the same time? You *do* remember I went to university - and you *do* remember I spent a whole year in France??"

"Yes, of course I do - as if you'd let me forget it- you bloody swot!"

"You've told me the story about Starkie that often it's as if I *was* there! How the police were called and how he had to get off the bus or be arrested - and how he had to walk home along the A5. **List- en!** On September 16th 1971 we went to The Fox, got bladdered, bought some chips and walked home. If you start telling the Law I went running after a bloody bus, I'll be in the shit. And don't call me a swot - if you'd spent more time in lectures and less in the students union bar....."

"Hold on! Start telling the Law *when?* Have I got to come down to the station?"

This completely foxed me. I put my hand over the mouth-piece and yelled in frustration. I worked out what he meant by this gibberish and told him I had had no choice but to give the police his *address*. He protested. He said he would do anything but lie for me. He did not have to lie for me, I retorted. He just had to say we got chips and walked home - because that's what we had done!

At that point I remembered to mention the bus-boy to him.

"Did you ask around about the lad I described to you?"

He had completely forgotten. I described him again and he promised he would phone John Starkie about him when he got his line back.

"Well for God's sake ask him if I *was* there with you on your eighteenth."

"Hold on. I drove you to Naunton station the next day, didn't I? But I can't remember the night before."

"That's alright. You probably won't remember this conversation by this afternoon."

He laughed, called me a cheeky bastard, reminded me about his cheque and rang off. So much for a cast-iron alibi. If my brother went into a witness box, would he last longer than Hughes? All night I dreaded what he might tell the police.

BOX 6

The sixth box contained letters from members of the public. There was one nasty one written in block capitals saying that Emma was a TART AND DESERVED ALL SHE GOT. I decided it was probably a jealous rival. Ugly people tend not to make enemies. They just get ignored. Loveday had stapled all these letters with their envelopes, together with remarks he had jotted down. They made fascinating reading, being in the main denunciations of individuals their authors considered a likely candidate for a murderer. Many were obviously mischievous or acts of retribution in that they had no addresses and were not signed. No name there cropped up more than once and Loveday had scrawled *alibi* on most of them. I set all these in one pile and then found another one without an address which was very different.

Dear Mr Loveday,

I am Emma. I am never coming home. You can stop looking for me right now. Go round now and tell my mum. I'm alright. She knows why I've gone. Ask her!

The postmark on the envelope read Nottingham. A stapled note by Loveday read: *Received 06/10/71. Shown to mother. Not Emma's hand (see below) - mam - not mum - no domestic*

problems, apart from the normal.

Immediately beneath this heartless letter was a page of neat, closely written prose in turquoise ink. My heart missed a beat as soon as I realised I was reading an essay by Emma on the role of dramatic irony in Shakespeare's Othello. I had never been this close to her. I picked up the paper and held it to me. I too had studied that play in my A Level English course. What she had written was intelligent and cogent. I compared this to the fake letter and shook my head at the stupidity and callousness of at least half the world.

There were seven letters which had been addressed and signed. Six of these related to adults to which Loveday had stapled copies of interview notes and on which he written now and then *see box 7*. All six had been *cautioned*, he wrote, and had *solid alibis*. I give the meat of the seventh letter in full, penned by a Mrs Curtis of Fairleigh Parva.

It all started as a bit of a lark at lunch on the school field when my daughter Sharon snatched a pen from a boy called Simon. He and his mate chased after her and they all fell down a bank. She refused to say where she had hidden it. The boy Ben told Simon to grab her arms and Ben sat on her legs. He said he would undo her dress buttons one by one till she gave the pen back. She laughed and said she had thrown it to her friend Helen. It should have finished there but Ben started to undo her buttons even so until Sharon was almost hysterical. Ben then pulled up her bra, exposing her breasts. Simon told Ben the joke had gone too far but he lost his temper and slapped her, making her cry. He had put his hand up her dress when some older girls ran up and told him to stop. They would report him. At this point Ben and Simon slinked off.

Sharon told me Ben would be thrown out of the sixth form. At the Junction Disco last week Ben told Sharon he would get his own back on her and her mates. She was so scared she has decided not to go again.

This letter was dated June 24th 1971. Why had Loveday included it in this box if it was not relevant to Emma? Infuriatingly, there were no comments on it and no hint of follow-up. Had Gane Senior used his influence again? My mind returned to the bus and I imagined an excited, frustrated, nasty boy losing his temper when Emma struggled on the bus. Had he knocked her out as she screamed and struggled?

*

By good fortune it took me only a couple of hours to trace Sharon Curtis - who had never married - via her mother who still lived at the address on the letter. I told the mother I was an old school friend who wanted to trace her daughter as we were organizing a reunion for our fortieths. The mother had already phoned her by the time I turned up on her doorstep. She studied me, looked a little puzzled but asked me in anyway. She was rather a large lady to say the least and I could not imagine anyone getting very far with her now. The tops of her arms were as wide as my thighs. She remarked how much we all change in twenty years and how many names we forget. Which form had I been in? Was I *Colin* Smith? Wasn't I starting arranging things a bit early when we all had three or more years to run before the deadly birthday?

"I wasn't in your year, Sharon. I'm around three years older than you. I've told a bit of a fib." I

handed her my copy of the letter her mother had written all those years ago. She read it, held up her palms in shock and surprise to her face and asked me if I was from the police. I shook my head.

“But how did you get hold of this letter?”

“It was sent to me. I’m trying to trace someone. Who came to your aid that day?”

“You have no right to this letter. It’s my mum’s. I’m keeping it.”

“Please do. It’s a copy. Was this one of the girls who helped you?”

I had handed her my precious photo. She blushed and shook her head. She was lying, I could tell.

“She’s Emma. I’m looking for someone who might know where she is after all these years. I’ve been abroad you see - and I’m just catching up on a few people. Writing a bit of a piece about my youth. Then this letter arrived in my lap.”

I asked her if she knew the surname of the Ben in question. She hesitated.

“Was it a boy called Gane?”

Again she hesitated. I told Sharon a lie - that her mum had said his name was Gane - and I just needed her to confirm it. She nodded slowly.

“His dad brought him round in July that year and made him apologize for what he did - and said to me at the youth club. He even started to cry. My mum was happy and left it at that. And I got a hundred pound off them.”

“And how did that feel?”

“Alright. He never bothered me again after that . He left Earlstone Upper and went to a school in Naunton, I think. He calmed down, I heard.....and grew up..... His friend Simon was alright really.”

“Can you remember Simon’s surname?”

“Hart. He ended up marrying Helen - that girl who was with me on the field. We lost contact. It’s a pity you’re not really organizing a reunion....It would be lovely to see everybody again.” Why was she trying to change the subject?

“Have you any idea where I might get hold of a photo of Ben from that time?”

She looked into her lap and shook her head. I left her my telephone number in case an idea occurred to her. Why, I wondered, had she pretended not to recognize Emma? The question preyed on my mind and I decided I would phone her later. She had received a hundred pounds from Gane. What had Ian Dewis said to me? *Gane and another boy had grabbed a fifth year girl - admittedly a bit of a tart.....A bit of a tart* How much of Sharon was up for sale? What was the going rate for principles and silence in Earlstone? As I drove home I imagined a scene between Gane Senior and the Chief Constable in the lounge at the golf club. *Let’s keep it a private matter. Ben’s been disturbed by the move up from London, leaving all his friends behind. He can’t settle in Earlstone and now he’s moving schools. He’s got in with a bad crowd. It’s all out of character. I’ll take him round to the girl’s house and make him apologize. I’ll make it up to them. You know what I mean? Now, how should I make this cheque out? Police Provident Fund?*

*

Just before I woke I found myself staring at an Edwardian mansion. Steps led up to a portico and a terrace. A white-haired woman wrapped in a blanket sat sleeping in a wheelchair. As I approached I saw it was my mother. Without opening her eyes she said “I know you’ve not come to see *me*. She’s in there....” Inside it was very gloomy. The hall floor was tiled in cream marble

and a great staircase led up to a balcony where a nurse stood leaning over a balustrade, looking down at me. It was Gwendoline, thin, dressed in a wartime uniform with a wide belt and a cap. She grimaced and told me *she* was in the back garden. The sun was warm and old people sat on the benches holding sticks. One told me with a smile that this was a nursing home now - more a private hospital. Under a blossom tree she stood, doubled up with laughter, pointing at me. The smirking boy came to her and carried her away like a dummy. I stuffed and lit my pipe. Then I was holding her. Her eyes were shut and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. I kept telling her I was sorry – until I awoke in a sweat.

The next morning I walked out again, this time much further, on past the marsh land, past the bus stop, turning right off the Stapleford road towards Bragwell. I had Emma's old address and was intrigued to see where she had grown up. On the way, on the left, standing well back from the road in a copse of evergreens stood the large house I had seen in my nightmare - a house I had driven past a thousand times without taking much notice of it. This was a cold March day and there were no wheelchairs outside. A sign announced that it was The Raw Dykes Nursing Home. The proprietors were a Mr B and a Mrs C Gane. Catherine? Christine? Were you ever violent with her too, bus-boy? I walked on.....*she was a tart, she was a flirt*. When I had seen the former written and had heard the latter said, such mean belittling of Emma had irked me. But so what if you were a flirt!? You were young, you had the whole pick of them, because you were so pretty. How many hearts did you break, besides mine? It was not your fault to be such a freak beauty in an ugly species. Had you told me you loved me - if I *had* gone into the tobacconist's when you had waved - I would not have believed it, as Othello, deep-down, could not believe that Desdemona honestly loved him. That was the true cause of the tragedy, Emma, not the lost handkerchief, not Iago - but Othello's own lack of faith in himself and hence lack of trust in her. Until your beauty had faded you would never have been safe.....I stopped and looked at the street sign.

How could her old house be such an ordinary semi-detached in such an ordinary close; such an ordinary case from which an extraordinary creature was to emerge? I imagined her playing with her dolls on the pavement and in the front garden; going out on her first dates; going off to the pictures that night after a farewell kiss for her mother. Which window had been her room? Were there secret treasures still in the garden where she had buried them all those years ago? I imagined Loveday walking gloomily up the path and knocking the front door - again - with no good news. I imagined the worry and grief pervading the gradually darkening rooms of October and November, the black-windowed desolation of December surrounded by glow and sparkle. And then when her people moved out they had taken the aura of despair with them, and the house was relieved. As a five minute act of infidelity could poison forever the lives of the betrayed, so a cruel and selfish act of violence had destroyed those lives, and their one consolation was that one day the pain - a pain more more dreadful than Emma's because of it was so prolonged - would be no more. The relatives of victims came out of courtrooms cheering and punching the air after a guilty verdict on the perpetrator. *Now, at last*, they declare to the waiting press, *now we can begin to move on and put the past behind us*. But how long before the tide of empty dejection begins to sweep in again?.....I noticed a hostile face at the lounge window, turned and walked away. As I passed the nursing home I memorised the phone number. I had a number *and* an address. I paced out the distance between the bus stop and the house. A little over a hundred yards.

The phone rang. It was Sharon. She said she felt guilty. She *had* recognized Emma's picture. "When I saw it I suddenly remembered what I've been trying all these years not to think about. If you've been abroad you wouldn't know. Emma disappeared the same year that I was molested." "And you thought Ben might have something to do with it?" "No, not *thought*. Just a feeling. It was just how *nasty* he'd been - and the look in his glassy eyes. Scary. Well, now you know." "Sharon, do you know where I can find Simon Hart?" "Yes. Earslton cemetery. He died in 1985." "Why didn't you tell me? How did he die?" "He fell off a scaffold in Naunton. Broke his neck. Had only had the job three days. They were building a multi-storey car park in a shopping development. My friend Helen was devastated. And she'd been thinking how lucky they'd been - him losing a job in a factory one day, and getting a job as site foreman the next." "A shopping development?" "Yes.....The Gane Centre."

*

The caller's voice was familiar. He asked me who he was speaking to and I was cautious. Who wanted to know? "You put an advert in my paper. Two or three Fridays ago. I'm looking at it now. And you phoned me from a call box to ask about the Robinson girl. It *was* you, wasn't it? A Jacob Prince? There's no point denying it....a little bird told me you were taken in for questioning the other day. I *am* right, aren't I?" I asked him with a sinking heart if he intended to run a story on it. He was non-committal. This call from the editor was the last thing I had expected. I cursed the corrupt bastard at the station who had leaked this to the paper. I needed to think my strategy through. I promised him I would call back in an hour.

If the officer responsible for the leak would sell information to the paper, then he would be likely to sell it to other interested parties, such as a prominent local businessman. It was not unknown for rich, powerful people to have private ways and means to enforce their will and - if necessary - to silence their enemies. To give Gane's name to the police - as I had been considering - was now utterly out of the question. Perhaps I was being paranoid, but I preferred to be paranoid and alive than naïve and dead. Like Simon Hart. Maybe.

A number of people had already noticed my advert and reacted to it. If the murderer was Gane - or indeed someone else who was still local - the odds were that it would - or had - come to their notice too. If so, he might write me off as a crank or an innocent - literally - an innocent from abroad looking up an old flame - a disguise I had already used. I might then be ignored as someone who had not a clue about his identity. If the editor printed the news of my arrest, the report would further reassure him that the police were a million miles off target. But how welcome would the re-opening of media and public interest in the case be to him? Emma's photo would reappear on the front page; buried facts would be exhumed. Apart from the unease of such a dreadful episode being re-run - and I had to credit the culprit with at least a modicum of conscience, especially if her death had been an accident - there would be a real

danger that someone's memory would be jogged or the conscience stirred of someone who ought to have, but who had not come forward at the time. Maybe the girl sexually assaulted by Gane on the field - perhaps there were also others - would be emboldened in their more mature years to lift the phone. If the other boy on the bus had not been Simon Hart, how had his silence been guaranteed since 1971? Was theirs a pact of silence of equals? Or was the other boy, like Simon on the school field, less of a participant and more of a reluctant semi-observer? How reliable was he now in his late thirties? Might the murderer become vulnerable to blackmail?

I decided that the revisiting of the case would be wholly unwelcome to Gane. But I had no proof whatsoever he was the murderer. To name him to the editor would be slanderous - and at this stage unethical. He might be a nasty slime ball but so were many people who had nothing to do with Emma. The editor could not and would not print such an allegation, so to give the name to him was pointless. Should I tell him merely that I had a person in mind? If he printed that then I would be whisked off to the police station, the suspect would get hold of my co-ordinates and I would probably disappear. The whole affair was threatening to spiral into a whirlwind beyond my control.

To phone the editor back with a terse "no comment" was also a poor option. If it was an uneventful news week, then something like this below might appear the following Friday: *A thirty-nine year old Earlstone man has been questioned about the disappearance of Bragwell girl Emma Robinson in 1971. He was later released without charge. Asked if the case had been reopened, a police spokesperson stated that it had never been closed. Would my name appear? And the photo I had supplied?*

I went out for a walk and thought and thought some more. The strategy I eventually came up with was very far from ideal. I took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

"I need to talk through with you all the circumstances of the case. I have quite innocently put my foot into a wasps' nest. If you go ahead and print now what you have - which, believe me, compared to what there might be is very little - you will jeopardize what could be the biggest story of your career. Let me tell you now - if you do go ahead and print that chickenfeed, you will never get another word out of me - and Emma's murderer will probably never face justice. And you will almost certainly put me in danger."

In the long silence I could almost hear him thinking. He asked me to come in to the offices and I told him I would never do that. If I spoke to him, it would have to be entirely off the record.

"Do you swim?" I asked.

"Why?"

"We could talk in the poolside café at The Watling Hotel. I'm a member. No notebooks, no hidden tape recorder. Just our swimming trunks. They are my terms. Take them or leave them."

*

In Martine, her younger sister, I could see Emma. She had dark brown hair, curled at the ends, and the same shape to her eyes, but any previous sparkle they might have had had dulled. She dangled a spastic arm and also walked with difficulty. I had managed to persuade her over the phone - she being the third of seven Boyles I had found in the phone directory - that I was genuine and might have a new clue. She asked me if my name was Prince - the man mentioned by the policeman who had called. She wanted to know if I had put that *bloody* advert in. I assured her my intention was not malicious and that she had nothing to fear or lose by seeing me

- of course with her husband or her partner present, if she wished. Still she hesitated but when I told her I had kind of fallen in love with Emma from a distance and had the deepest respect for her, she had melted and - with a whimper - had agreed to see me.

Their budgerigar whistled and clawed at the bars of her cage. A ginger cat on a cushion with eyes tight shut appeared to take absolutely no notice of it whatsoever. Martine, a small woman, diminished even more by the huge armchair she sat in, began to pass me photographs she had in a chocolate box aslant on her lap. In thirty snapshots of her short life I watched Emma grow more sturdy, more bashful, then more knowing and ever more beautiful - until in the final one she was playing the flute on stage in a lovely black gown with a white flower pinned in her hair. I noticed the cat take a rapid peek at the bird and resume its innocent posture. Martine pressed the key on the tape recorder and I heard Emma play her flute so effortlessly and melodiously I could hardly bear it. Then she sang an aria. She sang so sweetly I could hold back my tears no longer.

“Now you can begin to see what a loss she was to us all. You asked me whether she had enemies. Of course she did. Stupid, spiteful, jealous people....there was one girl who gave her a particularly hard time when she was in the fifth form, kept tripping her up in the corridor. I told her to complain - but you know what she said? Compared to me, she had nothing to complain of. Amongst the few intelligent people in the school she was well loved. She was always cheerful, kind and funny. And modest. But above everything else always very kind.”

“Were there any boys who disliked her?”

“A few - the ones she wouldn't go out with. But as for *disliking*....Nobody threatened her or scared her.....Not that she told me about anyway - and we told each other everything.”

“Did she mention a nasty incident on the school field in the summer of 71? About a girl being molested? On a Sports Day?”

This appeared to trigger a memory long buried. She thought it over. Eventually she said that Emma had been one of a group of friends who had gone to the aid of a girl whose dress had been torn off - but in which year she could not say.

“Did she mention the name of the lad who did it?”

”She might have done at the time but I can't remember.”

“It wasn't a boy called Ben?”

She could not remember. Loveday had asked her about any enemies at school a year after she had vanished but she said she and her mother had given him a good tongue-lashing.

“We told him to go and find the bastard in the van who had kidnapped her. My mam shouted at him *How could it be a schoolkid?* Afterwards she felt really sorry. Poor old Loveday. He was a good man. He started out full of confidence.....in the end he was....”

I waited until her gaze returned from the wall where she was watching an image, no doubt, of a broken detective walking down the garden path.

“Martine. You said a *year* after? Are you sure it was a year after when Loveday asked?”

“It was September or October 72 . I know because it was just after the first anniversary.”

She began to talk of how she dreaded the approach of the autumn each year, but after a while stopped and looked at me with coolness.

“You're not listening to me. I think it's time you went. I'm tired.”

“I'm really sorry, but I was just wondering why it took Loveday so long to get around to asking you about her squabbles and such, with other teenagers.”

A distant voice in my head - it was eerie - supplied an answer: Loveday had been given the Curtis letter by another officer.

“He was clutching at straws. Run out of ideas. I only remember seeing him once after that. He brought round some flowers one anniversary and apologized to my mam. He told her he would never stop thinking about Emma and one day would find the man who did it. She was lucky. Went senile. She thinks I’m Emma and has forgotten I exist. I pretend - I pretend *I am.....*” She cried very briefly and stopped.

“We couldn’t stay in the old house. When we moved, Mam set up Emma’s bedroom exactly as it had been the night she went. It’s still the same. I couldn’t have children. I’m thirty-five. Emma will always be eighteen. Now she’s my child.....”

What she said then surprised me somewhat. She wanted the murderer to confess but not so that he could be punished. The desire for crude revenge had faded.

“He must be tormented by it, however well off or happily married he might be. No. I just want to reclaim Emma as my older sister. Have her in a grave I can go to and take her flowers and talk to her. How many secrets have died with their people? Maybe there’s a place all the secrets go to... like the mind of God. The thought that Emma will lie out there - a tiny secret speck in the landscape and never recoverable - makes me feel physically sick. If the murderer dies so, in a way, does Emma again. Do you understand? How little we really know. Perhaps I should put an advert in the paper like you. *Please send word where Emma is.*”

“Why don’t you ask the editor to ask that very thing - as a feature?”

Her sad, scornful laugh made me blush. Did I *really* think it would work?

“Would he want her dug up and clues he might have left behind discovered? Get real! No way. It’s been nineteen years and the pain has never diminished. We’re as much prisoners of this as Emma is of the earth holding *her*. I just hope the bast- I just hope whoever it was does have a conscience - gripping *him*.”

“Martine. Was Emma as intelligent as you?”

A middle-aged man appeared in the doorway. Martine introduced him as Rodney, her partner. He was easily ten years older than her and clearly had a pastoral, caring role - in more ways than one as I was about to discover. As soon as he spoke I recognized that quiet, serene voice heard in the background of our first telephone conversation. He put a steady hand on her shoulder to comfort her, closed his eyes and whispered a prayer for understanding and forgiveness. I felt intrusive and rose to go but his steady gaze made me sit back down.

