

## THE PRETENDER

### 1 Old

I *am* old. It takes a while to become it, but once you have, there's not a lot to be done except get older and die. And being old is painfully confirmed by more than just the high numbers you have accumulated. If I'd imagined that I looked younger than those 60 years, then a balls-up in my car (a Rover aged fifteen which I intended to drive one day in the London to Brighton rally) - a misjudgment leaving me blocking a busy junction in Birmingham put me straight. Birmingham drivers are famed for their lack of patience. I suppose it never occurs to them that *strangers* would drive into their pestilential city. Anyway, the ones who wound down their windows to yell abuse at me were not your stereotypical baseball-capped, weasely-faced yobs with an active vocabulary of five hundred words. They looked more like young salesmen and junior executives. "Yow ol twat!" was the shout I heard above the rest. It was the adjective which stung, not the noun. I'd been a twat for years, evidenced by the fact that I'd remained a schoolteacher well beyond my throw-out-by date. Sixty is the new forty? Just ask the kids. Let's be honest. Not far below the surface of civilised nicety there bubbles a cauldron of resentment towards older people. Old people are more likely to be robbed at home; they are neglected by nurses; they sit on money (sometimes literally!) they are unwilling or unable to spend; they are generally unpleasant to look at; they are a daily reminder to the young of the fate awaiting them; they drive and walk slowly; block, with the obese, supermarket aisles and pavements; they deprive the young of jobs by insisting on doing them themselves; when they retire the young are burdened with paying their pensions; as soon as they can no longer look after themselves, they either move into the son or daughter's downstairs room at the back, or worse they sell their homes to pay for care and the money dribbles away while they dribble away. The young world is flexing its muscles, bursting with impatience to occupy the spaces and positions encumbered by the old, while the old cling on stubbornly and most inconsiderately to their miserable lives. We are a society conditioned into hating old things - unless they are antiques - by advertising. Old is to trade as kaolin is to bowel movement. And it is no comfort or mitigation for the young to be reminded that they were conceived, succoured and moulded by the old who were young at the time. That was *then* and this is *now*. In the pantheon of pointless subjects, History is almost as much despised as Music, RE and French. And besides, there are very many offspring who resent the way they were succoured and moulded, and some even resent the conceiving itself. Has there not ever been since the dawn of Homo Allsorts a mutual distrust and loathing between the generations? Disengaging from polite and friendly teacup conversation and taking a sly glance at youthful eyes, the old will discover the primitive truth which the young have tried to disguise. I saw my chair-bound mother do it once to me, as no doubt her own burdensome mother did it to her. I am glad that I will not have to carry out the same examination, having only a nephew I rarely see. Yes, I'm afraid - and you may make appalled exclamations to the contrary - the young think the old a fucking nuisance - the sooner gone, the better.

Repartee doesn't come so quickly when you're old and I'd driven half a mile out of Birmingham before the wittiest response occurred to me. I almost did a u-turn to catch those impatient yuppies up. What my perfect riposte was, I forget. I'm old, you see.

Some people age prematurely inside before the wrinkles show. I have compiled a questionnaire. If you answer "yes" to many of these, then maybe you should take yourself in hand. In no

particular order of importance.....

- You have a hatred of loud music and loud people; in fact of most people, loud or soft, young or old.
- You are tempted to go on a cruise or a coach holiday.
- You have started sitting with a blanket on your lap.
- You spot a bit of something on the floor, ignore it and then go back to pick it up.
- You worry whether it is black bin or brown bin week.
- You talk to yourself.
- You never break the thirty mph speed limit and loathe those who do, especially ones who overtake you.
- You express a thought or opinion and immediately laugh for no reason.
- You like couples-only hotels.
- The proximity of children brings you out in a rash.

Here is one for the younger readers. You think yourself kind and exempt from my previous comments? Below you can test yourself as to your (secret) hatred of the old. If your (honest) responses to these statements are a mild or strong positive.....

- You think often and more often about how much money and property you will inherit from your ageing relatives.
- You feel obliged rather than keen to go and see them. It is as pleasurable as ironing and a relief to have it over and done with.
- You feel frustrated behind them on the roads and in shops and such phrases as “old farts” ring in your head.
- You are wretched that they show no sign of clocking off early.