“No, Mr Prince, I wish you to hear this too, whatever your persuasion.”

He prayed for those who loved and missed Emma, and prayed for her killer, for a change in his heart, for his confession of guilt and for him to plea for forgiveness. I found myself completely moved - and riven by the conflict of emotions his words inspired. Martine told me as she limped with me to the door that Rodney was a lay-preacher who had rescued her from utter despair after she had attempted suicide by overdose.

“You don’t blame God for what happened to your sister?”

“Of course not - nor for my crippled body. He’s a much more subtle God than that. I know now Emma is with Him. But this side of death things need to be....*put right*. But now Loveday is dead, I don’t know how and I don’t know who. It’s a pity about your new clue - like all the others. But I shall never give up hoping.”

I drove home. Could a loving God allow Emma to remain a secret forgotten as the years rolled on? As I passed the cemetery I thought of those in churches below slabs worn smooth and illegible by a million footsteps and of all those beneath soft headstones eroded by weather and eaten by lichen, dead men and women fading away into oblivion; not to mention the forgotten

millions from centuries and centuries previous. By the end of the world only a fraction of those who will have lived will be remembered.

Depressed and with a sinking feeling I went to bed. Life and death were meaningless. *I* mattered to no-one. I was a secret too in all but name, and fame would be mine only if I was accused of Emma's murder. What a cruel, vicious stupid irony that would be. I woke in the night with a stronger determination. I felt my futile life could be transformed by the distant influence of Emma into something meaningful. I would make Gane reveal where the body was. And *I* would punish him, if he refused. If things mattered at all, it was NOW that they mattered. OK - Gane might have been a thoroughly mixed-up teenager and he might not have intended to kill Emma - as he had not intended the Sharon episode to go as far as it had. He was like a beast who had scented blood and lost control. If it had been an accident - a blow to the head too hard, a grip on her lovely throat too tight or an unsuspected heart defect in Emma triggered by the stress of the attack - if he confessed, if he apologized, if he revealed, sobbing - as he had sobbed at Sharon's house under the stern eye of his own father - the location of Emma's grave, he would doubtless serve a shortish prison term and healing on all sides could begin.

But how accidental had Simon Hart's headlong fall on Gane's construction site been?

I thought hard. Where *would* Gane's young face be on record? Had he been a member of a club? A new boy in town, friendless, might well have joined some association. I had a brainwave. The carnival. Compared to the half-hearted short procession it was now, Earlstone carnival had been a great local event in the seventies. All the clubs and chapels and hosiery and knitwear factories - since defunct - had entered a float on the back of a lorry. If Gane had been photographed on one then might he be in the Gazette archive?

The meeting with the editor did not last very long. He did not feel comfortable in trunks being rather flabby for a man in his mid-thirties. It was a Monday morning and apart from a middle-aged couple we were alone. He said he felt ridiculous, climbing out of the chilly water, after we had done a couple of lengths I had insisted on. He wrapped his towel around himself and grimaced. Did we really have to go to such lengths? Did I really think he had a tape recorder in his crotch?

"Come on. Let's get straight to the point. I've got to be back at the office in an hour."

I told him I had been the last person to see Emma Robinson alive, but I had an alibi. I told him of the nasty bus-boy, and that it looked almost certain that he was a violent teenager who had since transformed himself into a prominent, respectable businessman. The editor stopped shivering.

"I can't tell you who. I might have it completely wrong. That's why I need your help. Then it's your big story."

"If you're wrong, it won't matter. I won't print it and I won't breathe a word. Who is it?"

"Sorry. I don't trust journalists. *You* aren't above accepting leaks from the bloody police about *me*. I think I might have a way of forcing Mr X into the open. Should I meet with a tragic accident you can have all my notes. Someone I trust will send you a letter telling you where they are, giving you permission above my signature to have them. Mr X will know all that, but I won't mention you are the beneficiary."

"Oh that is very kind of you...as you must have noticed, I'm not a good swimmer and with a great rock tied to my ankle I doubt if I could get out of Earlstone canal. Why don't you just go to the police, for goodness sake? All this cloak and dagger..."

"I trust the police even less than you. It's a cert that Mr X has friends there who would surely

alert him.”

“So I’m just to sit on it and wait till you disappear?”

“No. You can help me. I need to see a photo of this guy when he was eighteen. He must have been in some sort of club.”

“I’m putting my shirt on now. I’m freezing.”

He covered up his beer tits and relaxed. I mentioned the carnival. He told me I was welcome to talk to Jim, their senior photographer who had recorded Earlstone life since the sixties.

“If anyone can help you, it’s Jim. But there’s one condition - if you find a picture, you’ll tell me.”

This was such a foolish bargain that I readily agreed and that afternoon I found myself with Big Jim Doyle surveying rows of cabinets reminding me of a sixties computer array. He told me he had photographed every float in every carnival since it had begun in 1967. He started me off with folders from 1971 - 73. I began all eagerness, but gradually my optimism waned and finally expired. There were many boys who had dark hair but my bus-boy was not amongst them. There were floats of football clubs, the tennis club, squash, archery etc, etc, and chapels but he was not there. I even studied the factory floats though I knew such a rich, pampered boy would never have to work for his pocket money on a Saturday as I had had to do when in the sixth form. Even if he had been a member of those clubs any illness or engagement could have kept him away on the day. I told Jim I could not find what I wanted and went to go. Jim asked me to tell him who I was looking for. I smiled, thanked him and left.

Sharon phoned me late that afternoon. She was excited. She had a really good idea. *She* would organize a reunion. I told her politely and dejectedly that it sounded a nice idea, but I would not come, not knowing anyone.

“No. You’re not getting what I’m driving at! You wanted a photo of Ben Gane. Well, if you put an advert in the Gazette and ask everybody in the first year sixth from 70 - 71 to send you a photo to display on a big board at the reunion, then he just might!”

I told Sharon she was a genius. When she had gone I gave it more thought and realised there was no need to put in an advert. I typed out the following:

Dear

Soon we will be forty! I am organizing a school reunion to take place in September 1994, the month we all began at Earlstone Upper, at a venue yet to be decided. A key feature will be a large display board entitled THE WAY WE WERE and I need photographs of us all at that tender age.

Please send me yours to the above address and confirm you will be able and willing to come. Please copy this and sent it to people you have stayed in touch with - it won’t matter if friends receive more than one letter.

More information to follow.

With a blue pen I wrote in *Ben* after Dear. Whose address should be at the top, mine or Sharon’s? In the end I signed it Sharon Curtis, wrote in her address, sealed it in an envelope and

posted it to the nursing home on the Bragwell Road. I reasoned that the idea seemed more probably the work of a feminine than a masculine mind. And I wanted there to be no chance of giving anything away about my identity and location, in view of what I was planning to do.

BOX 7

The seventh box contained copies of statements from those who had been denounced by their enemies and neighbours. But there were many more from various peeping toms, flashers and petty perverts. Most had alibis and I sensed that Loveday had simply been covering all the bases and had not seriously suspected anyone amongst them to be his man. I read very carefully a statement taken from a convicted rapist who lived in Earlthorpe. He did not drive a car of any description, was in his late forties and had a very good alibi for that night - he had been in Casualty in Naunton with a very bad gash from a power tool and had returned home at ten. No-one could vouch for him after that - he lived alone - but it seemed dubious that a traumatised man would go out again before eleven on a foul night into Earlstone and be capable of abducting a wriggling teenager. And he did not fit the bill. His rape conviction was for going further on a date than a thirty-two year old woman had wanted, an assertion which he had adamantly contested.

Two paedophiles had been interviewed, one of whom had declared that eighteen was well out of his age-range. The other specialised only in fair-haired boys. I had closed box seven and was opening eight when my phone rang. It was Jim Doyle from the Gazette. The editor had had a word with him and he had had an idea.

“He said you were looking for someone from a sports club. Why didn’t you say? My brother had a photography studio and he did all sorts of photos - passport, portraits, weddings - but he also did all the sports clubs every year. When he took ill he gave me access to all his public stuff for our archive. Every so often - if we have a gap to fill on page nine or ten - we print old photos of teams, clubs and gatherings along the lines of *Are you on this photo? Who’s the bloke third from the left on row two?* Nostalgia stuff, and all that jazz - you know.”

“And?”

“Well if you want to come in tomorrow you can have a browse through 71-73 - and all the seventies, for that matter. If your friend’s not there, well you’d have to conclude he wasn’t a joiner.”

I went in as arranged. Jim left me to take a leak and I spread out all the photos he had put in a stack. There were a good forty of them. Straightway I went very cold. There he was, smiling at me now - not smirking - but smiling pleasantly with a toothy grin, holding a tennis racket, amongst twenty or so other boys and girls. Earlstone Junior Tennis Club, second row, third from the left next to a very radiant blonde who seemed to have no qualms about his proximity. I checked the name-key at the bottom. *Ben Gane*. I heard a distant flush and the rattle of a lock. The photo was in my inside pocket before Jim returned. I spent another quarter of an hour shaking my head over the rest and other photos from later files, had a quick, despondent word with the editor, promised to be in touch and left.

I phoned Sharon but there was no reply. I wanted to tell her what I had done about the reunion idea, hoping she would not mind me using her as a PO box. I phoned Ian Dewis and arranged to go round. But first I needed to put him off the scent - he was the last person I wanted blundering into my plan. So I photocopied the picture, put the original in my own blue box file and guillotined off the name-key on the copy.

“That’s him! That’s Gane!” he shouted, grabbing the photocopy as soon as I took it out. “I’d forgotten the snooty bastard played tennis!”

Fortunately, there was another dark-haired lad on the top row who looked a little like him.

“Somebody told me he was a big tennis fan” I explained “So I went to the club on an off-chance and got the old club secretary’s details. She had all the old photos and records. She remembered the name *Gane* but she couldn’t say which of these two it was. Him at the top - or him below. The one at the top rings a real bell.”

Dewis had turned pale with anger. He demanded to know what game I was playing. Why was I pretending, he shouted, when I knew full well which one was Gane?

I shrugged and said. “Why do you think I’ve come round to ask you? If you’re saying *that one’s* Gane, then he’s not the one I saw. Face is too long. The lad on the bus had a rounder face. Like him at the back. Well. That’s that then.”

He snatched the photo back and crumpled it. I told him I understood how he felt.

“But you can’t make me say the culprit is a guy you loathe, if it’s *not* him! I don’t know Ben Gane from Adam - I have no axe to grind. He’s not the man, and that’s that!”

I was glad to leave him. I was sure he would have gone straight round and killed Gane, had I confirmed his identity. I was relieved I had checked Dewis - but thought that he might be useful in a dire emergency.

*

“I don’t think you’re Emma’s murderer, Mr Prince for one minute” rasped DS Peach as he lit a cigarette in the welcome absence of his upholstered superior. “But there’s stuff you’re not telling us.”

He picked up a statement and blew smoke at it. “And your alibi is crap - *My brother told me ‘That twat just gave me the V - I’m going to bash their brains in.’ I had to hold onto him so that he couldn’t go racing after the bus which had stopped at the lights. He calmed down and we walked off home, getting a bag of chips on Coventry Road.*” Our Loughborough colleagues said your brother was a pissed as a rat. They asked him if you’d been in contact to discuss the alibi and he said you had. It’s all noted here. This is a piece of shit.”

“Well, if you reckon my story is so dubious, charge me. Anyway, he didn’t grab hold of me and I didn’t run after the bus.....”

“How sober were *you* that night? How many pints had you had? If I get really plastered there are quite a few things I forget I did.”

I reminded him that I had accepted an invitation this time to be interviewed informally and could leave at any time - and that I was on the point of exercising that right if I had only been asked in to be told what I already knew - that my younger brother Neil was an unreliable alcoholic.

“Anyway, if you reckon, as you should, that I am entirely innocent, why are you questioning my version of events? And if I really did run after that bus, who’s to say I didn’t get on? Maybe I am the murderer. And I’ve buried it all in the moraine of my subconscious.”

Peach did not smile as I thought he would. He scowled. He told me he did not like me.

“You think you’re really fucking clever *Mr Prince*, don’t you. *Poor old Peachy here with his grade 5 CSES can’t understand words like moraine*, you’re fink-ing. Believe me, Prince. If you were the bastard who killed Emma, I would have you on fucking toast.”

At his elbow sat Puddephat, all rosy and clean-shaven, elevated since our last meeting to a DC. DS Peach was obviously trying to impress him with his crappy old hard-cop ploy. I almost

blushed at its crappiness. He swang back on his chair and drummed the table with two rapid fingers. This was the signal for Puddephat to make the running.

“Mr Prince, did you visit a thirty-seven year old Earlstone female by the name of Sharon Curtis three days ago - on March 18th?”

Now this really did throw me and the skeletal Peach even allowed himself a grim smile at my discomfort. Had she told the police about her mother’s letter after all? Would I have to surrender my archive?

“Her mother said a male phoned her - phoned the *mother* that is - about discussing a school reunion with Sharon, and so wanted her address. I contend that caller was you, Mr Prince.”

“Why?”

“She said he did not sound like an Earlstone man, sounded educated....and had a slight stutter.....You.”

Peach suddenly swang forward, jabbing his finger at the tape machine. They could play the mother my previous interview tape, he growled, to clear up any *misunderstanding* about what an *educated* man sounded like.

“OK. I went round. So what?”

“Why? To discuss a reunion? You’re two or three years older. What are you hiding from us? What did you discuss with her?”

“Why don’t you go and ask *her*?”

But I was all bluster. The game was surely up. Checkmate next move. Peach started a new smoke, inhaled deeply and to our surprise - and his - did not cough.

“We’d love to, Mr Prince” he said, badly concealing a gloat “But she’s gone missing. Her partner came home last night and found the table set...dinner in the oven - but no Sharon. A bit like that ship - the Marie Wotsit....No *Dear John* letter. Oh, and there here was a strange smell in the air - like TCP he said.”

I calculated. My letter “from her” would have arrived on Gane’s mat that same day. Oh God. What had I done? A few more questions were posed by Peach and on one front at least I felt relief. The old letter I had left with Sharon had evidently not been discovered. I was asked to account for my movements over the previous three days and I felt no anxiety about lying that due to the cold and wet I had stayed at home. A person gone missing is not a crime.

“You can shed no light on why - or where she may have gone?” asked Peach.

“Were you and she romantically involved?” asked Puddephat.

“Emphatically NO to all three questions. I - I honestly thought she was a Sharon I had known in the sixth form. I bumped into a old mate called Ian Dewis and we got talking about a whole sixth form reunion. I’ll give you his number and you can phone him if you like.”

The bluff seemed to work. They did not ask for the number.

I drove home in a rising panic. That distant voice which often sounded so real in my head suddenly said a terrible word. *Blackmail*. I was thrown back onto my initial assessment of Sharon in her needy surroundings. How else was her sudden disappearance to be explained? Would she leave without a note, with food cooking in the oven? I could envisage her phoning Gane anonymously and making her accusations and asking for money. Had she indeed phoned him the very morning “her” letter had arrived bearing her address?

At that point I almost came off the road. The letter. Who had it now? What had Sharon said about me? She had written down my name and phone number. My address was in the directory.

The moment I got home I threw some clothes into a case and hurled bedding into the boot of the car. I phoned Gwendoline. As I think I mentioned before, her new bloke was a builder and renovator of old properties. I told her I needed a favour - did Rich have a place vacant, part or fully furnished? I basically needed a bed. She said she would ask him when he came in. I felt strangely comforted to be hearing her asthmatic, breathless whine from an electronic distance. I tried to imagine her as the gorgeous woman I had fallen for - but could not. Did most relationships end secretly with a sense of relief on the part of the surviving partner - whose depression due to the awful condition - mental, spiritual or physical - of their mate of thirty, forty, fifty or sixty years on from the initial infatuation had cancelled out love? Did the old face obscure the young one? I thought of Emma's cracked school photograph. Her beauty and charm could never deteriorate in my mind. I thought then for no clear reason of Sharon's young breasts exposed on a sunny June day - and of her wobbly upper arms in a shabby Earlstone semi-detached house which had smelt on a chilly day in March of salty gravy.....

Gwendoline was complaining. The rasp in her voice put me in mind of Peach. She reminded me that I had not seen Rachael in weeks and that she was missing me. Missing me? I thought of the last time we had got together and I had mistakenly tried to interest her in a walk around a local reservoir to see the wildfowl. Only the ice-cream van at the end had rallied her.

"You said you'd sort out a Sunday in March. When then?"

"Gwen. It can't be this Sunday. I'm in a bit of a fix to be honest. Can you phone me as soon as Richard gets in? I'll pay good money for a flat."

"So what's wrong with your new place?"

"My new neighbour - I've had a big row with her for playing reggae all hours. She's threatened to get her bloke to work me over. I just need a time-out till the council people go round to talk some sense into her. I can't work or sleep here anymore. I might even put the house up for sale and have done with it."

Richard did have a flat to let just on the edge of Earlstone town centre at a reasonable price - *as a favour* to me - *for shagging your chubby wife* he might have added. *Kindly fart and give me a bit of a clue.....* Richard met me there and gave me the key. He said it was not all that special but for me it was ideal. I begged him to tell no-one I had moved there.

"I told Gwen a little fib. It's not because of a neighbour problem. I'm trying to shake off a woman who's pestering me. She imagines she's in love with me."

He smiled and pulled at the skinny bag below his eye. He promised to keep that to himself and went on his way.

If my blackmail insight was correct, then the very thing I wished to avoid - Gane becoming aware of me and of what I knew - had already come about. A terrified Sharon would give him a vague description of me, but he would never connect me to the young man he had given the V to, even if he remembered doing it. Who on earth would he think I was? The immediate worry for me now was how the police would react to my disappearance. It might confirm Sharon had pre-arranged a romantic flit with me, but more probably they would suspect foul play. There would be publicity. Gane would see my photo. It might trigger a memory of a windy autumn night. So it was vital I laid low for a while. I phoned the station and asked for Puddephat. I told him my uncle in France was ill (he did have angina.)

"Out of courtesy to you I'm telling you I shall be away for about ten days - possibly longer - just in case you go jumping to the wrong conclusions - when next you knock down my door! Have

you got a pencil to take down the address and phone number?"

I phoned my uncle and told him the police might be in touch and that he was to say I had just gone to the shops. He asked if I was in any trouble. Yes I was, but it was nothing I could not handle myself. He agreed to vouch for me. I put down the phone. Lies were spinning out of me like a spider's silk. How could the web not collapse?

The day after next was Saturday. A billboard had told me that Earlstone United were at home. That night I worked on my first letter to Ben Gane.

Ben Gane,

Cast your mind back to a windy night in September 1971. It is the 16th. You are on the upper deck of the Coventry to Leicester bus. After a night out in Naunton? Maybe there had been an event at your new school. Remember? A lovely girl you have always fancied but resent - because she shopped you over a sexual assault in June that year - a lovely girl with curly brown hair gets on, comes upstairs and encounters you and Simon Hart. Is it all coming back to you? You might have had a drink or two in The Bricklayers. The bus is late because a lady has fallen on the stairs. Anyway, you grab the pretty girl. Remember her name?

What is my name? Has Sharon - the girl on the field - told you between her terrified sobs? You might have some idea of what I look like..... But where am I? Not where you might think... How do I know all this? By the strangest set of circumstances..... What else do I know? Second instalment coming soon..... Where will I be after today? I've never been down to the Watling Stadium. Time I had a look. I will be in the stand opposite the Directors' Box, but not to watch the game (I'm not much a fan) ...but to watch you squirming.

I loathed you that windy night and would have gladly wrung your slender neck. Perhaps you recall me now. I had half-persuaded myself to give you the benefit of the doubt because of your age in 1971. Then I found out about Simon and now Sharon. So it is time you suffered, time for you to wake up in the night in a blind panic wondering what else I know and what I'm going to do.

The next time somebody you know better will be in touch to take up the story. Until then.....Sleep well. Sweet dreams.

As I finally let go of the letter and heard it smack against its neighbour in the pillar box a terrible fear ran through me. Part of me delayed my return to the flat, wanting really badly to retrieve the envelope and go my quiet ways. That part of me would not let me rest that afternoon, urging me to tell Puddephat about Gane. He seemed to be a man I could confide in and rely on. Many times I lifted the phone and twice dialled the number. Once I repacked my suitcase. I stood irresolute at the window. It was an old-fashioned April day. Rain spattered the pane and then the sun turned the droplets into gems. Even the roofs of the town were briefly transformed into a magical landscape before reassuming their squat dreariness. I was above a boarded-up newsagent's with a private flight of steps at the back. No-one passing suspected the flat was occupied or that there even was a flat. Only Rich knew I was here. My car was behind tall wooden gates in the back yard. I began to relax. I was safe.

The next morning I thought of the old policeman pointing with his stick at the cream and green

marble chess set on the low table. I had made my daring move and had taken my shaking hand away. I imagined Gane opening the envelope, whistling perhaps....then staring in shock and amazement at the contents...perhaps the photocopy of the tennis team had fallen out onto the floor.....picking it up he saw his young face, circled in red biro, smiling back at his current one, aghast. Was he pacing the floor as I stood eating toast and looking at the ever-changing set of the street below? Perhaps he was staring back into that distant night, trying to spot me in the wet, windswept street - the street which I could just see now from my window. He had taken another huge risk with Sharon and had been convinced his secret was permanently drowned or buried with her. Like Emma. And now this! Yet another head of the hydra had grown.

Perhaps your wife and your staff cannot understand why you're so touchy today, Gane. If I'm in danger of losing control of events, so are you. To that extent we're in the same boat.

That night my voice woke me. *Chloroform!* The chemistry store had been broken into and acid taken. Had Gane stolen chloroform too? Was *that* how he had silenced Emma? "*There here was a strange smell in the air - like TCP.*" Had Sharon likewise succumbed?

*

It took me about half-an-hour to walk along the Coventry Rd to the Watling Stadium. It was sunny but chilly and I had put on plenty of clothes. Outside the ground I bought a red and white scarf to tie around my mouth and chin. There was an impressive silver limousine in the car park with a customised plate 2G ANE. Short queues were forming at the turnstiles with fifteen minutes to go before kick-off. It was a minor league match against a team I had never heard of. I asked a steward where the directors' box was and walked off in the opposite direction of that quarter. I asked for a ticket in the corner from where I would be able to observe Gane in semi-profile. The stadium could seat around four thousand people but there were at best eight hundred inside. The teams came out to an unrousing cheer. The sun was in my eyes and my cupped palms were an ideal hide for the tiny binoculars I had brought along to observe Gane without attracting his attention. I took out the photo I had clipped from Dewis's Gazette to make absolutely sure I was looking at the right man. I saw figures enter the box and cupped my hands around my eyes. As soon as these directors, worthies and guests had settled down, in at last sauntered Gane to take his place in their midst, the most important figure on the board. He truly did seem quite invulnerable. The difference between this Gane and the younger version was quite marked. This one wore glasses which subdued the impact of those fishy eyes. The goofy teeth had been fixed. The sleek black hair had dulled and thinned. Next to him sat a very glamorous blonde. His wife? Looks follow the money. What, I wondered, did she tolerate in him for the sake of the lifestyle and status? What did he tolerate in her to possess and parade such a high-class beauty? She looked bored, as well she might. Where had I seen the woman in the fur who sat directly behind him, who occasionally leant forward to speak? When someone we vaguely know is placed out of their context it can be puzzling. I watched those fish eyes keep straying from the action on the pitch to survey the stand opposite him, and I tried to imagine his private thoughts, while he tried to identify possible candidates as his tormentor. Once he seemed to stare straight at me but it was an illusion. If a neighbour spoke to him, he posted a grim smile around his mouth but his eyes remained fixed. I saw a slender, manicured hand reach from behind to touch his shoulder, causing him to turn and smile. He turned back and the smile gave way to the glassy stare again.

He was not looking at the match but into himself. What at, I wondered? Then, when Earlstone scored, and his upper arm was grabbed in joy by someone, he appeared to snap out of a reverie to force a cheer. By half-time I had seen enough to gauge the turmoil my letter had caused within him. I scrawled a note in capital letters

ENJOYING THE GAME? YOU LOOK WORRIED BEN. SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?
CRACKING BLONDE! YOUR MRS?

I persuaded a steward to open the gate and let me out. I tucked the note behind his windscreen wiper and walked off. Who was that bloody woman behind him? Where had I been where I could have seen her? The pub? The library?

I was within a few yards of my new flat, pulling the scarf up to cover half of my face when the answer stopped me in my tracks. The bloody police station! The face reacquired its bolstered shoulders and spoke in that sickly-sweet pseudo-sympathetic voice which reminded me of Margaret Thatcher. Any thoughts of confiding in any police officer vanished on the spot. I phoned Martine and asked if I could come round. She agreed.

*

“I’ve seen a way to make Emma’s killer tell you where she is buried. It might not work but there again, it just might. You know we talked about putting an appeal in the paper?”

“Oh, come on! There will be clues leading to him down there with her. He wouldn’t dare!”

“After twenty years? There will surely be no surviving DNA from the killer - such as trapped that rapist from Narborough a few years ago. You heard about that?”

“Yes - of course. But he might have dropped an object which would lead the police to him.”

“I bet he was really careful not to. After all, he had no idea she wouldn’t be found in days or weeks. Look, I understand your scepticism but it’s worth a try. The editor would go for it. It’s nearly twenty years - new publicity might jog a memory or a conscience and bring forward a new witness. If you don’t give it a try, you’ll never know. At least you can tell yourself - and Emma - you made one last effort.”

Rodney had listened. He was not sure whether the pain of it would be too much for Martine. She turned on him and said that it was not the pain - or the probable disappointment - which bothered her - but the *point* of doing it. I could hardly tell her about Gane and my campaign - she would surely have gone straight to the police. What could I say to sway her?

“When Rodney prayed for you the last time I came, I admit I was more than sceptical. But the strangest thing happened. I woke up that same night in a sweat and a voice was telling me to come and see you again. And I just feel certain that this is the right course of action.”

Evangelists love a convert. Rodney took my hand and his eyes shone with an admiration almost equal to my show of sincerity. But I had lied for a good cause. And it did the trick. She left it to me to contact the editor.

On Monday I phoned the Gazette.

“You still want your story about Emma Robinson?”

“Oh, it’s you! I thought you might be weighted down at the bottom of Earlstone canal, it’s been such a while!”

I thought of Sharon and went to mention her but stopped myself in time. I gave him Martine’s

details, assured him she was keen to speak to his reporter about Emma and left it with him. I had a bigger fish to fry.

I walked up to the door of Raw Dykes House and rang the bell. A face peered around a partition wall and pressed a buzzer to allow me in. I told the receptionist I wanted to see the proprietor about the possible admission of my mother to the home.

“You really ought to have phoned for an appointment, but if you take a seat I’ll see if Mrs Campion can come down and see you.”

“I wanted to speak to Mr or Mrs Gane ideally. Their names *are* on the board at the entrance.”

“Mr Gane rarely visits - and Mrs Gane is....” she lowered her voice “No longer....*on the scene*.....”

“Really? Is she in the garden?”

She appeared not to hear this as she was busy phoning Mrs Campion.

“Who shall I say?” she asked.

“Mr Scott.”

I sat down in the lobby. I expected to smell a mixture of salty gravy, medicines and urine, but the air was fresh and fragrant. Gerald Campion was the name of the actor who had played the role of Billy Bunter and irrationally I expected a wide, matronly type to come waddling down the stairs and was astonished when a pair of long, shapely legs in a pencil skirt descended, and a very pretty brunette in her thirties gave me a frank, charming smile and took my hand. Her eyes were as dark brown as her long hair and they shone with pleasure to observe the admiration in mine. She asked me how she could help and I stuttered. She was not English and had said a few words when I could not stop myself interrupting her.

“Vous êtes française, Madame Campion?”

“Non.....Suisse.Et vous?”

“Anglais.”

I began to tell her in French what I had called about, when she asked me politely if I minded speaking English. It was the adopted tongue of her adopted country.

“Is your mother not able to come along today?” she asked as we started our tour on the landing. I told her she had fallen and cracked her collar bone.

“That’s why I’m looking. She’s so unsteady on her feet now - she needs care when she comes out of hospital.”

“Is she - er - *mentally*.....”

“Oh, as sound as a pound!These day rooms are lovely. She would love it here.”

“The section further down the corridor is for those who have dementia. They need special care.” She smiled and asked if I had seen enough. Perhaps I would like to see a bedroom?

“They are on the second floor but we have a lift.”

We took the stairs instead and she showed me into a room which was not currently occupied.

The lady there had sadly died. The view across the back garden into the fields and woods towards Bradgate Park and Leicester was very special. Trees everywhere were coming into leaf, including the apple tree in the garden.

“I am told it is beautiful on the back in the summer. There are swinging.....*seats*, you know...I have only been in charge since January, you see....since my husband returned to Scotland. I love this view. So open - not like the mountains - all closed in.....Would you like to see the garden?..... Oh, do you like this room?”

I told her I really wanted to speak with Mr Gane and she frowned. She had not yet met him - he

never visited. She only had contact with the finance director and the general manager. She was sure that there was no information I would need which could not be supplied by her!

“Actually, I was looking to kill two birds with one stone - I was at school with Ben and some of us are organizing a reunion. Could you possibly give me his telephone number?”

She shook her head vigorously. In silence we came down in the lift and walked out into the back garden. Ranks and groups of daffodils, fully out, rippled then stood quite still in the breeze. The old apple tree dominated its neighbours and drew my steps towards it. Brown, rotten fruit littered the grass underneath. I recalled my nightmare. Was she lying there? Was she as close to me now as she had been, smiling, behind the counter of the tobacconist’s? Twenty yards to the right there was a small grey tombstone on which there was an engraving of an Alsatian dog and the inscription LUCY. Uneven grass drew my gaze to the corner of the perimeter wall.

“Have you had to relay turf?”

“Not *me* - that’s Charlie’s job. He’s doing the new rose bed down the side, look.”

I needed a reason to go and speak to him.

“You know, when I was a child the owners used to organize summer fetes here. Would you mind if I had a stroll round on my own? You understand *memory lane*?”

“But of course! Be my guest. Will you come and see me before you go?”

“Of course I will...”

“I mean - so that I can give you our brochure.”

Her eyes lingered on mine a while, smiled and gazed a little self-consciously in the direction of the house. I watched her walk elegantly past the empty benches towards the glass doors - in which - not that she did not already know - she could see me admiring her. I saw the reflection of her face, slightly bloated by the glass, look at me and then vanish. The gardener, dressed in a brown overcoat and cap, was forking through the new bed and scattering horse manure and straw. I noticed he had a bad limp. Rose bushes with red tags were in a pile awaiting their turn to be planted.

“Excuse me, Charlie. I’m sorry to disturb you...”

He turned and leant heavily on his fork, rubbing his sore knee.

“I’ve just been having a walk round. Saw the grave to Lucy - is it recent?”

“Recent? No! That’s been there since the century before last, I reckon. Over in the right hand corner there are some more. Pet cemetery!”

“It looks like there’s a new one down by the other corner.”

“Yes. The boss’s dog. Died last week. Thought he’d carry on the tradition.”

“Big grave for a dog!”

“What? You reckon his missus is down there?! No - she’s been gone a few months. Gone abroad. Sour puss. That was his great Dane.”

“Did you bury it?”

“No. Just dug the hole. He wanted to do it.”

“When?”

“Last night, I reckon.”

“So you didn’t actually see the dog?”

He laughed and studied me. He wanted to know if I was from the council.

“Don’t tell me there’s bylaws now about burying a bloody dog!”

I shook my head and joined in the joke with him before hurrying away. I forgot to pick up the brochure.

Hello Ben. You do remember me? When I came up those stairs all those long, lonely years ago and saw you, and you grinned, I thought for a few seconds that you had changed. I should have known better, should have turned and gone back downstairs. On such simple decisions life is pinned. I should have recalled just how terrified Sharon was when you had grabbed her. I saw my friend down in the street and yelled to him through the open window of the bus. You dragged me away and slid it shut. The last thing I remember was an awful smell which took away my breath. Was it chloroform in your hankie? What did you do to me? Did you enjoy me? Was I good Ben? Did you take me into the field or to your big house? Had your swanky parents gone out for the evening or away for a few days? You see I don't know the answers - and you know why. I can't see where I am now, it's so dark and cold. Please tell my sister where you put me after you'd finished with me. She misses me and wants me home. Am I somewhere in the old garden? Perhaps you tried to wake me but couldn't. I bet you panicked, poor soul! Did you know for sure I was dead when you covered me over? I shall haunt you Ben until you tell my sister and my mother where I lie. Soon, I'm going to show you how to do that and still get away with it. I give you my word you won't go to prison. There's no need, you see - because from now on you're going to be my prisoner for the rest of your life - as I am yours. Release me and maybe I will release you.

Emma

I walked back from the pillar box thinking about the lovely Swiss lady at Raw Dykes House. "Mrs Campion? It's Mr Scott. I'm sorry I didn't call for my brochure. I remembered an appointment. Please don't think me forward - but you could bring it - and I c-could buy you dinner at my favourite Italian restaurant."

I clenched my fists and screwed up my face, while she thought how to tell me politely NO, when - to my delight and astonishment - she agreed.

BOX 8

The eighth box was crammed full of other correspondence under two headings which Loveday had attached to the large clips which held them, one reading SYMPATHY the other CRANKS. I guessed that many letters had been sent directly to him, and others had been handed over to him by the family. There were some very heart-rending ones from parents whose own children had gone missing.

Ginette's bike was found in the lane. She had gone to the village store for me. Naturally, we thought she had fallen off and been taken to a nearby house, and when that proved wrong, by a passing motorist to hospital. Only parents in our situation can know the sickening, appalling horror which swells and swells as we realise that not only has our beloved child been taken, but that she will never come home. It has been three long years now, and the pain never fades, only increases when we think what she might have become and what she might have achieved. She was only twelve years old.

Is there not a gutter too low for some people to stoop into? I came across a letter from a woman psychic among the CRANK pile offering to locate Emma for a fee of £500. All she needed was an item of clothing sent to her. Others, more cranky than cruel, claimed to have "seen" where Emma was lying. One was convinced she had seen Emma on an alien space ship on which she

was a fellow abductee. A Mrs Lee said Emma had been in touch to say she was happy and with her grandma. The next letter I picked up completely baffled me. I looked back in Box 3, found the Othello essay and shivered. The letter was addressed not to Mrs Robinson, but to Loveday. How had he managed to miss the link? The letter began in an untidy, immature hand with grammar errors and spelling mistakes.

Dear Mr Loveday,

Emma keeps asking me to write down whats happened to her. Shes driving me mad. Shes in my dreams so much I carnt sleep.

And then the handwriting changed completely. I compared it again carefully to the essay. I swear the styles were identical. It *was* Emma's handwriting.

A boy has taken me. I am in a large, dark room. I know I am not far from home because I can hear the chimes of Bragwell church. I want to see Mam and Martine, and Ian and Timmy.

And there it ended without a signature. The address was an Earlstone one, 78 Ashcroft Rd. I drove out there and stopped at the very last house. It was numbered 76. 78 did not exist.

I picked up the phone and took a deep breath.

"Martine? Who was Timmy? Another boyfriend of Emma's?"

"Timmy?" She laughed. "No! Timmy was our old ginger tomcat. Emma adored him. How do you know about him? Are you psychic?"

I could not answer. I put the phone down. I do not believe in mediums or psychics. If it was not Emma, the writer of the letter could only be one person. It had to be the murderer taunting Lovejoy. An appalling vista opened up, replacing the flash-scene of an oversexed boy hitting a girl too hard and panicking. Instead, there sat Emma tied to a chair in a dark room, so terrified as her time approached that the child in her cried out for her loved ones - and even her pet cat. I went into the kitchen and nearly vomited. I thought. I puzzled. How had Gane - if it was Gane - managed to get hold of a sample of Emma's handwriting? I summoned the nerve to call Martine again.

"Martine. This might seem crazy, but would your sister have had a letter she had written with her that night - or an essay she had been working on, ready to hand in? A shopping list maybe?

Something or anything she had written down?"

"What's going on?"

"I can't tell you at the moment. Please. Please trust me."

"I can't think of anything - apart from her pocket diary. We turned her bedroom upside down to find it for Loveday. It was probably in her shoulder bag. Which was never found."

The ninth box was quite heavy. It contained a teddy bear. Loveday would have taken it for the tracker dogs to smell. I drew it close and inhaled the faint, sickly scent of the nursery. I imagined Emma curled up safe and snug and warm in bed. I put the teddy back in its box and wept.

I felt depressed again and badly needed a confidante. A companion. I was lonely and the onus of knowledge was overwhelming me. And I had gotten to the point where I wondered whether I

was imagining more than I was deducing. Someone sensible needed to go through my account and point out ridiculous discrepancies and illogical conclusions I had jumped to. After our Italian meal I felt bold enough to tell Nicole Champion that I would like to invite her back for coffee but I was in the middle of a house move, and the flat I was renting was not very special. I drove her home and even before the kettle boiled we abandoned the coffee for bed. She was utterly delicious. Afterwards I asked her what was wrong with her husband.

“Is he mad?”

She laughed and snuggled closer.

“Love cools, you know. We are trying a time apart. People get tired of the same person. He was a ski instructor and I fell for him. There was less to him - and to *us* than I thought. For you I am a novelty. And you for me. You would soon get bored once you discover all my bad habits - and all my secrets. My husband Philip is a good man....”

She failed to finish her sentence and the *but* she did not say was loud and clear enough. Her half-crazed passion let me guess the rest. I told her I wanted to know her secrets and thought how badly I wanted to tell her mine. In the event of my disappearance someone needed to know the story, but was it fair - or safe - to burden her with it? In the event it was what she said next that decided me.

“Jacob. You didn’t really come to the house about your mother, did you? I could tell it was a story. I could tell you were snooting.”

“No. *Snooping*, Nicole. What made you think I was snooping?”

“You never asked about the food. Everyone does. If men come, it’s with a woman. A wife or a sister. So why did you come?”

I could think of no plausible reason to be in a care home without someone to be cared for; and the wine I had drunk had loosened my tongue.

“Your boss, Mr Gane, is a man I really do need to meet. Years ago a teenage girl went missing and I have reason to think he knows what happened to her.”

“You are a detective? You have been using me??”

“No, no Nicole. Please don’t think that. As soon as I met you, I saw how special you were. *And* you could tell I did! *No*. I promised the girl’s sister Martine I would find her. I mean her grave.”

Nicole studied me with those quick dark eyes and seemed reassured. She asked me to tell her the story. When I had finished she asked me who the girl was.

“Her name was Emma Robinson. Her sister -”

“You already said! She is called Martine? She has a poorly arm which - *comment ça se dit?* - dangles...at her side? Oh mon Dieu. Her mother Alice is a resident. This is why she sits and rocks and keeps moaning - *Emma*.”

*

Chessmen have straightforward existences. The eight pawns, after their initial move of one or two squares forward, plod onwards one square at a time, capturing pieces diagonally to their left or right. The two bishops process diagonally any unblocked distance on their black or right tracks. The two rooks - or castles - which tend to be active later in the game as the space on the board increases, can move, if unhindered, any number of spaces down or across. The queen is the most versatile and powerful piece on the board. She moves any distance in any direction. The king is the most important figure because upon his capture the whole game depends. And yet he is weak, lumbering in any direction only one square at a time. I leave the least straightforward,

most devious pieces - the two knights or horses - till last. In German the knight is called *der Springer* which describes his elegant function perfectly, for he can dance about the board - even over other pieces - in L shapes, one or two squares down or across and then two or one square respectively to the left or right, describing baffling patterns and springing horrible surprises on the unwary. The pieces have simple functions but in combination on a board of sixty-four squares they can produce patterns of exquisite complexity - and yes, beauty - which require foresight, strategy, imagination, intellect and not a little cunning, both to produce those patterns and to develop them further. Probably the most important rule of chess is to check before you make your next move whether your king can be captured, for, if so, defeat is inevitable. And never, ever underestimate your opponent. What is his view of the board? What is his next or ultimate move in a gambit? Does an apparent error or weak move have a devious ulterior motive? Chess fosters empathy and objectivity. I doubt whether "closed-in" self-absorbed people can succeed at it.

My streak of intellectual snobbery had led me - I freely admit - to seriously underestimate Ben Gane. What was he but a run-of-the-mill mind who would have amounted to little without Daddy's money? Gentle persuasion had worked on Nicole. I had assured her that he would never find out who had given me his private number. She had also agreed to make discreet enquiries about what had caused the split between her boss and his wife. She would ask June the receptionist who knew everybody's business. My hand trembled above the telephone cradle. I took several deep breaths to minimise the risk of stuttering. I dialled. Gane's phone rang several times and as it was picked up he was carrying on a laughing conversation with someone in his room.

"Hell-o!" he almost yelled.

"Mr Gane? Ben Gane?"

"Yes?" he said, less assured. "Who am I speaking to?"

I took another deep gulp of air. "I think you know"

"How did you get hold of this number?"

"I want to meet you and put a proposition to you."

"You want to meet *me*?"

"Yes. At Raw Dykes House. Alone."

He covered the mouthpiece and I heard muffled words which could have been instructions. The clarity returned.

"Very well. When?"

"Tomorrow. At two p.m."

My first moves had been sound. And my next move was wise - to drive the long way round to Bragwell through Fairleigh Parva and Earlthorpe so that I did not need to pass Raw Dykes. I parked a hundred yards away. I had gone a few steps when I realised I had forgotten the dummy letter from the box file which purported to come from Emma. I felt confidence drain out of me and I faltered. I put my trembling hand into my inside jacket pocket. Thank God. At least I had the newspaper.

The receptionist seemed not to remember me from the previous week. Perkily she told me to go straight through the door opposite where I would find another door with a number 1 on it. *Mr Gane was expecting me*. I knocked and entered. He looked very grave. On his desk I recognized the copies of the two letters I had sent. Uninvited, I sat down opposite to him and waited, saying

nothing. When he spoke he sounded different from on the phone - his cockney accent was more exaggerated and put me in mind of Michael Caine, which was doubtless intentional - though pathetic in view of his slight build. He waved his right hand over the letters.

“You write these?”

I nodded and he picked one up - the second one - by its edge.

“No doubt your dabs are all over this. There must be some law - fuck me, there’s laws against most things these days - *some* law against sending stuff like this through the post. Not least blackmail.”

“You were with Emma on her last journey. I saw you.”

“It wasn’t rocket science to work out who you were. After this second letter. You should go to the police. Do your public duty. So why don’t you? You’ve got fuck-all, that’s why.”

I threw the front page of the Earlstone Gazette into the kitty.

“You know why. You have people protecting you. No doubt they’re freemasons like yourself. If you haven’t got the guts to come clean and confess, at least do the right thing by the family and tell them where you put her.”

He cast his eyes over the headline from the previous Friday TELL ME WHERE EMMA IS and Martine and Emma’s pictures. Slowly he shook his head in phony wonder. His glassy eyes betrayed not a flicker of any genuine emotion and I saw in an instant what he was. He folded the paper neatly and passed it back.

“Yeah. I remember a girl did go missing. So?”

“The girl reported you for molesting Sharon Curtis.”

“Sharon? That girl on the field? You are a real know-all, aren’t you? *Sharon* was, shall we say, teenage exuberance, and she was a real tart. As for *reporting me* - total bollocks. I went straight to the Head and admitted it. You can ask him. Still alive old Rigid Ridgewell. Magistrate. Fellow Rotarian.”

I told him he had a chance to contact the family anonymously. He laughed and told me I was insane.

“Let’s just imagine - for the sake of argument - I am your villain. Do you reckon I’m going to tell her people she’s buried on *my* property - as you crazily allege?”

“Just because she’s buried somewhere on your land doesn’t mean *you* put her down there. I’m sure you can do shock and amazement as well as you do ingenuousness.”

He nodded in feigned admiration.

“Well. *You* could just contact the family anonymously - like the ten or dozen other cranks will.”

“I just might - but these grounds are extensive. Only you know the exact spot. I only have my intuition.”

“Your overactive imagination you mean. I did not kill, harm or even meet this girl.”

I seized on this. “You just acknowledged you’d worked out who I was. Ergo, you were on the bus. I saw you pull her down. There was nobody but you and your mate upstairs. You got carried away - as with Sharon. You knocked her out - perhaps by accident - you shouldered her home between you like a drunk. Perhaps your parents were in bed or away. What you did after that, only you know.”

“There was a bird on a bus. She looked nothing like that pretty photo. She was all make-up and cheap scent -”

“Emma didn’t wear make-up. She didn’t need it!”

“ - *Cheap scent* and a tiny mini skirt up to her tight little arse. A tart. Got on past Naunton. We were chatting her up. She points out the window in Earlstone and says *look at that nobhead*

staring up at me. I give him the V. He gets on at the lights. Pissed. Older and bigger than us. Tells us to lay off her. We were scared. He sits down next to her. We go downstairs. Get off at the Bragwell turn. Last we saw of 'em. I can't swear to it - it's twenty fucking years ago - but I reckon if I saw a photo of you back then I'd recognize you. I reckon you were that.....*person.*"
"That is a total lie!"

"Well, that's what I'm telling the police if you carry this on. Like you implied, I know some of them pretty well. Besides, I have a witness."

Now I had him. I leant back and told him I knew he was bluffing.

"Your witness? Simon Hart?"

Now he did look shocked. His mouth fell open. What a moment to relish!

"You either pushed him or had him pushed - because you hadn't the guts to do it yourself - off a multi-storey in Naunton. Because he was blackmailing you - like Sharon was!"

"Where do you get all this....SHIT? Crazy allegations! You do know that harassment is a criminal offence? Simon Hart - my friend - my only fucking friend in this god-forsaken shithole back then - died in a tragic accident. Blackmail? Simon?? And I've neither heard or seen Sharon What's-her-face since I was seventeen! My witness isn't Simon Hart, you twat! I was with my cousin up from The Angel that night. He'll remember you - cos you stuck your finger in his chest."

"Sheer fabrication! You're going to use your creepy influence with the bent police to wriggle of the hook - you shitty little worm! And here was me thinking you might feel at least an ounce of shame and compassion!"

I had to make an effort not to reach across the table to wring his swanlike neck as I had so badly wanted to that night- especially now that that gloating smirk I recalled was lifting the corners of his thin mouth. The smirk told me he had outplayed me. In that terrible instant I even felt an absurd urge to ask him if he played chess.

"I'm going to be generous, Mr Prince"

"How do you know my name? *I* never told you!"

"I'm going to be generous, Mr *Jacob* Prince. If you agree - now - to put a stop to this...*nuisance*...and leave me in peace, then none of this goes any further. It makes no sense to go digging up the past. It's a land best left behind. You can't ever alter what's happened. Leave the office now. Never give me another thought. Get on with your life. I'll get on with mine. Agreed?"

I shook my head, got to my feet, gave him a lingering glare and left. I felt so furious and confused as I strode back to my car that it never occurred to me to check if I was being followed.

I drove home in a daze. I refused to believe I was beaten. I had two surprise moves left, neither of which was guaranteed to work. For example, how crazy would I look if the police, alerted by me, dug up not the great bulk of Sharon Curtis but a rotting great Dane? How credible then would be my conviction that Emma was under Gane's gnarled apple tree? At least Gane had no idea I had already visited Raw Dykes House and no idea I had seen the grave. He would therefore have no reason to disturb it and would let sleeping dogs lie. My other move - and it was weak - was the dummy letter. If the writing at the beginning could be shown to be Gane's adolescent scrawl then he would be trapped with no escape. But how seriously would Peach or the bolstered woman detective take such a claim? How probable was it that that malicious youth - even at his most impetuous - had run such a huge risk simply for the sake of spite? And yet, a callow *psychopath* with a reckless streak just might. It was a very long shot. The letter could as

easily have been written by a spiteful classmate - I remembered what Martine had said about teenage jealousies - by a girl who knew her handwriting.

I am feeling pretty down as I write this. I called Nicole a while back but she did not answer. It's gone ten o'clock The white van I noticed parked just down the road out of the glare of the lamppost has not moved. The number plate is muddy and illegible. In the absence of Nicole I call my brother. He is drunk. As a skunk. I tell him to pull himself together and listen. I was locking some important boxes in a cupboard and leaving the key under the corner of the carpet - the corner with a chunk of plaster missing. I tell him to get the key from Gwen and give him her address. I owe somebody money and need to be scarce.

"I'm off to Uncle Rémy's. And I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"What for?" he drawls.

I have just told him told him *why* and now my patience snaps.

"Why the fuck don't you pull yourself together, Neil? You'll be dead before you're forty at this rate!"

He laughs crazily and tells me to chill out.

"Get yourself some dope and relax. You worry too much."

"You're not on the wacky backy again?"

He laughs louder. *I take life too seriously!* I retort that some people have got to - to pay taxes for the likes of him to sit on his arse and slowly poison themselves.

"Why don't you get yourself a decent woman, Jake? One that's the right shagging weight this time!"

I hear a woman's drunken giggles in the background and in spite of myself I cannot help but join in. I tell him I might do just that. Then I beg him to be serious and remember what I have told him about the boxes. I insist he reads back Gwen's new address. He does and assures me with a belch he will not forget. *And it is his last night on the piss!* He is having an operation and joining the Boring Brigade.

I try Nicole again. No reply. I'm hungry. I fancy a takeaway. If I eat now, I can be away by eleven and in Dover by four. I look out of the window. The white van I fear has gone. Neil is right. I worry too much. But I shall lock these pages and everything else away before I go out.

* * * * *

I'd never to my brother's house in King Street. I found it pretty easily. It was an old street of terraces no doubt built by a bewhiskered manufacturer for his workers in the nineteenth century to enable him to claw back some of his paltry wages in rent. Number forty-five was a little more run down than the rest. Here he had lived since his divorce. In the tiny walled front garden a bare stalk was pleading to be pulled up out of a cracked terracotta pot. I knocked on the doors on either side in the hope he had left a spare key with the neighbours. Both maintained they had hardly spoken to or seen him and were keen to shut their doors on me. Forty-five and forty-seven shared a tunnel passageway to their backs. The gate at the end was not locked as I had expected. The daffodils around the lawn had wilted and the grass was neglected. On a patio beyond there was a cheap plastic table, white and round, and three white chairs, one of which had been blown over on to its back. I picked it up and inspected the rusty, filthy barbecue. The curtains at both bedroom windows were drawn to and the blind in the kitchen was down. It looked as if he might

have had a late night and was lying in. Going up for eleven. My eyes fell on a stone frog crouching in a corner by the back door. I lifted it and found the shiny back door key. The kitchen smelt musty but was tidy. I opened a top window. I wondered from room to room. A few shirts and some trousers hung in a wardrobe; his bedside drawers were empty; an alarm clock ticked away pointlessly. The bedclothes had been rolled back and I looked at the shape his body had made on the sheet. There was no sign of a hurried abandonment as I had expected. I took out the piece of paper, unfolded it and picked up the phone. To my surprise there was a dialling tone.

“Can I speak to Mrs Campion please.”

“Who shall I say is calling?”

“A Mr Prince.”

When she came on the line she was excited.

“Jacob? Where on earth have you been? Jacob?”

“Are you Nicole?”

“Yes. But who are you?”

“Neil Prince. Jacob’s brother. Jacob is missing. I need to talk to you.”

I gave her the address and she agreed to come round after work. From my car I unloaded the boxes I had been through in that dismal flat the previous day and night. Gwen had said I could stay there but I couldn’t afford the rent. It was a dump anyway. I fetched in my gear and fried up a tin of tomatoes I found in a cupboard. Later, I checked again with Rémy. Still no sign of Jacob. Nearly two and a half weeks. As I said, the flat had showed no signs of anything untoward. But in the bin there was no sign of a takeaway - neither a polystyrene tray, or fish and chip papers. Jacob’s car had gone and there were no clothes or cases. So I had just locked up and taken the keys back to Gwendoline - who was even more of a lard-arse than ever.

I sat drinking one coffee after another - my booze substitute - flicking through Jake’s account again, laughing about his cheeky bloody comments on yours truly, wondering how much was hard fact and how much elaboration. Or fiction. He had sounded very worried on the phone. On the last page of a notebook was a list of telephone contacts, including Nicole Campion.

I laughed again at his pretentious, melodramatic chess analysis. Jacob had always been crap at chess. He used to beat me once in a blue moon. Where he looked for subtleties I preferred a crash-bang approach, exchanging pieces as soon as I was a bishop or a pawn up. I would always exchange queens if the opportunity arose. I had underlined one on my list who would do a good battering-ram job on our Mr Gane: the girl’s ex-boyfriend, Ian Dewis. But I would leave him on the back row for a while. I went through Jake’s bookcase and found his Greek Myths and Legends. There was a term in his account I wanted to make sure of. When I found it I laughed. It was perfect. I had found his electric typewriter in a cupboard at the flat and now I hammered out the following.

The hydra had the body of a serpent and nine heads, and could not be harmed by any weapon. If any head was lopped off by a sword another would grow. The stench of its breath could kill any man or beast. It terrorized its vicinity for many years until Heracles devised a way to kill it. Heracles, you ain’t.

I compared the typeface to that of the two letters sent to Mr Gane. Identical. This would do for starters. I sealed it in an envelope and posted it to Raw Dykes House. After two and half weeks of relief this would come as rather a nasty shock and put a sizeable bug up his arse. I felt very

sorry for the Robinson family, but my main motive was to avenge Jacob. I intended to make that creep Gane suffer and if, as a by-product, Emma was found, all well and good. I had been captivated myself by her photo. Jacob was right. How different all our lives could have been. When Nicole came round I did not beat about the bush.

“Your boss is a Mr Gane? According to this (*I placed the typescript on the table*) - and I don't know just how much detail Jacob went into with you - according to this, you work for a murdering psychopath. You must be hungry. Fancy a paella? Mussels? Do you have mussels in the Alps? Tell you what, I'll have a stroll to Tesco's and get the stuff. You have a read.”

She had turned over quite a few pages by the time I got back. I gently fried the chicken thighs, shallots and garlic in olive oil and watched her finger slowly descend the paper before reaching the bottom and turning each new one over onto the read pile. Occasionally she paused, gave a little cry of surprise and shook her head. I assumed that she had discovered a piece of information he had not given her. I added the rice and watched the grains become translucent, and then sprinkled in the turmeric. I poured her a glass of white wine as soon as it had chilled enough in the freezer and watched her sip it. She was dainty and very pretty. I drank grapefruit juice. I steamed open the mussels and added their life juices, herbes de Provence and tiny peas to the rice, setting the mussels to one side. She looked up now and then to ask me the meaning of a word, a phrase or explain a reference.

“What is the hydra?”

“A monster you can't kill - apparently. Chop off its swede and it grows another.”

“Swede?”

I touched my head and she frowned. I added stock and let the mixture bubble very gently under a lid. I leant back against the sink studying her and peering at the paella occasionally which needed a lot of patience to be at its best. Now I could tell she had reached the part concerning her. Her beautiful eyes grew wide and suddenly she turned bright crimson. I knew exactly where she was because of the red dot I had put in the margin.

“I think he's been very discrete, Nicole. More wine?”

She put her hand over her glass. And read on. There was only a slim pile of pages left. She looked up again frowning.

“*Shagging?*”

“What? Where does it say that? That's a rude word.”

“*You said it to Jacob on the phone! The wrong shagging weight.*”

I had forgotten he had written that. I blushed a little and explained. She giggled and asked me where *my woman* was. I made a quick gesture with my elbow and she laughed.

“Did she do that to you or you to her?”

“She gave me the bum's rush. Threw me out.”

“Why?”

“She wanted to make a new start. And so did I, I reckon. We were bad for each other.”

“It says here you had an operation.”

I explained about my stomach patch while I put in the mussels and prawns and gave everything a stir. “Normally you put white wine in a paella. Most of the alcohol would evaporate but just a little would make me very sick, so I can't take the chance. Make a bit of room on the table. Here's a dish for your bones and mussel shells....Right....Bon appétit.”

“You also speak French?”

“Some. Forgotten a lot. Our dad was French. But Jake was the linguist. I got slung out of teacher's training college and I was training to be a chef. But the bottle got me again. You've not

read the last page. Drink your wine.”

“But does it not upset you to have alcohol on the table? Mmm - this rice is so delicious.”

“*Upset me?* No. It’s good mental training. And I like watching you enjoy it. Getting drunk by proxy! Read the last page and tell me what you think.”

She put down her spoon and had a look. She went pale. Her eyes filled.

“Somehow I don’t think he made it back from the takeaway, Nicole. Eat your rice. It’ll go cold.”

“The white van! Charlie drives a white van.”

“Charlie? The gardener?”

“Oh, he’s more than that. He collects all our provisions too.”

“That might be bad news. Jacob talked to Charlie in the garden after you went back into the house. Remember? If Charlie grabbed him, what would he tell Gane about him snooping about the dog-grave?”

“But this is impossible! Charlie is such a nice man - always shouts hello and asks me how I am. I cannot believe poor Charlie would do bad things. And he is disabled - he limps.”

“So did Richard the Third. Can you check tomorrow to see if the ground looks as if it’s been disturbed? But be careful. Don’t go down. Look out of the window.”

“But this is dreadful! Surely it can’t be true! Poor Jacob!”

“We don’t know for sure.”

“But he’s your brother. You don’t seem sad!”

“Of course I’m sad. If it’s true. *If* it’s true, I’m going to make sure that bastard Gane gets what he deserves.”

She refused more wine. We sat in the lounge. It was chilly. I put the fire on. I asked her if she had found out about Gane’s wife as Jacob had asked her. No, but she would - June, like most underworked receptionists was a terrible gossip. Nicole studied me with her pretty head leant to one side.

“You look a little like Jacob but you are, I don’t know....”

“Not so skinny? More handsome?”

“No! Well - *yes*....and more cheerful.”

She laughed in spite of herself. I told her I was less of a dreamer than him.

“He was - he *is* - the academic. Me, the doer. Till the bottle got me. Buggered up the story of my life so far. But I’m sorting myself out.”

We hadn’t really been a very happy family. Our mother had married a very handsome Free French pilot in the war. The wedding photo full of smiles promised a lot. But our father, charming and debonair, turned out to be a drinker and a womaniser.

“Our childhood was pretty crap. Veering from screaming rows to frosty silences. Resolved when Dad went back to France. He died under a lorry, drunk, when we eleven and thirteen. One of us had the misfortune to resemble him in looks and habits, and one in brains. Our mother got very demoralised and depressed. She didn’t hold out much hope for either of us, but surprisingly took it out more on Jake than me. He was the eldest and had the habit of correcting her when she was wrong about politics and such - a bit like Dad used to do. He stuttered and she couldn’t stand it. It was a cold, loveless house and we were glad to spend our summers with Uncle Rémy in Chartres.”

She looked at her watch. She had to go. I watched her drive away, went back in, looked at the bottle and poured all the remaining wine down the sink.

The next morning she phoned me sounding very anxious. She had looked down at the “grave”

from her office window and thought that if anything the area of grass squares was bigger. She hadn't really paid it much attention to it before so she couldn't be sure.

"Do you think that.....?" Her voice trailed away.

"That Jacob is down there *too*?"

She didn't answer and I didn't pursue it. She said she had to go but something she had read in the story was playing on her mind. Could she come round again later?

While I cooked her spaghetti, she told me what was bothering her.

"You don't remember that Thursday night, do you Neil?"

"The Thursday when it all kicked off? No. Only the day after. When I drove him to the station."

"So, he might have got on the bus? What Mr Gane said could be true."

"I've tried not to think about it. Jacob wasn't - *isn't* - a violent person. If he ever lost his temper, it was only for a second."

"But if he was being taunted - by the girl and the boy - or thought he was... And he must have been drunk. I would hate to think...."

"Hate to think what? That you had sex with a murderer?"

Her face told me I had scored a bull's eye. I asked her as delicately as I could if there was something about him that night which made her suspect that.

"I never knew, of course, what my brother was like *in that respect*."

She blushed and smiled. He had been very *good* to her. I changed the subject. Had she found out what had happened between Gane and his wife? She had. June the receptionist knew a friend of her cousin's. It was quite a scandal. She had had too much to drink at a Rotary Club dinner and had had a go at her husband in front of everybody for chatting up some blonde. Not long afterwards she had left for their Greek holiday home which he agreed she could have for getting out of his life. There had been no divorce for financial reasons - and she had become a free spirit.

"So they're still married?"

Perhaps my suspicious mind got the better of me at that point but I couldn't help but speak it.

"Presumably then, if she met with a tragic accident out there, he would get his villa back."

"But June says it's nearly a year since she went."

"Maybe the longer the better - and all the less open to suspicion *then* if she drowns or goes missing. If Gane is what Jacob says he is, then come the holiday season, when he fancies a trip out to his villa, she could be feeding the fishes."

I wondered if Nicole was expecting me to ask her to stay the night. In the end I decided not to, she having given off no signals I recognized. Perhaps in Switzerland they have a different code, involving ski goggles or something. Anyway, I had no desire to over-complicate matters. Gane had most likely had my brother killed. We were never very close but he was the only family I had left. And I had no intention of the family line dying out just yet. I had to be single-minded.

Jacob had left out two important aspects of chess: time and space. A premature attack with insufficient resources would come to nothing - or - as in his case, defeat. And an important piece being placed one square to the left or right, in front or behind the key square could, as in a life of narrowly missed opportunities, prove not only frustrating but fatal. How many slight misjudgments of timing and space had, down the ages, led to disaster? If Anne Boleyn hadn't lost her rag and mentioned her Henry having a tiny cock, for example, he might have let her off.

My mind was hatching a plan to back Gane into a corner with no escape. But I needed a reliable

ally - someone with intelligence and integrity unlikely to have been corrupted yet by the idle habits of placemen and timeservers. There was only one I could see in Jacob's encounters who was a candidate.

My phone rang. It was Friday and I had not been up long. Nicole was on the line, very upset. When I asked her to explain what was wrong she told me to go out and buy the Gazette. She rang off. I got dressed and battled through a downpour to the garage on the corner. The headline read HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN? I wondered how the paper or the police had obtained that up-to-date photo of Jacob in view of what he'd written about surrendering only his graduation photograph. The police wished to interview him in connection with the disappearance of Sharon Curtis, missing since early April, and believed him to be in possession of vital evidence in the matter of Emma Robinson. I rushed home. I had two urgent phone calls to make.

The first was to Gwen, assuring her that Jacob was not a fugitive from the Law but had in fact gone into hiding because he was in danger. I did not elaborate. This fitted in well with the gambling debt tale Jacob had told her partner. I managed to convince her and persuaded her not to breathe a word to the police or anybody, as it could make things very tricky for him. And as far as I was concerned, I didn't want a soul to know I was in Earlstone. My second call was to Martine. I told her who I was and that I knew of my brother's visits to her.

"Jacob found out who took Emma, Martine. No, listen. He had access to Loveday's private archive and found a clue which he had missed. It's absolutely vital you don't contact the police because someone there is protecting the killer. And Jacob is meant to take the blame."

"But who is it? Who took Emma?"

"I can't tell you. But I'll tell you this. Before April is out he'll be exposed. I promise you."

"Like someone else promised once? We'll see."

"Who gave you that shit story about Jacob Prince?"

I had demanded to speak to the editor. I was furious.

"It was a press release from Earlstone police. It's not just *us* who got it. I had no choice but to print it - or look stupid."

"Well I'm telling you it's bollocks. The real culprit is behind all this - pulling various strings."

"Can you prove it? Will you come in and talk? Is that you Jacob?"

Was I Jacob? Our voices were similar. I decided to leave him in doubt and ignored the question.

"Remind me. Who is your chief photographer? Jim Somebody."

"Doyle. Why?"

"Did he take the photograph on the front page?"

He hesitated. I looked at it again. Jacob's face was ghastly pale - as if dead.

"No. It was...supplied.....by the police."

"Really? I might want to borrow Jim at some point. If that's OK, and it all works out hunky-dory, *then* you get the exclusive."

All calls to the police are logged and recorded. So it was out of the question to phone.

I typed the following and posted it to DC Puddephat at Earlstone nick.

I want to meet you on my terms. If you show this or report its contents to a superior, then my plan will fail. Jacob Prince is dead. I know the identity of the man who murdered him, Emma Robinson, Simon Hart and Sharon Curtis.. My code name is Law. Phone me at this number at 5

pm on Sunday to listen to where we meet. If I get the feeling I can't trust you, then it's all off and I won't show.

I was about to put Gane under so much pressure that he would have to be superhuman not to crack. The local radio station Radio Watling had a request show. I phoned in with a request for that afternoon - *from Emma to Ben Gane - Please Release Me by Engelbert Humperdinck*. I phoned the evening papers in Leicester and Naunton and had box adverts inserted in their dating pages for their Saturday editions- *Emma - please forgive me - Ben Gane*. I tuned into the request show and had almost given it up when at last I heard the request announced and that crap, heart-rending song played.

On Saturday my next move on was to buy some oil-based marker pens. Good ones. As I walked back from the town, I saw on a poster that Earlstone United were playing their last home match of the season that afternoon. I hatched a plan which was so simple and so cheeky it had to work. I sat in the car park until half-an-hour after kick-off. The security guard had come out of the main entrance a couple of times, had a smoke, picked his nose, looked at the bogey, then his watch totally bored and gone back in. There was no-one about. I took off my glasses, grabbed my toolbox from the boot, placed it by the doors and waited. Out he came again.

“Are you on security?”

“Yep.”

“I was just driving past. There are some kids round the back up there. I couldn't quite see what they were up to, but they looked suspicious.”

He thanked me and hurried away in the direction I had pointed. I grabbed my toolbox and went to reception. I asked the girl urgently where the tannoy room was. My urgency, my anorak and the toolbox did their job of convincing her and she pointed up the stairs. I ran up, pushed open the door, grabbed the microphone from the desk, flicked the catch to ON and announced “Mr Ben Gane! You are a murdering bastard!” The action on the pitch froze. I thanked the astounded announcer, gave him the microphone back and hurried down the stairs and out. There was no sign of the guard as I drove away.

On Saturday night I waited until the pubs and clubs had closed and the last drunks had staggered out of the town. When all was quiet I walked around with my pens. The next morning I looked around at my handiwork on billboards and road signs - *Emma Robinson = Ben Gane*. I phoned Earlstone police station and said through a handkerchief that the graffiti culprit was an individual called Ian Dewis and gave his phone number.

The phone in the callbox rang at two minutes past five as soon as a woman in there had finished her call and left. I said *hello* and the cheery voice at the other end asked me if I was Law.

“I am. The Bulls Head in Fairleigh Parva. Tomorrow night at eight o' clock. Alone.”

And that was that.

The graffiti had stayed put the whole of Sunday and gradually vanished during Monday as council workmen were redeployed to deal with them - no doubt at the insistence of a certain person with influence. But I doubted very much that they could be scrubbed out in people's minds. It was time to make contact. I dialled the number.

“Ben Gane? Remember me? Enjoying the limelight? Confess you slimy bastard!”

Before he had a chance to reply I crashed the phone down. As I said, my voice was similar to

Jacob's. He must have thought I was the new Lazarus.

I had arrived in the car park of the Bulls Head very early and had already been into the pub to suss out suspicious characters who might be colleagues of of Puddephat, sitting there by pre-arrangement. But apart from two gawky teenagers playing pool and two or three couples dining there was no-one in. Back in my car I watched as the April sun paled and got lost in the squat skyline of Earlstone, some three miles away across steadily darkening fields. At just before eight, a red Austin Montego drew up and a ruddy-faced man heaved himself out. I decided my beanpole of a brother had been a bit harsh on him. He was what our mother would have called "well made" rather than fat. I waited a few minutes and followed him in. I bought an orange drink and went to join him in the far nook beside the log fire where he clutched a half pint of beer in his pudgy hand. He asked me who I was. I smiled and asked if he could tell. He took a longer, more critical look at me.

"I'm Neil Prince."

He didn't seem surprised. He asked me where Jacob had got to.

"I already told you in the note he was dead. Don't you believe me?"

"Can you prove it? Where is the body?"

"He made a bad move and got too close to his adversary - who had him followed back to his flat and abducted. He'd managed to find out the name of the boy who gave him the V on the bus - the teenage boy who took Emma. He didn't want to give away the name in his interviews because he had no proof at the time. And he didn't trust the police. The nasty bus-boy, as he called him, had turned into a solid member of the local establishment, you see. So Jacob decided to go it alone. He was trying to force him into just telling Martine Boyles, Emma's disabled sister, where the body was. That's what the Gazette story was all about a while back. It was a well-meaning but hopelessly naive plan. He underestimated the killer."

"Who is?"

"Jacob trusted you. He thought you were solid. But the man in question has friends in high places. I'm not for a second suggesting that they are knowingly protecting a murderer. Of course not. I reckon they'd been persuaded at some point to think he was being harassed by a crank. By Jacob."

"Has this anything to do with the graffiti appearing around the town? Anything to do with Mr Gane?"

I had prepared for this. I feigned surprise and asked him to explain. He went into detail and finished by telling me an Earlstone man had been arrested. I smiled inwardly and imagined the hothead Ian Dewis rent by two furies, one of denial of guilt and one of loathing for Gane. My plan was working. Gane would surely have been informed about the arrest of his libeller. With the *crank* apprehended, he would think himself in the clear for a second time. Paradoxically, Dewis would be safe too: Gane would not dare harm him in the light of his marker pen accusations - and would not need to if it was now a police matter. And I would be safe too with Dewis as my shield - at least until I, the hydra, sprang my next unpleasant surprise on my target, plunging him into despair for a third time.

Puddephat was waiting for me to respond. I apologized and said I had been wondering if the name of the graffiti artist was Dewis.

"How the devil did you know that?"

"Dewis was Emma's steady boyfriend. Jacob tracked him down and described the boy on the bus to him. He knew him."

“I wasn’t there when Mr Dewis was brought in - but apparently he nearly brought the roof down”

“Jacob told me he was Mr Angry. So he tried to convince him the killer wasn’t Gane. So he wouldn’t interfere - and for his own good.”

“His own good?”

“Yes. Because the killer *is* Gane. He’s a psychopath.”

“The killer is Mr Ben Gane. Are you serious?”

I put the tennis club photo on the table. I placed Mrs Curtis’s letter about the sexual assault next to it. Beneath them I put a copy of the reunion letter Jacob had sent to Raw Dykes in Sharon’s name.

“The day after Gane received this, Sharon went missing. Coincidence? Note the date at the top. A few hours after my brother confronted Gane at Raw Dykes, **he** went missing. Coincidence? The receptionist at Raw Dykes will confirm Jacob had an appointment with him that day. The night my brother sees Emma with **him** - (*I tapped the goofy cod face in the photo*) - **she** goes missing. Coincidence? The day after Gane gives Simon Hart - the boy with him on the bus - a job on his building site, **he** falls to his death. Coincidence? Gane must be the biggest jinx since Leicester City had the Indian sign on Liverpool! Jacob left behind meticulous notes. You can’t talk to DI Loveday because he’s dead - but he believed Jacob about the bus. You can ask his wife. An ex CID man Philip Tom told Jacob how manipulative Gane Senior was, and how he got his son out of the mire. Ask him. And look at this nasty letter - compare the handwriting to this essay Emma wrote in the sixth form. After he killed her, Gane used her diary to copy her handwriting. The sick bastard! He thinks he’s invulnerable. But it’s my aim to get him as bothered and frustrated as a thalidomide victim with an erection.”

He held up his hand and told me to hang on. He read through everything slowly and for an age said nothing. Then he turned and pointedly asked me where Jacob had gotten hold of it all.

“Loveday’s private archive. His wife wanted shut of it. Ask her.”

He shook his head very slowly. He told me he *did* believe me. But it wasn’t evidence a court would accept. And, he added, the chief witness had gone missing.

“I’m under no illusion of it standing up in court. That’s partly why I’ve contacted you like this. I need your help to force Gane to dig his own grave. Think it over. Leave a message behind the bar here for Mr Law if you want in. Mention this to another officer and it’s finished. By the way, where did this photo of Jacob come from?”

I let the cutting flutter down onto the table. He turned it round and said it had been taken at the station after he’d been arrested.

“I didn’t interview him but DS Peach said he looked scared to death.”

“Scared to death? That’s *just* what I thought.”

He caught my meaning and said I was being paranoid. There was nothing suspicious about it at all. White suspects usually looked deathly pale on their mugshots.

“Nothing suspicious at Earlstone nick? Do me a favour. Who leaked it to the press Jacob had been arrested. And why?”

He shrugged. I gathered up my things and left.

“Ian Dewis? Just listen. Interrupt me or shout at me and the phone goes down. I have a plan to trap Emma’s killer but it’s essential you do as I say - and keep your temper. Can I come round?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the bloke who shopped you about the graffiti.”

“You - WHAT??”

He was dumbstruck. I told him I would be round in half-an-hour.

His was quite an impressive pile in Bragwell. A Victorian villa with a large frontage. Maybe Dewis had a hidden talent or a wealthy benefactor. I went to raise the brass knocker but the door was already being wrenched open and there he stood - a tall, glowering man, prematurely grey but with a stylish, full head of hair. I could see he was the sort used to his own way and I judged him to be a small-time entrepreneur with a handful of workers to bark orders at. Curtly he bade me enter. The door had hardly closed before he was hoisting me up the hall wall by the lapels, causing a barometer to go crashing to the floor.

“Do you have any idea how long I had to sit in that festering dump? On a Sunday afternoon?

Arrested in front of my guests here?”

I shook my head, not daring to smile, even though I was dying to.

“Five fucking hours!”

I told him I was very sorry, but that it was all in a good cause. He slowly let me down onto my toes.

“You his brother? Him, Prince? The chap who’s done a bunk?”

I took out a letter I had handwritten and gave it him to read.

Dear Mr Gane,

I wish to apologize unreservedly for my shameful conduct in writing defamatory graffiti about your involvement in the disappearance of Miss Emma Robinson in 1971. I was engaged to be married to her.

I had consumed a large amount of alcohol and was convinced after speaking to Jacob Prince that you were responsible. I now accept that what I was told was wholly wrong, and am copying this to Earlstone Constabulary as my actions also wasted a lot of valuable police time. I am also sending a cheque for £500 to the council to pay for cleaning costs.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Dewis

Instead of flying into a rage he laughed. Did I really expect him to sign it?

“You want me to send *this* to that worm Gane? And send five hundred quid to the fucking council? A *Lib-Dem* council?”

“It’ll guarantee your safety.”

He laughed louder but not pleasantly. Safety? He would pick him up and throw him as soon as look at him! Had I never seen the scrawny wimp?

“He doesn’t do his own dirty work, Mr Dewis. He pays others. There are people out there who would quite cheerfully break both your legs for five hundred quid.”

He read it through again and turned on me. Who did I think I was? He had already denied the accusation at the police station. *Hadn’t* I dropped him in it *right* and proper!

“Yes I have. But I’ve pulled you out at the same time. If he thinks you’re just a hothead who’s no threat to him, you’re in the clear. The police are aware too. And Gane will know they’ll have a

copy of this. The main thing now though is - don't you see? - Gane's exposed. There's a dirty stain on his shirt and it won't come off. People will keep wondering if it's all true. I'm going to let things die down for a while till he starts to relax again, and then hit him for another six! I couldn't have done this without your help. I didn't *need* to show you this letter, you know. I could just have sent it."

"How very considerate of you to consult me!"

He had calmed down sufficiently to ask me if I wanted a drink. I told him I was a reforming alcoholic and he raised his eyebrows. So what did I want him to do next? I told him I would let him know and then took my leave. He would send the letter, he had grumpily agreed. Like a pawn in my game, he had served his purpose.

The week crept slowly by. It began to seem such a long interval of days that by Thursday I convinced myself that sufficient of them had elapsed to restore Gane's peace of mind. It was now time to wreck it again. But first I needed to speak to Martine Boyles. It was only fair - because my next move would go right to the heart of his territory and touch on hers. On the phone I told her that Jacob had been convinced that Emma was buried very close. She first gasped, then whimpered and asked me where.

"Somewhere on the bus route. He worked out that the murderer was a Bragwell youth. That's why he asked you about Emma's enemies at school. He was on the bus which Emma got on that night."

"But Emma never got on the bus. The driver said so! She had a lift in a minivan. She could be anywhere in the county! You're talking rubbish."

"No Martine. She's close. The police got it all wrong. The bus driver was a drunk and drank on duty. He got caught a few months later and had the sack. Chances are he hadn't got a clue about that night - he was late and more bothered about rushing back to the bus garage. Batman and Robin could have been playing cricket upstairs for all he knew."

"But they searched the whole area - all the fields for miles around with dogs. How could they have missed her? They had her teddy to give the dogs the scent."

Martine had a point. If Gane had buried her body on private land, surely the dogs in the fields nearby would have picked it up. And what about her trail from the bus stop to Raw Dykes? Perhaps the rain that night had washed away all traces. But the grave was a different matter - assuming it was - as it surely was - a shallow one. That made no sense.

"Martine. Prepare yourself for a shock. There is a strong probability that Emma is buried in the grounds of Raw Dykes."

For a long time she said nothing. Only her steady breathing told me she was still there. Then a catch in her breath told me she was crying. I asked her if she was alright.

"You know," she whispered "It's really strange. Whenever I dream about her it's always a happy time. It's a garden fête. She's with me. When we were kids. There used to be summer fêtes at Raw Dykes."

"I know. We went once or twice when we were kids."

When Mum and Dad were on speaking terms.

"The fêtes were in May. I remember the apple blossom. Then in the dream I'm on my own. Looking for her."

"I wonder if we walked straight past you once. You know, I used to wonder when I was a kid why such a beautiful place had such a horrible name."

"Me too..... Do you really think you'll find her there? Near my mother after all?"

“I do. The name of the murderer will appear to you. When it does, do nothing. Be patient. Trust me.”

In my mind I did a tour of the grounds that long, lost sunny day when last we were there. I visited the Aunt Sally stall, the tombola, the archery and finally arrived at the swing boats. There were two giggling girls in the next boat we had tried swinging in time with, but who kept pulling on their ropes to slow themselves down - or speed up - to frustrate our efforts. I tried to see them clearly but they had no faces, only the ones I superimposed. I tried to see a tree which dominated the others, but also in vain. I interrupted my daydreams to phone Dewis to see if he was alright but he didn't answer - which was a relief seeing as I was going to have to break the news to him he would most likely be arrested again on Friday morning.

I waited again until any night owls were tucked up in their nests and drove out towards Raw Dykes, leaving the car a good two hundred yards away. I had taken a red marker pen this time. The surface of the low wall in front of the home was like rice pudding gone hard. I looked out to the Stapleford road and then towards the centre of Bragwell village. There were no approaching headlights and only the stars were looking down. Quickly I wrote

WHERE IS EMMA, MR GANE?

On Friday afternoon I drove past and saw a tall man in overalls on a stool scrubbing away at the slogan which remained very pale pink in spite of his efforts. I called in at the newsagents on the corner and bought the Gazette. The headline made me laugh out loud when I imagined a certain person's reaction to it. GRAFFITI ATTACK! - read the headline, referring to my first wave of scribbles. It mentioned one Ian Dewis, owner of a Bragwell printing firm, being arrested for making *utterly spurious and groundless slurs against a prominent businessman (nameless) concerning the abduction of Emma Robinson. Mr Dewis was not available for comment, but The Gazette understands he has admitted being intoxicated, has apologized unreservedly to the victim and withdrawn his libellous allegations. He has also sent his apologies to Earlstone constabulary for wasting police time and made a sizeable contribution to the costs of removing the offending slogans.*

I realised there was no need to contact the editor for the time being. Now he knew the famous name. Like every other nosy parker in Earlstone.

*

A noise. *Downstairs.* I held my breath in the dark and listened. I had definitely checked the window locks and door bolts. Double-checked. I quickly let out a breath and slowly took another. There was the noise again - and now I identified it. Either the back door or a back window was being gently tested against its frame. My heart thumped so loud now that I could not hear. Where could I hide? What could I use as a weapon? The orange peel scattered on the little table? I sat on the edge of my bed. Surely the locks would hold. I listened hard. The green luminous hands of the clock stood at three ten. I watched the second hand jerk around the dial, wondering if I was witnessing my fatal countdown. For three long orbits there was nothing. Had it only been the wind? I dared to pull the curtain back an inch and saw with dismay the conifers static in a nearby garden. My bed was on casters and I pushed it against the door sideways on. A

short rapping noise. Had *I* made it moving the bed? Or had it been the front door? I cursed myself for not bringing the carving knife up with me. I took the shade from the lamp which had a heavy brass base, and gripped it tight, keeping the light bulb close as a pathetic hand grenade. There was now a definite change of pressure in the atmosphere as if the front door was open. Had it been jemmied off its hinges? The second hand jerked towards the hour. I listened with rising terror for the bad creak on the seventh or eighth riser. But the creak never came. Only a crack. At the margins of the bedroom door I saw a light. But flickering, not steady - as if someone was wielding a torch. But why? Why not just switch on the effing landing light? How unnecessarily melodramatic! *Flickering*. Suddenly I understood. I wrenched the bed away from the door, took a deep breath, opened it and saw flames climbing up the staircase. I went into the bathroom with my duvet, shut the door and soaked it under the shower. I opened the bathroom window to let out the stench of burn and gases. Taking another deep breath, I opened the door and threw down the soaking duvet into the heart of the blaze which hissed and steamed in indignation. Wet towels and the bed sheet followed and the last flickers vanished. How I longed for a drink. Sitting on the toilet, breathing in the cold air, I thought it over. Every day on my return to the house I had parked my car a hundred yards away so as not to draw attention to myself. Would my surly neighbours have revealed my presence to a nosy caller? I saw Puddephat's rosy face. I had always argued with Jacob about his confirmed lack of faith in humanity. He had always maintained that most people were ultimately a disappointment. Now I had to admit he had a point.

I asked to speak to Nicole as soon as it had gone nine. I told her bluntly I needed somewhere to stay. I would do the cooking in return for a bed. That was all. She sounded reluctant and odd somehow.

"Your boss found out somehow where I live. And who I'm related to. Petrol was poured through my letter box and set alight. I made a mistake and trusted someone. I need to move out. Before it gets dark."

She said she would think it over and let me know later.

"Was it you who wrote that...message on the front wall? Yes? Well, at last I have met Mr Gane now. He was absolutely furious. I could hear him screaming at someone in the little office yesterday afternoon. When he came out he was all red."

"What was he shouting?"

"I could not tell. I asked June. She shook her head and would not say. Poor Charlie. He kept rubbing at it but it would not go completely. There is a painter in this morning. I hope you know what you are doing. If you are wrong....well..."

"If I'm *wrong*, Nicole, who tried to kill me?"

Of the few people who knew where and who I was, I reasoned Nicole was the least likely to be capable of betrayal. And yet her reaction to my tale of the fire had not sounded like genuine astonishment. Astonishment is hard to conjure up when there is none. At ten I phoned Dewis again but there was no reply. In the end I could not bear the anxiety and itch to know any longer and drove round. His car had gone. There was no sign of a forced entry, back or front. I shouted through the letter box, heard nothing but my echo, smelt nothing, scribbled him a note and posted it. Back home, I asked both neighbours if anyone had asked about me the previous day. The surly woman I shared the entry passage with had no idea I was even there, she said. The youngish man the other side, blinking at me in the sunlight as if a cave-dweller, beer can in hand,

shook his head and closed the door. I turned - just in time to see a lace curtain twitch in the window opposite. I went across. A white-haired lady came to answer my knock. She told me a tall man had asked the day before if there was anyone living across the road.

“Did he roll up in a van? A white one?”

“No. He walked. He had a poorly knee he kept rubbing.”

“Neil - you must forgive me for sounding so little sympathetic this morning. I heard from my husband in the week. He wants to try and make it work again.”

“Oh I see. I understand. I’ll find a hotel.”

“Oh no - he’s not here at the moment. I’ve been trying to decide what to do. I was thinking, if you came round, a neighbour would see you. And then....”

“Nicole. I understand.”

“No, you don’t. Just a while ago I realised I want more to help you - and Jacob. It is important to me. I will cook you a fondue. But you must understand, it is for a meal and a bed - a single bed - only.”

“I completely understand. And I’m grateful.”

She told me where she lived in Fairleigh Parva - the exclusive village where Loveday’s house stood.

By seven I had packed the boxes and my things into the car and was about to leave King Street when the phone rang. It was Dewis. I told him how relieved I was to hear his voice. He said he had thought it all over and decided it was high time he had a holiday. He was staying with his brother on the Norfolk coast. He asked me to do him the favour of checking up on his house. I told him I already had, and added that he should stay put. I did not mention the Gazette article. I surveyed the scorch on the stairs. The fire had mainly consumed the petrol, not the carpet and wood. I had been lucky. Five minutes longer would have been fatal. And probably for others living in the terrace. I was dealing with a man without conscience. Even I had underestimated the depth of his depravity. Before I left I contacted the Bulls Head. Was there a message for a Mr Law? The barmaid would check. Yes, there was. *Meet Monday at eight*. I pondered. Would Puddephat leave a message for a dead man? The answer seemed to put him in the clear. As I was closing the front door for the last time the phone rang again. I picked it up and listened. I heard slow breathing. Finally the caller spoke with a cockney rasp. “I don’t know who you are - yet. But, believe me, I **will** find out.”

“Gane? You are finished. Give in. Confess.”

The call did trouble me. But encouraged me too. For Gane to call in person showed just how rattled he was. How frustrating for him to have me, his tormentor, just out of his grasp, like a sniper melting into the woods. As I turned left out King Street for the final time I was on my metal and noticed in a side street opposite a white van. As I slowed for the traffic lights at the junction in my rear view mirror it lumbered out onto the main road behind me. To the right, about twenty yards away, next to the newsagent’s, there was a narrow one-way street. Traffic was beginning to cross the junction and a lorry was turning towards me. I could not waste this chance. I pulled out of the queue onto the wrong side of the road and nipped into that narrow street right in front of it, causing it to slow down. I glanced in my mirror as I sped away and saw the white van nose to nose with the lorry, unable to turn and follow me. A tall man was stepping out of the van and urging the other driver to reverse. I realised he would have my registration number and Gane would doubtless use his powers to find out who I was. But not *where* I was. At

the end of the road I turned right, then sharp left and found myself eventually on the Stapleford Rd. I drove past the cemetery, reaching the Bragwell turn soon after, where I turned not right to the village but left into open country through Raw Dykes fields towards Dadlingcote and Fairleigh Parva. Of the van there was no sign and I laughed to imagine the rage Gane would fly into at the news I had gotten away. I had nearly been caught and we both knew that I could not have risked another night at Jacob's. A move against me that day in broad daylight would have been bold, but it was a risk he should have taken. He had failed and was in a hopeless position. Now it was my move.

I had put the car in Nicole's garage out of the way of prying eyes. When we had eaten she told me she had decided to resign from Raw Dykes. It troubled her, she said, to work for such a monster, whose vileness she had seen at first hand the previous day.

"He was so vile to Charlie when the red letters would not come off and talked to the painter like a dog this morning when he came in a little late. His eyes bulged so much, I thought they would pop out onto the floor!"

"Yes, but Nicole, you enjoy your work, don't you?"

"Yes - I love it. But it also troubles me about the garden. Do you really think those things Jacob said can be true? Such horrible things in such a nice place?"

For my plans to work it was essential that Nicole remained in charge at Raw Dykes. I wondered how much more to tell her.

"Are you worried you might come under suspicion?"

"No. Not at all. The horrid man barely acknowledges me. And *I* am the medical superintendant! And June has told me such stories of how he mistreated his wife. I cannot bring myself to work for such a person."

I asked her to think of the inmates, the nurses and the staff, and how they needed a good manager like her. She blushed.

"Nicole. I promise you, Gane will soon be gone. Can I ask you something? Does Raw Dykes have a cellar?"

"Oh yes! We store old beds and equipment down there."

"Do you think I could slip in and see it for myself?"

It was a beautifully warm and still late April Sunday. Nicole had warmed some croissants and managed to produce some wonderfully fragrant coffee. I strolled out to the church and cemetery which Jacob had visited five or six weeks beforehand. In the corner, covered in withered flowers and wreaths, was a fresh heap of clay settling down to do long duty as a grave. I wondered how many more weeks the wretched decorations would stay there before a decent enough interval elapsed to allow for their disposal. The clay would have to settle further before a permanent memorial to Jack Loveday could be put in place and so a wooden cross with a brass plate had to do for a while. I whispered who I was and why I had come. I decided as I walked away that a letter to his wife in praise of him would be a comfort to her as soon as his life's ambition was fulfilled.

Nicole had told me to roll up as a visitor and say I was a relative of Mrs Robinson, if challenged at Raw Dykes. If Gane was on the premises she would come back out of the front door and shake her head. It was Sunday afternoon and her day off. No-one, however, would find it remarkable or unusual if she happened to pop in for some reason. The front wall, freshly painted, was pristine,

and I thought what a great pity it was for Gane that memories could not be washed so white. I waited in her car for five minutes and as a group of visitors came past I tagged onto them. The foyer was pretty busy and tea was being served from an urn. Through the lounge I could see the open French windows and the backs of people enjoying the spring sunshine on the benches and the *swinging seats*, as Nicole had described them. As prearranged, she hailed me from the short corridor where Jacob had met Gane that day.

“Mr Sykes! Could I have a quick word?”

No-one paid any attention. I followed her past the door marked Number 1 and we turned left down a short flight of steps. She turned a key in a door, put her hand inside the cellar to switch on the light and came back past me as if I was not there.

It was my hunch that Gane had kept Emma down there until he had found a safe opportunity to bury her. How else could he have avoided the dogs which would have been out and about for days on end? If the whole Gane theory was correct - and recent nasty events surely confirmed it - then the cellar was the only logical solution to the problem concerning the non-discovery of her body. Perhaps his parents had left him alone again one evening or weekend. He was, after all, old enough at eighteen. How scrupulous had he been about cleaning up the space in the cellar where she had lain - or had sat, if Jake's worse fears were correct? Most teenagers are crap at housework. I moved carefully between the bedsteads and drip-stands, sweeping the dusty floor with my eyes. Where would *I* have kept her? I reasoned it would be his instinct to place her as far away as possible from the door. In the farthest corner. I weighed myself on an old-fashioned scales, moving the bar across until they moved up and down in equilibrium. I reckoned being off the juice had caused me to lose quite a lot of weight. I felt trimmer and lighter on my feet. I sprang onto a bedstead and walked across others, jumped down and rounded the external corner. And bumped straight into a man as tall and as startled as me. In fact it was me - in a full-length mirror propped against the wall. I saw myself give a cry of surprise and throw up my hands, then laugh.

The artificial light faded and I became aware of a faint glow from the far corner. If daylight was coming in then so could sounds. Church bells for instance. The further I went in, the further back in time I went, as the earliest junk would have been stacked farthest in. The faint glow was coming from a grimy window about seven feet above the floor. There were no more beds or equipment here - just boxes and files stacked to a little above head height. The brick walls around me were not hanging with cobwebs as I imagined they would be. Perhaps the floors had been swept clean of ancient traces after all. I nearly gave it up at that point but it was a good job I didn't. Nicole had needed a lot of persuasion to sneak me in, so patiently, one by one, I carried the boxes away and stacked them on the beds. If Emma really had just been laid out in the cellar, then what chance was there of anything of hers being left behind? Little. But if she had been unconscious, had woken and had struggled with her adversary, then might there be a button, some hair, a shred of material? They could work wonders with DNA now. Out of nowhere I saw Gane slap Sharon Curtis on the school field and make her cry. I jumped up and down and saw first plants through the grimy window and then the leg of a bench. Going down on my knees, I switched on the pencil torch I had brought. With a pen I picked through the dust and fluff, moving steadily closer to the corner. There was a dark, irregular deposit. Paint? Blood? I scratched at very edge of the patch and a fine dust materialised. I rubbed it uneasily between my fingers and lit it with the torch. It was dark brown. I found myself right in the corner. Then I noticed there was a fault in the floor: the concrete had not quite met the walls and there was a slight hollow which the years had filled with fluff. I eased it away and saw something white. A

button? A pearl earring? For a second I thought it was one of those tic-tac mints. I turned it over with the pen and saw a roughened edge. I could hardly believe it.

I closed the cellar door. My ears were ringing and the conversations from the foyer were vague, as if bubbling up from under water. I felt odd, faint even. Nicole was nowhere to be seen. I studied the old cellar key and put it in my pocket. No-one took a blind bit of notice of me. People were sipping tea, nibbling biscuits, attending to grandma and granddad, some - and not just visitors - stealing quick glances at the foyer clock which stood at ten to five. A shaking lady in a wheelchair was being pushed out of the day room back towards the lift. She was muttering then shouting *Emma!* The woman pushing had a lop-sided gait and one arm hung down. Our eyes met. She froze. The tall, older man pushing with her looked at her. The blood had drained from her face. Without ever meeting me, she could see who I was. She came up and whispered *Where is she?*

“Martine.” I whispered back. “Please be patient. It won’t be long now. Promise. Go back to your mum.”

I went to meet Nicole around the back. I had found the cellar window half concealed by a shrubbery. The bench was free so I sat down and looked at the posse of trees to my right, huddled around a tall structure. The spire of Bragwell church. I thought of the dummy letter and put my head in my hands. Good God. How much had she suffered?

“Neil? I’ve been looking for you. Neil? What’s the matter?”

“Leave me a minute, Nicole. I’ll be alright. See you back at the car.”

As we pulled out of the car park a large silver Bentley swept in through the gates and we had to pull over. The registration was 2G ANE. He sped past, nose aloft, without even a glance at Nicole. We had gone about fifty yards when I told her to stop at the callbox. I found a ten pence piece, asked her for the number of Raw Dykes and ran to the phone. As soon as he came on the line I said

“Gane I am going to send you to hell for what you’ve done, you fucking coward, you bully!”

*

“Why are you so upset? Why won’t you speak?”

We left Dadlingcote behind and went over a humped-back canal bridge along narrow lanes to Fairleigh Parva. She asked me if something I’d found in the cellar had affected me.

“I found a tooth, Nicole. A broken tooth. And what looked like old blood. He killed her in there. I know he did.”

“Oh, how can you be so sure? It could be any tooth. The house is over a hundred years old.”

“It’s just an overpowering feeling. It all fits. I know I’m right.”

She asked me for the cellar key. I told her I wanted to have a duplicate made.

“I put everything back as it was, don’t worry.”

“We hardly ever go down there. It ought to be cleared out. Where is the tooth?”

“I left it where it was.”

“But why?”

“It’s evidence - for when the time comes.”

It was Monday. I had been out for a long walk again along the canal in Nicole's absence and when I came back at six she was there unpacking her shopping. She told me she had an amazing tale to tell me.

"After we left, Gane walked in through the front door and Martine recognized him. She went up to him and punched him!"

"Punched him? Oh no!" *Or oh yes?*

"She called him so many bad names. June heard it all today from one of the nurses. Her husband had to pull her away from him. In the end he went and locked himself in his little office. And then on top of that you phoned! But he's getting revenge. Look."

She pulled a piece of print-out from her bag which she said June had done for her.

Dear Mrs Boyles,

Following on from your disgraceful assault on my person yesterday, as disgraceful as it was unjustified, I am requesting that you make alternative care arrangements for your mother, Mrs Robinson. It is bad enough being the victim of a slur campaign - but to have such shocking allegations thrown at me in my own premises at such close quarters is beyond the pale. I had nothing whatsoever to do with your sister's abduction, being in London at the time, which I can prove.

I will give you until the end of May to find a new care home.

"Five weeks grace! Now isn't he just the soul of generosity! He has got to be one of the worse people I have ever encountered."

"To take it out on the mother - the poor lady who....who..."

"...The very person whose life he's wrecked. Has this letter gone out yet?"

"By this afternoon's post. But Gane will not be pleased with the news that two families who had booked appointments for tours have cancelled today. *And* June is applying for another job."

I phoned Martine to break the news about the letter to her and she told me not to worry. It had felt good to thump him and she was taking her mother away anyway.

"Pay out from my mother's estate to *him*?"

"I wish you hadn't found out now."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"Martine. Did you tell Gane that you'd seen me at Raw Dykes?"

She hadn't. I told her that Gane would mention an alibi for September 16th in the letter she was being sent.

"Don't believe a word. He was with Emma on the bus that night. My brother saw him. I saw him"

She asked me how I knew about the letter and I told her I had a contact inside.

"Just be patient a little bit longer and stay away from Gane, whatever you do."

"Don't worry. After nineteen years a few weeks more won't much difference."

I met Puddephat that evening as arranged. To be extra sure I arrived in the car park early again. No-one with a limp or in a van turned up. Monday is of course a quiet night in pubs and we had the lounge pretty much to ourselves. He said at last that he was prepared to help me and wanted to know my plan.

“Only when the time comes. I’ll make sure you are the officer I call. Give me your private number. You will be off-duty, you see. It’ll be before April’s out. What do you know about DNA?”

“DNA? Quite a bit. I was interested in forensics at university. Why?”

“Well, just for the sake of argument, suppose Emma’s blood, or hair - or a tooth - was found. Could the DNA be extracted?”

“After nineteen years? Not sure. A tooth would be the best source, I reckon. Have you found something then?”

“No. But I’m pretty sure she was killed in Gane’s cellar at Raw Dykes.”

“How on earth can you be sure?”

I told him my theory. He agreed it made logical sense, but said that crimes often didn’t.

“Oh no. Gane is a calculating man. He hid Emma till he could bury her safely. The problem as I see it is, how could DNA be proven to be Emma’s? Wouldn’t you need a sample which is definitely hers?”

“No. Not a problem. A sample taken from a close relative would confirm the DNA did or didn’t come from Emma. “

“Her mother and sister are still alive.”

He went waffling on as I hoped he would. Everyone has heard of the YES/NO interlude. YES and NO responses are so automatic that they emerge in spite of ourselves. That does not mean that we have a subconscious respect for telling the truth, in spite of our deviousness. Sadly, no. As he was taking a breath to carry on spouting about DNA, I saw my chance to pounce with my little truth test. *Did he know I had moved out of King St?* A YES - or a disingenuous NO - would be fatal to his pretence. A hesitation while he wondered which might be the best answer would also disqualify him as a true ally. He looked genuinely puzzled and said *King St? Where your brother lived? You’ve been living there?* I looked from one eye to the other and saw no hint of guile. He had passed. I began to tell him about the petrol attack and he stared in genuine disbelief. He shook his head and I told him if he doubted it, he could have the key to go and see for himself. In fact it would be further proof that Gane was the villain. I began to take the back door key off its ring but he said he would take my word for it.

As I drove back I felt very uneasy. I kept looking in my mirrors for signs of being followed. How close was Gane to guessing my secrets? And I was worried Nicole would fall under suspicion. June was a blabbermouth and Nicole had been asking a lot of questions. And a nosy neighbour or someone in Neighbourhood Watch might have made a note of my car registration. As soon as I got back in from the pub, I told her I was going to book into a hotel. To my surprise, she did not take the news at all well.

“But why? Have I done something to upset you?”

“Not at all. I’m just worried Gane is going to find out somehow that you’re involved. It’s safer for you if I’m not around. And anyway, you want your privacy back.”

“But if Mr Gane finds out, and I am here alone, then how am I safer? Neil, listen. I wrote to Paul today to tell him I wish for a divorce. Yesterday made my mind up. I don’t want you to go.”

“Yesterday made your mind up?”

“Yes. When you were crying on the bench - and when you were so angry in the car. I’m sorry, but I sort of fell in love with you.”

“You’re sorry?”

“No. Not at all.”

“You *sort* of fell in love? What sort of love?”

“Come upstairs with me. I will show you.”

When I thought of Jacob as we stumbled upstairs, I felt guilty. But it soon passed.

There was just one more risk I needed Nicole to take. I wanted Gane’s private address. If he knew I knew where he lived, I could pose yet a further threat to his insecure position. After we had made love so boisterously, Nicole had gone to sleep and when she woke I told her I had a favour to ask her.

“Another one? So soon after *that*? My God. Are you a machine?”

“No. Not that kind of favour. Maybe later. I want you to ask June - or look it up - where Gane lives.”

“Oh, but I know! It is not far from here. You drive out of the village and head for the A5 and there is a big house on the left - a mansion - with stables and a walled garden, like Raw Dykes. It is called something Hall. I will ask June.”

“No. I’ll find it. Don’t mention Gane to June again - and if she mentions him, say you’re not interested in gossip.”

The next morning, Tuesday, I woke with the car on my mind. It was bothering me more and more. I half-expected there soon to be a story planted by Gane’s creature at Earlstone nick - and I had persuaded myself it was either Peach or Miss Universe - a story appearing in the evening paper along the lines of *Police are searching for Neil Prince in connection with renewed graffiti incidents in Earlstone - be on the look-out for a yellow Ford Escort, registration blah, blah, blah...* I was making a coffee, after Nicole had hurried off to work, when a thought struck me like a bolt. I was not the legal keeper of the car. That was my ex-partner in Loughborough, Leslie. I had given her a couple of hundred quid for the banger when we went our ways, but I had not yet gotten round to sending in the logbook. If his police creature had done him a discrete favour on the computer, Gane might now have her address. She would only be able to give him - or more likely, Charlie - my one contact in Earlstone, John Starkie. Both were in danger. I dialled her number, praying that she would be in. She picked up. I told her under no circumstances to admit knowing me and say she had sold the car through the paper and hadn’t a clue who to. For good measure it might be a good idea to move out for a few days and stay with a friend. After a while she began to take me seriously and said she would.

I went for another long walk along the canal later that morning and reached the bench I had made my own. I wanted to try and see the situation from Gane’s point of view. I took out Jake’s notebook and wrote the heading

GANE KNOWS (and underneath I wrote)

- 1 I am not Jacob!
- 2 Jacob has told Dewis, Martine and me about his theory
- 3 Jacob suspected and therefore I suspect Emma is buried at Raw Dykes....
- 4 ...but I do not know whereabouts.

Then I wrote

GANE DOES NOT KNOW

- 1 Who else Jacob and I have told, and how much

- 2 My name
- 3 About the tooth
- 4 I know about the dog-grave
- 5 I have been inside Raw Dykes
- 6 I have a contact inside RD and a police "friend".

I watched the mallards floating past. I kept wondering, if I was in Gane's position, which move of mine would I fear most? Another graffiti campaign? No. It had already had its impact on the public mind and more of the same was unnecessary. Indeed, it might even arouse public sympathy in his favour, even in a town used to seeing so many paint scrawls on its ugly buildings and walls. In fact, if I were him, I would send Charlie out in the dead of night to scrawl some *really* offensive words about myself around the town - and choose the few picturesque treasures of Earlstone's architectural legacy to enrage the community and get them on his side. *It's the work of a jealous business rival - he could argue - or some disgruntled employee, disgracefully using poor Emma Robinson as a cover.*

No, the thing he feared most - and I could not imagine a greater fear - was the discovery of Sharon Curtis's body, fresh in her grave. What did someone say about keeping one's friends close and one's enemies closer? I just knew she had to be there. The Raw Dykes staff thought he had dug it for his dog. He believed it to be as close a secret as Emma's grave, buried deep in his sick mind. Jacob had not mentioned the dog-grave to Gane and nor had I. In the garden Jacob had asked Charlie about it - (surely he had mentioned that fact to his boss?) But Jacob was dead. The only weak spot - *so Gane would think* - was Charlie. Getting up from my bench, it occurred to me that once Gane believed himself in the clear, then poor old limping Charlie might become the ex-gardener, especially if he asked for an inflation-busting pay rise. Once you start being a murdering bastard, where do you stop?

I pulled my hood up against a shower of rain. Did Gane really think he could save himself? He must know I would win in the end, if only by sheer persistence. I would win unless he could have me disappeared or discredited. Even if that were to prove the case, at the very least his reputation would be shredded locally and he might have to move away. I thought again of the two cancellations for show-rounds at Raw Dykes. I reasoned that it must have entered his head to decamp - or just go abroad for weeks or months. I climbed the stile and walked over the humpy bridge. On my right was The Boatyard Inn. How I thirsted for a beer.

I walked grimly on and kept my mind on Gane's options. And then it struck me as so obvious! How on earth could he sell up? To sell Raw Dykes along with its secrets would be a real hostage to fortune. The new proprietors might wish to demolish it and dig footings for a private estate of executive dwellings - revealing the very crimes he wished to conceal. He was as much a prisoner of Raw Dykes as Emma was.

So what *would* I do if I were him? I bent down to tie a shoe lace. The rain had stopped as quickly as it started. It would soon be May. I decided if I were Gane, I would go some distance abroad. I would leave Charlie in charge of the grounds and only come back when the dust had settled. For our cause that would be the worst result. A stalemate.

So when Nicole phoned that afternoon to say June had heard he had bought a villa in Majorca, I went cold and knew I had to make my move quickly. I fetched Jake's typewriter from the boot of the car. I had already worked out the content of the final letter I would write.

*Emma told a teacher about you, didn't she Gane? You didn't really have the guts to go and admit the assault on Sharon to the Head, you liar. But you got Emma back for it good and proper, didn't you? I bet it felt really good getting your revenge on such a little girl. How do you stand it inside that foul body? Your money and influence is not going to save you. **And I know where Sharon is.** You probably never had a Great Dane. I reckon you're more of a Rottweiler man - to make up for your lack of balls.*

I put the envelope ready. In the evening I phoned Puddephat on his private number to voice my concerns about the car.

"I'm glad you phoned. You're absolutely bang on. Luckily the job of tracing the registration came to me. I memorized it in the pub car park the first time we met. We had an anonymous call from a so-called resident in Bragwell Lane saying they had seen someone scrawl on the Raw Dykes wall and drive off in a car with that reg. Gane's trying to find out who you are - at the very least trying to drop you in it."

He assured me he had buried the file at the bottom of his in-tray - it was chickenfeed and nobody would be hunting it down.

"But what if your mate Peach - or whoever belongs to Gane - has looked up the registration illegally? Could you tell somehow?"

"Not if it's off the record. But it wouldn't be Peachy. He's off at the moment with bronchitis. And he's *not* my mate."

His absence might be the stroke of luck I needed. If Gane was further frustrated in his quest for me, he would feel himself to be in an even weaker position.

I had one more job to do that night before turning in. I needed to settle something in my mind once and for all. I phoned my old drinking pal, John Starkie. I had not seen him since moving to Loughborough and when he spoke he was louder and hoarser and coarser than he had been. Fags and ale. Or perhaps in my fresh non-alcoholic state he just sounded that way to me. I needed him to tell me again about an incident on a bus when we were teenagers. Had we been in Earlstone or Atherstone?

He laughed. "You pisshead! Atherstone! We were on the Naunton bus. Remember? I started chatting up this bird who had got on and she told me to eff off and clouted me one. Her bloke who seen her off at the bus stop came running after us and caught up at the lights, but the driver - thank God - wouldn't let him on. He'd have killed me! Anyway, do you remember the police coming over? Her bloke had stood himself in front of the bus and refused to move. And the driver wouldn't open the doors even though the bird was screaming to get off! This constable got on and told me - either get off or get fucking arrested. You were paralytic - just sat there not saying a word. Anyway, Mitch walked all the way back with me and Rags stayed on the bus and saw you home."

"Starks. Was my brother Jacob with us?"

"Jacob? No. God, you don't remember that night at all, do you?"

"Most of my life has been like that, Starks. A thick fog."

"Shall we meet up for a pint?"

I felt simultaneously a great thrill at the prospect, a great thud of disappointment and a strange sense of relief. I told him about my operation and he said it was a pity I'd let the booze get me so bad.

"We had some fucking great times together, Princey."

“Did we? I’ll have to take your word for it Starks. By the way, if anybody asks - you’ve not seen or heard from me for five years.”

On Wednesday, the following day, I had one job in particular to do. I phoned the editor of the Gazette and told him my requirements. He asked me to hold while he checked, and then said there would be no problem. We were all ready. The trap only needed to be set with some juicy bait. That sentence I had written about Sharon would surely provide it. I cooked my lovely alpine maid another paella that evening and this time she got a little tipsy. We had an early night. I slept well.

On the fateful Thursday I woke early again - even before the birds began singing. Not wanting to disturb Nicole, who was sound asleep, I got up, picked up the poisonous letter I had left ready and jogged the five or so miles to something Hall - which turned out to be called Collingwood Park. At the far end of the drive I could see his silver limousine 2G ANE. Delivered by hand and without a stamp, my latest and final message to him, which would stand propped up waiting for him at the breakfast table, would, I hope, disturb him so much he would be convinced he only had one move left to make. It was April 26th and a beautiful day. Trees stood in fresh leaf and cool blossom. The dreary winter verges were rippling with grasses and flowers in the breeze. There had been another transformation. Gane’s tall gates were padlocked but that was no impediment. I grabbed the rods, put my foot on the middle bar and leapt up and over effortlessly. Not caring whether I was visible or not I posted my letter, and walked backwards to the gates. Did I see a curtain twitch on the second floor? I turned and climbed over the gate and had one last look. The door opened. And there he stood in his dressing gown, letter in hand. I left the road by the next stile and ran through the fields feeling elated and light on my feet. I crossed one field after another and saw a fox scattering rabbits until he finally caught one and trotted back to his home ditch with it hanging limply in his mouth. Banked up in the middle distance was my target, the canal and my route home. A kestrel was hanging, wings flickering before plunging suddenly to the ground. Cattle stood staring in wonder at me. I laughed as I ran. I was new and alive!

Before I left Fairleigh Parva that afternoon I had two final phone calls to make. One was to Earlstone police station to leave a pre-agreed code message for Puddephat. Then I phoned Martine and told her I hoped that her wait would soon be over. She said very sadly that she wouldn’t hold her breath.

“One thing, Martine. I know it sounds odd, but when you were at the Raw Dyke fêtes, did you ever go on the swing boats - the ones you used to make swing by pulling on ropes?”

“Oh yes! Emma loved them. Why?”

“We loved them too.”

*

At five o’ clock Raw Dykes would be concentrating on feeding its residents and at its most vulnerable. June the receptionist would be preparing to knock off. She had never seen me, so when I arrived in photographer Jim Doyle’s car and sent him round the back to wait, she had no reason to be suspicious when I asked to see Mrs Champion - as we had arranged.

“Oh, you couldn’t have called at a worse time!” she whined. “It’s changeover and dinnertime,

and she'll be really busy for the next half-hour. We're closed to visitors. Is it a visit?"

I began to make a scene. Nicole came down the stairs and told June it was alright - she would deal with *the gentleman* and she could get off home. As soon as June had flounced out, Nicole let Jim in through the back door and we went up in the lift to her office on the second floor. She locked us in and pushed the key under the door, in case we needed the toilet just along the corridor. I looked out of the window at the garden with its high wall into which spikes had been driven. Raw Dykes was invulnerable to invaders, at least from the outside. Nicole had said there would be only two carers on duty after eight o' clock when the residents would be in their own rooms. We would be fine as long as we kept our voices down. The section on the floor below where Mrs Robinson and other dementia sufferers lived was self-contained with its own staff. All we had to do was to wait for darkness to fall. The occasional footsteps and voices on the corridor became less frequent and the distant sound of Boy George was cut off when the door of the staff room closed. Only once after darkness had fallen did it open again when one carer clipped along to answer a call. We had watched the sun pale and dissolve into the clouds over Bradgate, and pinpoints of lights from farms and hamlets strengthen. Jim had assembled his gear and he passed me a lens to look through, as soon as the garden was quite dark. The black corner in question was transformed and became astoundingly clear. He attached the lens and demonstrated the zoom. Now I could even see into the slight cracks between the squares of turf which had almost but not quite knitted. Jim smiled to see how impressed I was..

The hours passed and we sat, watched and waited. It had been a glorious day and I followed the negligible motion of the constellations against a spar of the window frame, particularly the Plough as it edged nearer to the horizon. Half a moon had risen, making the scene now clearer. Jim had a thin torch and was reading magazines. He kept chewing toffees and once or twice offered me one. The house and Jim were silent. I guessed it must be nearly midnight when owls, eerily close, began to hoot. Jim kept looking at his luminous watch and whispering the time. The Plough was setting and the tension I felt in the room becoming almost unbearable as I imagined the boredom and frustration Jim was feeling. Finally, I had to speak. *How long should we give it? I might have completely got it wrong!* His face creased into a grin in the faint moonlight and he told me not to worry about *him*. He had sat all morning and all afternoon once to get a shot of a kingfisher bashing a minnow on its killing post. It had been worth it - he had won a prize. Besides, he was doing nothing special on Friday night and could come again. He told me to relax, so I did and the time ceased to be an issue. My eyes were heavy after such an early start to my day.

All at once I felt myself being gently shaken and I saw Jim pointing out of the window. I had been dreaming of a kingfisher and thought for a split second he had seen one. He nodded vigorously and waved me over. There was a white van. He adjusted the zoom and passed his camera to me. A tall man in a long coat and a cap had piled turf on one side and was digging. "I'm taking a snap every thirty seconds" he whispered, taking the camera back. "You'd better phone your man - he's at least three feet down."

I phoned Puddephat - (*We had agreed I would be the anonymous old lady who had looked out of her window and not liked **at all** what she had seen - (How "she" had known his private number would not become an issue)*) - and after a long series of rings when I feared he was dead to the world or elsewhere, he picked up. I told him to alert his colleague. He cut me off. Fifteen agonizing minutes passed. The moon had set and it was pitch black.

"Aha!" said Jim. "Plod's here. Just sidelights. Creeping up on him. Softly, softly catchee monkey....Not seen 'em yet....Hey up! Hey up! Now he has! And out they get. Thinking about

legging it? No! poor old bugger - just leaning on his shovel....“Hello, hello, hello, what have we here?” - “Nothing occifer, I always exhume bodies in the miggle of the night“Here have a quick look!”

I saw Charlie offer his wrists up to the first of two officers and watched the cuffs slapped on them. I handed the camera back.

“Hold on! Is that your mate?”

“Who? Gane??”

“No! The fat boy with the hamster cheeks. Puppy Fat? He’s looking up at the windows and waving us down.”

We ran downstairs and pushed the bar down on the security door. The night air hit me like a plunge into a freezing sea. When we reached the grave, the two uniformed officers were winding scene-of-crime tapes around the nearby trees. There was absolutely no smell as I had dreaded there would be. A large zipped bag was half in, half out of the hole where Charlie had left it. It couldn’t be touched till the forensics team could come - which could be ages.

“We’re waiting for spotlights and Kendrick. He’s got to come from Leicester.” explained Puddephat. An officer queried our presence with him and he took him to one side, assuring him he would take full responsibility. They drove a silent Charlie away and within five minutes another squad car arrived to take their place. It was so cold. All three of us went back to Nicole’s warm office and I fell asleep.

When I woke it was light and all the birds were singing. There was a lot of activity down below which Jim was snapping. Puddephat came in, looking grim.

“Well, we just opened the bag. Phew. It contains a great big rotting dog.”

“A dog? A fucking dog?? No. Can’t be.”

I sat down as if my knee tendons had snapped. He came over and put a consoling arm around me.

“Don’t take it too badly. DI Kendrick is nothing if not thorough. He went down another two feet and found a tarpaulin. There’s quite a large lady underneath it. Congratulations, if that’s the right word. Charlie kept saying he was just burying a dog - and then we told him we’d found Sharon. Believe it or not, he started complaining he knew nothing about *a woman!* *She must have been there already!* Stupid twat! Anyway, a colleague pointed out he could be out in ten or twelve with a confession, a guilty plea and good behaviour - or twenty-five if he didn’t co-operate. He’d be seventy-seven. That changed his mind rather.”

He looked at his watch. About now, he added, a Mr Benjamin Gane was probably somewhere between his mansion and Earlstone nick to help with enquiries. Should we celebrate with a cup of tea?

*

DC Roger - recently elevated to DI Puddephat, the youngest DI in the county - had become a close friend. He told me in confidence that Gane had steadfastly refused to answer any questions in custody. When asked about Sharon, Charlie had finally admitted he had chloroformed her in her kitchen (a bottle had been found in the glove compartment of the van) and taken her to Collingwood Park. A bit of a simpleton, he had believed Gane’s tale that he had used too much on his lint pad and killed her. (In fact the pathologist demonstrated she had been strangled with a cord, with her hands tied so that she could not resist - a. act which Charlie adamantly denied). Gane had then used Sharon’s death to coerce Charlie first into burying her and later into

kidnapping Jacob in similar fashion as he walked a few yards past his van with a bag of chips in a dark and deserted Earlstone. He had delivered him, as he had done Sharon, gagged and trussed to that remote location. But he swore Gane had told him that he only wanted to warn Jacob and would then let him go. As far as he knew, he was alive. A search for signs of recent disturbance in the grounds of Collingwood and forensic traces of Jacob in the rooms of the house proved fruitless. The police did not need to tell me about the proximity of the canal. There were lots of hump-back bridges within a short car trip - and miles where the canal was adjacent to country lanes. The chances of finding him were remote. And the police did consider re-opening the Simon Hart case but in view of the fact that no-one had witnessed his fall they decided not to.

As I had anticipated, persuading the police to search for Emma in the grounds of Raw Dykes was not straightforward. The evidence might be compelling to an average member of the public, but to legalistic minds it was weak. Gane had absolutely nothing to say on the issue and his lawyer gave the name of a relative in London who would swear that the teenaged Gane had spent the week in question with him. 1971 school attendance records had been long destroyed and it was difficult to find a way to disprove the alibi. I told Martine not to despair - I had one trick left up my sleeve. I phoned Puddephat and told him about the blood and the tooth. His amazement turned quickly to scepticism.

“But you see the problem, don’t you Neil? How do we get in to search the cellar? It’s the same problem as the garden in another guise. What good reason can we have for suspecting an eighteen year old boy would have held her there twenty years ago?”

“Sharon isn’t reason enough?”

“But he’s innocent *there* until proven guilty - at least for the next few months. There’s no conclusive proof Emma and Sharon are linked. We can’t use *her* as cause. Prejudicial.”

“Alright. Listen to this. You’ve had an anonymous call to say that Emma was held in the corner of the cellar and beaten up.”

“That wouldn’t work.”

“It might if it bloody well appeared on the front page of the Gazette.”

“You’d do that? The editor wouldn’t dare print it.”

Then I had a final inspiration. Could he come round? I had something to show him. The dummy letter. He took it away. Would it persuade a judge to issue a warrant for a sample of Gane’s handwriting and then a search of the cellar? Yes indeed it would! So nineteen years after his spiteful joke it had rebounded on him. The tooth was found and shown by way of DNA evidence to be indubitably Emma’s. Martine agreed to the police proposal to search for Emma once the trial was over, there already being sufficient evidence, they thought, to convict Gane of her murder. The chances of finding material in her twenty-year old grave - even if it could be located - capable of conclusively proving his involvement were held to be virtually nil.

Due to our graffiti campaign it was decided to try the case a long way away from Leicestershire. It came to trial in early October and Gane’s lawyer entered a Not Guilty plea to the three charges of murder. The defendant remained resolutely silent throughout, passing up the opportunity to take the stand in his own defence. The Sharon and Jacob murders ought to have been cut and dried because of Charlie’s evidence - but Emma would be more touch and go. According to Roger, the question as to whether Jacob’s diary-cum-account should be included as evidence had occupied the prosecution team for hours and hours. *Its greatest strengths are its greatest weaknesses* - he had declared rather pompously- an aphorism I had heard before but to which I

had never given much serious thought. *Strengths are weaknesses?* That sounded crazy to me, I retorted. But it was to prove amazingly prophetic.

As a witness, I was not allowed to be in court, so this is Nicole's account. The defence barrister was in possession of an alarmingly spiteful and incisive brain. The handwriting evidence was challenged and the competence of the stuttering expert vilified. And the tooth only proved that Emma had lost a tooth down there - not who had knocked it out.

How convincing would our circumstantial evidence prove? One by one we got roasted like chickens on a rotisserie. Ian Dewis predictably lost his temper when it was suggested he bore a long-standing, irrational grudge against the defendant based on little more than inverted snobbery. The barrister - named Farrant - threw quotes from Jacob's jottings at him.

"*Mr Ben high-and-mighty Gane.....Gane was a nasty little toe-rag.Dirty, little creepy bastard.....*Do you recognize these rather unpleasant comments, Mr Dewis? Did you not make them to Jacob Prince when you met him in early March? Well. Did you or didn't you?"

"Yes. Something like that."

"And I have a letter here - Exhibit A4 - which you wrote to my client in April and copied to the police, regretting and unconditionally withdrawing nasty slurs you had written on walls. How old are you, Mr Dewis?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Thirty-seven. Do you consider such conduct becoming of a thirty-seven year old man? Would it be going too far to describe you as a jealous, angry schoolboy who cannot grow up?"

At that moment Farrant's point was amply demonstrated when Dewis exploded, calling him - and his *bastard of a client* - a number of choice names. He was escorted, still protesting, from the courtroom and subsequently - at the request of the defence - declared a hostile witness by the judge.

A tearful Mrs Curtis had to admit she did not know the surname of the young Ben mentioned in her letter of complaint.

"Would you say *Ben* is an unusual name, Mrs Curtis? How many Bens do you think were at Earlstone Upper School in 1971?"

She shook her head.

"And I would like the jury to take note of the page in the diary where Jacob Prince quotes your daughter Sharon Curtis as saying that she had no idea at first of the surname. No idea that is, until Prince put the name *Gane* into her head. The stuff about him going to a Naunton school has no importance or validity as evidence - how do we know Prince didn't simply make that snippet of conversation up? Read it for yourselves, ladies and gentlemen. And can you confirm, Mrs Curtis, that the family received £100 in compensation for the attack.?"

She nodded.

"So - you received an enormous amount of money - in those days about a month's wages - from a person whose surname you cannot recall - in lieu of seeking redress in the courts for what you purport to be a serious sexual assault? How would you describe such a person, who prefers money to justice?"

"I did inform the police - but heard nothing. Because his dad pulled all the bloody strings!"

"*That* you could not *possibly* know in 1971 - and only make that allegation *now* in view of what you have since come to believe! How many times did you write to the police, after you failed to get a reply? Once? Twice? Thrice? Four, five times? Did you say to yourself *the letter must have*

been lost in the post? I'll try again.....and again.... Well? How many times? Did you not think to pick up the telephone?"

She shook her head disastrously a second time.

"No. Not once. The money did the trick. And you are now only motivated by the desire - understandable - and we all sympathise - to bring your Sharon's killer to account. You got compensated for a sexual attack on her.....I wonder how much compensation you are reckoning on from my client's resources for her *demise*?"

There was an outcry from the defence and many in court and at that point the judge intervened to query why Farrant was trying to sully the reputation of a bereaved witness. What relevance did it have to the case?

"Only to show, Your Honour, that she is unreliable, that the letter has no relevance whatsoever to my client. And that her motive for writing it in the first place is at the very least questionable." The damage was done.

A very slim and attractive Mrs Loveday had taken the stand much earlier merely to confirm for the prosecution that the nine boxes were what Jacob had said they were, and when a few originals were produced from police records the defence did not cross-examine her. She looked relieved.

After Mrs Curtis it was my turn. I surveyed the court uneasily from the witness box. The jury members looked as grim as executioners. The spectators - who, Nicole told me afterwards, had been swayed by Farrant's entertaining jibes - put me in mind of greedy-eyed onlookers around a guillotine.

"Mr Prince, Mr *Neil* Prince" he began. "You are the younger brother of one Jacob Prince, declared deceased, at once the author of the campaign against my client, and his alleged victim?" I confirmed that I was and watched him casually open the file at a page marker which he then laid with a flourish to one side.

"Mr Prince, in his records your brother alludes on several occasions to your drunkenness. Is it fair to conclude that you are an alcoholic?"

"A *recovering* alcoholic. Yes I am."

"That is admirably honest of you. So how would you describe the acuity and clarity of your long-term memory? Sharp? Hazy? Non-existent? Normal? Or if you wish, choose an adjective of your own."

I hesitated and he pounced. *Had I forgotten the choices already? Should he repeat them for me?* Somebody in the gallery laughed. I told him my memory was *hazy* at times. He picked up the statement I had made to the Loughborough police.

"In this statement made to the police in March - exhibit A2 - in which you provided the alibi Jacob had requested, you say - and I quote - *I had to hold onto him so that he couldn't go racing after the bus which had stopped at the lights. He calmed down and we walked off home, getting a bag of chips on Coventry Road.* Yet compare that to your brother's account on page twenty-three - just before the contents of Box 6 are described. I quote again - *If you start telling the Law I went running after a bloody bus, I'll be in the shit.* And at the end of the paragraph he writes - *All night I dreaded what he - meaning you, Mr Prince - what he might tell the police.* So what is the truth, Mr Prince? The court is confused. Do you remember what happened after you both left The Fox Inn, or not?"

"No."

The court gasped. I avoided Nicole's and Martine's eyes. Theatrically, Farrant ripped my statement into shreds and threw it aloft, drawing further cries of surprise.

"That's what we think of that, then! On September 16th 1971 after eleven p.m. your brother - for all you knew, given your drunken state - could have gone kite-flying, gone night-fishing...or gone in pursuit of a laughing, mocking girl he was infatuated with. Be truthful, Mr Prince - because you *are* worried about truthfulness - for I quote from the same section again - *he* - **you** that is- *said he would do anything but lie for me* - be honest now before the court, remembering you are on oath, you did lie for him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

There was uproar, quickly quelled by the stern judge.

"Or did you...*quite*? Perhaps the memory of your furious brother wishing to pursue the bus *has* remained with you. Perhaps it's the memory of him jumping on and riding off with Emma Robinson into the night which has been buried!"

"No! Jacob would never do that! You can't have it both ways!"

But judging from his smirk and the mood of the courtroom, he could. I was invited to step down. He had no further questions.

Fortunately, Raymond Hughes, the bus driver and a witness for the defence - Farrant's first mistake - looked an absolute, gasping wreck. The prosecution - in the shape of a Mr Hammond - came off the ropes and landed some telling blows. *Mr Hughes could* - drawled Hammond - *recall the hour between eleven and midnight of the 16th very well, so what had happened on the 17th and 18th September 1971? - How the hell*, growled Hughes in reply, *was he supposed to remember that twenty years later?*

"Precisely! No-one in this courtroom has a clue what they were doing either! So why did you tell Earlstone police that in late September of *that* year no-one boarded the bus in the town, and yet in March of *this* year you told Leicester police a young pipe-smoker did that very thing."

"The photo jogged my memory."

"Ah, the photo! - Exhibit B1 - Please describe the young man in question, Mr Hughes. What was his beard like?"

"He didn't have one."

"No, he didn't, not on this graduation photograph of 1974 which Mr Prince supplied to the police and which was shown to you a few months ago. But he *did* have a beard in 1971. The identikit photos - Exhibits B 2 and 3 - of the young man in Earlstone High St so smitten with Emma that he went back there again and again, show that he did have a beard - and I could call to the stand several of Mr Prince' fellow students to corroborate that. Admit it, Mr Hughes, on the night in question you were so preoccupied with catching up your lateness that nothing else mattered. Perhaps you were in a rush because your onboard store of alcohol had run low. You were dismissed in spring 1972 for being intoxicated at the wheel of your bus, were you not? Yes, you were. Now - be perfectly truthful. How much notice did you really take of who was on board or waiting at bus stops on that September night?"

He went to answer then stopped and hung his red face. Hammond made one rip in Hughes' statement, stopped and turned to grin at Farrant who had closed his eyes and appeared to be meditating. He was not as much a litter-lout, he said, as his learned colleague, and certainly not as histrionic as him. Whereupon he crumpled the paper and threw it into the bin by his desk.

So what Jacob had predicted had come true. We two drunkards had cancelled each other out.

When Charles McDonald was led in cuffs to the witness box Nicole feared the worst. Farrant would surely destroy him. And he would have to. Upon his allegations the main case against Gane rested. It began badly for the prosecution when he nervously failed even to confirm he was Charles McDonald. The court rocked with laughter. As soon as Farrant began to cross-examine him, he began to depict him as the true villain of the piece, a psychopath, who had killed Sharon and Jacob out of pure spiteful pleasure and put the blame on his employer. To everyone's surprise, Charlie laughed and fought back. Why on earth would he want to do that? The question caught Farrant by surprise and he hesitated even.

"Only you, in your perverted mind would know why you killed Sharon and - possibly - Prince."

"The only things I ever kill, me duck, are weeds."

The use of Earlstone's peculiar term of endearment to a QC provoked laughter and visibly annoyed that otherwise unflappable aristocrat of the bar.

"Are you not a convicted criminal - a man with a violent record of assault? Did you not in fact sustain your knee injury in a pub brawl which *you* provoked?"

"I'm no angel. But that were thirty-odd years ago. Got whacked wi' a snooker cue. I made a sixty break - when I were pissed - agin the club champion and laughed in his face. He were a big bloke."

The court found this particularly hilarious. When the laughter died down, Farrant had turned pale. An ignorant gardener was making a monkey of him and stealing the show.

"What deal, Mr McDonald did the prosecution do with you, for implicating my client?"

Charlie's candidness did him credit.

"It were either lie, plead not guilty and get twenty-five - or tell the truth about *him, mardy arse* and get twelve. Since then I ain't much bothered, cos I've got cancer and 'ave a year left, two if I'm lucky."

This news utterly threw Farrant. Any motive the witness might have to lie to save his own neck had just vanished. The mood changed. Farrant struggled on.

"But do you honestly expect the jury to believe the word of a convicted criminal..a common-or-garden....gardener....against the word of a well-respected member of the community, a charity fund-raiser?"

"What word? According to what I've been told he ain't said a bloody word to the police since he were arrested - not even to ask if he could goo for a pee! *And* I could tell you a few things about 'im....well-respected member of the community my arse! D' yer want to 'ear 'ow 'e used to slap 'is wife about and threaten to do 'er in?"

Farrant tried to shut him up but the damage was done. Hammond rose again and seized his chance. It all came out that Gane had put pressure on Charlie by threatening to sack him. He had told him Sharon was blackmailing him and he wanted to put the fear of God into her.

"Do you stand by your statements one hundred percent, Mr McDonald?"

"As I stand here, and God is my witness I do. Why don't you ask *'im* to come up 'ere and contradict me? I might be a rough and ready bugger - but I'm not a liar. I fought agin Nasser in 56, you know!"

Gane's London alibi also took a setback when the cousin he had mentioned was forced to admit he had a conviction for fraud. And he had a slip of the tongue, citing August as the month Gane had come to stay, and not September. He corrected himself when this was queried, but the glare in Gane's eyes said it all.

And so it came at last to the summings-up. For dramatic reasons, I quote from them in reverse order as the defence summed up last.

Farrant fought back strongly from a weakened position. The circumstantial evidence against his client depended on one man, he declared, a man who had gone missing and whom he could not cross-examine. Jacob Prince had admitted throughout his account telling one lie after another to people, until he himself was forced to concede *lies were spinning out of (him) like a spider's silk*.

“Which are the lies here and which are the truths?” Farrant demanded of the jury, grabbing the file from his desk. “Or is it all fiction? Even its author himself ponders that very issue at one point - just before his encounter with Mrs Champion of Raw Dykes - and I quote from memory - *I had gotten to the point where I wondered whether I was imagining more than I was deducing..... Imagining...more...than I was...deducing*. Who else alleges that Benjamin Gane was on a late bus to Leicester that night? Only Prince. Who admits one sleepless, feverish night that the police had very good grounds to suspect ulterior - even buried, subconscious motives for him putting that pathetic message to Emma Robinson in the Earlstone Gazette? Look at that list of motives he himself draws up on page...twenty... Got it? Just take this one - *Because your conscious mind had buried the event away - and your subconscious mind had always longed to make amends*. These are not my words, ladies and gentlemen, but the main accuser of my client. Could a psychologist put it any better? He admits to bouts of depression. He is a self-confessed failure as a husband and a father. He is a self-confessed snob and misanthrope. He even admits to loathing his own daughter! He contemplates suicide. So I ask, is it possible that Prince has not been murdered at all? Might he have been so weighed down by guilt - a guilt not only induced by the failure of his marriage but, much more seriously, by a guilt long suppressed? The guilt of a murderer? And, of course, you must take into consideration the dream. He is suddenly holding Emma and her eyes are closed. How so, closed? And what is trickling down her cheek? Blood. Who has assaulted her? The dreamer or Mr Gane? A tooth has been produced by the prosecution belonging without doubt to Emma. Who knocked it out and made her mouth bleed? Is the dream a coincidence? Should it not raise at least a doubt in your mind - enough doubt to be the basis for an acquittal of the defendant? I contend that there is more reason to suspect Jacob Prince than Ben Gane as the killer of little Emma Robinson.“

He paused to see the effect his words had had. A few jurors nodded.

“What” he said “Can any of us know about the true workings of another's mind? How indeed can we ourselves be certain about which amongst that rabble of our own motives is our true heart's desire? Remember, in order to convict my client of three murders and to deprive him of his liberty for the rest of his life, you need to be persuaded of his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If he were your brother or your son, how happy would you be to hear a verdict of guilty when there are clearly so many doubts that he is the candidate? Emma Robinson is dead. No doubt about it. Did Mr Gane or Mr Prince kill her? Or someone else? Sharon Curtis is dead. No doubt about it. We have a man who admits to kidnapping her but denies her murder. Should we believe him? Her self-confessed abductor? If we still had capital punishment, would you send my client to the gallows based on the evidence you have heard?”

Nicole said that she almost been persuaded at that point that Gane might even become the victim of an atrocious miscarriage of justice, when Farrant at last sat down. He had fought back well,

but Hammond had already gotten to the true heart of the matter in his final plea to the jury. On the face of it, he had declared, the murder of Sharon Curtis and the disappearance - and almost certain murder - of Jacob Prince were two crimes which had absolutely nothing to do with each other. For what did the two individuals have in common? Apart from living in the same town - nothing. One was an unemployed, academically unqualified woman and the other a university-educated linguist, interpreter and translator. On the face of it, the only link was their abductor, Charlie McDonald, Ben Gane's gardener.

"If we do *not* look *below* the surface, then those crimes will remain the gratuitous acts of a pantomime villain - an evil groundsman who did not know either victim. Why pick on Ms Curtis? Why not her neighbour? Where did he decide to dispose of his victim? In the canal? In a ditch? In the woods? No. Somewhere *really* obvious. Where else but in the grounds of his employer? And then later, on a whim, he just thought he would dig her up again! Yes, you *are* allowed to smile! Because it makes absolutely no sense! And nonsense does make us laugh! But the joke gets even better. After being apprehended *digging* her up, who does Charlie put the blame on? Why, who else but his boss! But *why* pick on him, and not on any of a thousand other people, you might wonder? Because he had refused him a decent pay rise? Because he refused to replace his clapped-out lawn mower? A satisfactory explanation has never been forthcoming - certainly not from Mr Gane who has steadfastly refused to speak to the police and who has not taken the stand in this court. In fact, on the face of it, if it were the plot of a TV police drama, viewers would be switching off in their millions at such a nonsense. No. It needs the addition of a rationale, a key, a secret, a missing jigsaw piece to make perfect sense. And what is it? You already know the answer, ladies and gentlemen. Add in the disappearance of Emma Robinson, and ALL becomes crystal clear. That man in the dock killed her when he was a teenager in 1971. He kept her in a state of terror in his parents' cellar - for how many days? - at Raw Dykes where, amongst other vile and unimaginable acts of cruelty, he knocked her tooth out, discovered nineteen years later. And in 1990, due to an amazing train of events and the determination of one man - a man who has not yet received the credit he richly deserves and who has indeed been vilified by my learned colleague - entirely due to Jacob Prince' efforts, the killer Benjamin Gane suddenly fears exposure. We will probably never know what final circumstances led him to kill Emma - all we know is that when Jacob Prince began to close in him, and when Sharon Curtis foolishly threatened to blackmail him, both had to be disposed of. By way of Charlie McDonald. Charlie had no reason to lie. He's dying. So, do you believe rough and ready Charlie? Or do you believe the respectable word of Mr Gane? As Charlie himself said - *what word?* Members of the jury, it is patently obvious there is only one verdict you can return which would not be ludicrous. And that is *guilty of murder* - on all three counts."

The judge, a striking and distinguished greyhead, was scrupulous in her summing up. The jury should contemplate, she said, a *rational* connection between the abductions of Sharon Curtis and Jacob Prince. The possibility of them being unconnected, motiveless crimes should be discounted. They should look for a connection beyond the *obvious* link of Charles McDonald, who had confessed to being their abductor. It had been established that his employer, Benjamin Gane, had been subjected to a relentless campaign of harassment by the main protagonist, Jacob Prince. The jury should consider separately how an *innocent* man might react - and how a *guilty* man might react to such a campaign. But in their deliberations they should entirely reject any inferences drawn and any implications made by Jacob Prince in his diary that Mr Gane had undue and corrupt influence with the Earlstone police. Equally, they should also dismiss

pejorative comments made by Ian Dewis and retired Detective Superintendent Philip Tom about the defendant and his father. They were gratuitous and had no bearing on the cases. She reminded the jury that there was no *forensic* evidence linking Gane to the murders of Curtis and Prince. The only forensic evidence produced in court had been the incisor tooth belonging to Emma Robinson. It did not *in itself* prove she had been murdered or give any clue to the identity of her killer. The judge directed the jury at that point to *mentally label* Curtis as case Z1, Prince as Z2, and Robinson as A. She explained her reasoning.

“The prosecution have produced only one witness who has directly implicated the defendant in cases Z1 and Z2. That witness is Charles McDonald. He has claimed he was coerced into being the accomplice - or more accurately - the henchman of Mr Gane. Do you believe him? If you do not, then you should return Not Guilty verdicts in Z1 and Z2. Conversely, if you *do* believe him, then you must convict. If you decide he is not guilty, then you are duty-bound - because all else is supposition and hearsay - to find him also not guilty in case A. But it does not follow that verdict A should be Guilty if the Z verdicts are. You may have been persuaded by the defence counsel that A is the only explanation of the two Zs. But it is not. One might conclude that Mr Gane became so depressed, distressed, disturbed - whatever you will - by the pressure exerted by Prince and Sharon - he may have decided they were working in concert to blackmail him - that in the end, though innocent of A, he snapped and ordered that they be eliminated. He may have feared, perhaps, for his business reputation, for as they say, there is no smoke without fire..... Therefore, jurors, you must consider case A in isolation, on its own merits. And when you do, ask yourselves - does the circumstantial evidence meet the high level of proof required in a criminal trial? Did Mr Gane, beyond a reasonable doubt, kidnap and murder Emma Carol Robinson in September 1971? Or was the murderer another person? Jacob Prince himself, even? Is there a sufficient amount of doubt to give Mr Gane the benefit of it? I contend that there is and that therefore, although you feel desperately sorry for her sister who is present in court, you should find Gane not guilty in case A.”

This was met by a stunned silence, and then murmurs of disapproval, quickly quashed by Her Honour. At that point the jury retired.

To general astonishment, within fewer than four hours they were back with their verdicts. Was that a good sign? For whom? I managed to squeeze in at the back of the gallery with Roger Puddephat. The jury - as diverse a bunch as you could imagine, ranging from a dreadlocked black man in jeans to a plump woman in a trouser suit - had elected a solemn fellow with the face of an undertaker as their foreman. He rose. He surveyed us all. He knew this was a moment to milk and savour all his life.

“On the count of the murder” he announced in a very quiet north Midland accent “Of Sharon Curtis we find the defendant....*guilty*.”

The word sounded like the ring of a hammer on an anvil. For a split second there was silence, then cheers of relief which immediately shushed themselves. Jacob was next. I myself was not convinced he was really dead but on the strength of Charlie’s statement, an inquest in August had already declared him to have been unlawfully killed. If he was not dead, where was he? If Gane was guilty of murdering Sharon, he **must** be guilty of murdering Jacob! The foreman now mentioned his name.

“In the matter of Jacob Prince I have to report that we cannot agree.”

The judge ordered that the case remain on file. She looked again at the foreman and nodded.. That second pronouncement had made me feel very sick. It would surely now get worse. Yes,

Gane *would* be punished, but my promise to Martine was about to be proven worthless. Would the search for Emma's remains have to be called off? Finally the quiet foreman spoke again and the gallery erupted in delight. I had missed what he had said, but Roger was punching the air and grabbing me! Gane's dead eyes stared for a moment at Martine who had struggled to her feet and then he was gone.

Two days later, I went round to apologize to Mrs Curtis for my brother's reunion ploy but she shut the door in my face.

*

It was early May and mercifully fine. At last the search for Emma at Raw Dykes was about to begin. Martine was asked if she had been wearing anything metallic that terrible night. Mournfully she replied that she had put her old plastic coat on because of the rain - but then recalled she had worn a watch.

"And her earrings! And there would be coins in her purse - with a metal clasp!!"

Metal detectors had been brought in to do a sweep of the grounds. After Martine resolutely refused to leave she was allowed to stay in the background. At her insistence I too was present. We watched lots of white crosses being painted on the turf of different sizes, according to the intensity of the detector signal. The forensics team under Kendrick insisted on being meticulous, investigating the responses in descending order of magnitude. The biggest yielded an old plough share found three feet down. After two more hours of junk being unearthed, we marched up to Kendrick and told him he was doing it wrong. Martine could not understand why they were looking at the big signals first.

"She wasn't wearing a suit of armour!"

"And Jacob was convinced she's under this tree." I said. "He sensed it."

Kendrick sniffed. Intuition was not a very scientific basis for investigation, he replied.

"That *is* logical! But you're wrong. Please try here!" pleaded Martine. "I just know she's here!"

Kendrick looked first at Martine and then up at the clouds gathering in the west, before walking off to talk to his colleague. Two officers were redeployed to the apple tree. The roots a foot or so down were so extensive and resolutely intertwined that a spade could not get through. Kendrick was consulted again and it was decided to dig a circular, intermittent trench at a distance of eight feet from the tree trunk. The two men began to work their way in towards the crosses, teasing soil away with trowels as they went. Most of the crosses further away in the garden had been excavated and filled in again. It was mid-afternoon and officers had begun to glance at their watches. Two crosses under the tree had already yielded an old florin and a hammerhead. The number of those spectating, rather than digging, had grown. I heard one murmur to a colleague as he waved his hand at the surrounding fields, that the grave could be anywhere *out there*. There were now four diggers at work, shuffling along on their knees towards the four remaining crosses. Piles of earth were being sieved behind them. I watched the blonde girl nearest to me sit back on her heels as if to take a rest. But she wasn't resting. She was pointing at something. She wetted her finger, leant forward, rubbed a dark material and it turned a glossy red. Martine put her hand to her mouth and let out a scream.

"Oh my God! Her coat!"

Kendrick wanted to drag her away, but she - literally - dug in her heels. A saw was produced and very carefully roots were cut through, taken out and laid to one side, as if a surgeon was cutting

through ribs to get at the innards. Magically, a PVC shoulder bag was brought out and wiped, turning instantly red. Martine gasped and sank to her knees. Puddephat brought it over. She nodded to confirm it was Emma's. He unzipped it. He took out a tiny mirror, a lipstick, a tampon in cellophane, a diary and a purse bulging with old money, and laid them carefully on a tarpaulin as if they were sacred objects. They were so clean, they could have been put in there by Emma just a few minutes previously. Tears streamed down her sister's face. She was laughing and crying at the same time.

"But where is Emma?" she sobbed. Puddephat looked at me and glanced his eyes to his left for me to step away and follow him. Rodney was comforting Martine and she didn't notice.

"Can you tell her?"

"Tell her what?"

"We've cut all the roots away. Apart from soft chalk there's nothing left. The roots have taken her. She's in the tree."

The growing roots had wrestled her, turned her, compressed her, penetrated her and consumed her. I looked up at the ugly, gnarled branches which pale pink blossom and fresh leaves were transforming. Rodney came over and I told him. He nodded.

"She just said she remembers Emma reaching up into the tree and putting blossom into their hair. She knows."

Teeth were recovered and they confirmed Emma's identity but there was no way to confirm a cause of death. The diary had pages torn from it but an entry from June 18th in her neat hand ensured that Gane's appeal would fail.

Been the disco at the Junction. Ben Gane threatened to get me again. Doesn't frighten me though!

He was taken from his cell to an interview room and told. Still he refused to say a word. Martine wrote to him to plead with him to make a clean breast of it for the sake of his soul. She had no reply. I said to Nicole that as far as souls were concerned, Gane had been at the back of the queue when they had been handed out. I thought about a similar appeal to him with regard to Jacob but realised there was no point.

Martine pleaded with the coroner to allow the tree to be declared a grave and with the blessing of Mrs Gane it was agreed. A circular kerbstone was built around it and a brass plaque screwed into the bark. Since then Martine has planted the ground with bulbs - snowdrops, daffodils, hyacinths, anemones and cyclamen - to send up flowers throughout the year. In December it is draped with tinsel to make up for all the Christmases Emma and Martine had never had. One March, as I was marking her sister's birthday with her, a week after she had scattered her mother's ashes there, she looked up to me and smiled.

"I bet you don't remember, do you? This is where the swinging boats stood. We haven't come very far have we?"

I left her to walk back in to get the inmates' dinner ready. My wife Nicole, installed by Mrs Gane as the boss of Emma Robinson House, ex-Raw Dykes, stood waiting for me at the French windows.

Some frosty days in winter I look out at the old tree and think it must be dead. But in May it never fails to blossom gloriously again against the astonishing blue sky.

FINIS