.....then you qualify. There is no need to feel ashamed. Most of us containing the positive pole of love from childhood develop the negative pole over time and you will yourself become the object of such ambivalence as you age. At 60-70 the poles are generally equally strong; by 80-90 the negative dominates. When we croak, a lack of grief is camouflaged by such sentiments as: *it was a blessing; (s)he was ready; (s)he didn't want to be a burden; (s)he had a good old innings; (s)he didn't suffer.....*

Time for a bit of amateur philosophy. The universe is a stage for the bewildering interplay between forces and between matter. Right? Nothing ever *is* because nothing really stops still...but is only ever becoming.... There is no regard for what was, neither an instant ago, nor an eon ago. *Then* is forgotten, *now* is in the process of being forgotten and *next* is the destination of all previous events. Time is unsentimental and non-nostalgic. Callousness is imprinted into all matter, organic and inorganic. I was so perturbed by this insight that I became a historian. I have witnessed archeologists weep over a long buried object they have unearthed and I understand why. The earth, thrown over from it, did not care. The things Time allowed to be created within its womb are pushed out and away, as mother bird and mother bear reject and disown their offspring. This is the reverse of the young-old polarity. Due to conscience and civilisation, this phenomenon is not so blatant in humans as in less complex species but may explain why the young, having sensed or suffered the weakening of parental sentiment towards themselves, feel

less shame than they perhaps ought to when the desire grows in them to see mum and dad eased off their nest(egg).

Time may eventually leave cinders behind in space to disintegrate slowly into lonely photons. If so, it means that Time is so apathetic that it does not even take an interest in its own rebirth in a new Big Bang - (for Time can only exist if things alter and events happen in Space.) I pray that there dances a dark, loving God somewhere on the periphery, in possession of amazing tricks which even the cleverest mathematicians and physicists can never know of. Or maybe Time and Space are just awful parents, orphans of a dead God; and maybe we are the best children they can conceive from available material. If that is the case, it is an awesome responsibility on us to improve our behaviour - because it ain't good.

## 2 Giving In To The Inevitable

I used to run a History department in a large Midland comprehensive. Few proper children, as I suggested, are very interested in old things. Dressing them up as centurions is a gimmick which soon grows as stale as, well, centurions. Children need a young teacher to revitalise their curiosity in things which they naturally loathe. Old things plus Old Smedley (me) equalled Youth Apathy. The Head, Simon Jewitt, did try to be sympathetic and helpful, but for me to take advice from a man twenty years at least my junior was impossible; especially when the advice was crap.

“Grab their interest at the door, Peter.....as we were discussing....*on the last Training Day with Flo Forward*” - (this last he added pointedly, almost ominously, implying that I might not have paid adequate attention to Mr Forward BE – (Bullshitter Extraordinaire)) - “Butter them up, Peter....put credit into their little piggy banks, (*as Flo was saying*)...make them feel obliged, as if they owe you.....*going forward*.....in terms of being.....pleasant.”

He stopped. Obviously my face, going forward, was doing my retorting for me. He had run this up the flagpole for my benefit and I had failed to salute it. Me - Old Smedley - who was renowned in his heyday for throwing naughty children down the stairs to lie in a weeping, writhing heap! - Me, the most feared scourge of children since Vlad the Impaler, *meet and greet the cheeky little gits at the door???*

I saw that familiar glint of impatience appear yet again in Simon's eyes. He would have been four when my career began. (A contempt for wisdom and experience is also a symptom of our Youthist society; our head teachers are just as callow as our political leaders.)

“Mr Jewitt, let's be realistic.I'm older than their great-grandparents in many cases. I need to retire. Isn't there any way I can get my pension enhanced? If I go early, Phil takes over and you can appoint a bright new thing out of college...to dress up as a medieval peasant or a Civil Warrior....whatever....No more complaints about me being sarcastic etc, etc....It's a win-win scenario for you and the school....*going forward*.”

He frowned. An involuntary glance at his watch reminded me that out in the foyer there were sitting a very pretty young woman and her twelve or thirteen year old daughter - with a chest which she was proudly projecting below her large inviting eyes - awaiting an appointment to be smothered in his charm. Old Smedley had been squeezed in at the last minute to be hurried out of the office with a sheaf of photocopied pupil statements and a parental complaint to respond to, regarding unprofessional conduct. Things were *going forward* but possibly not poor Old Smedley.

“It's all true! Bollocks!!”- I wanted to write in response to the charge. The girl in question was

plain idle. Her folder was a series of incomplete worksheets and redrafted work which faltered after a few lines and gave out in mid-sentence. And then there were intermittent wildernesses of empty file paper before another scrawl began and quickly ended. She did not give a shit. On that morning when the heinous event took place, I had been feeling a little low, having been trying to lift particularly dismal March spirits through an infusion of red wine the night before. Her silent shrug when I had questioned her commitment had touched a nerve.

“Jade. When I pointed out to your mother how abysmal - lousy - your effort was, she said that it might be due to a clash of personalities...”

“I’m Toyah, Mr Smedley. Jade was my sist-ah.”

“Toy-ah. Of course. Well, I honestly didn’t know what to say to Mum... Well I did, but I didn’t dare. That.....for there to be a clash of personalities, both parties had to have one.”

There. I’m ashamed. She was a stupid child and I should have known better. But it was out there in the air, in ears, in memory, on tongues, in other ears and it mattered. For Jewitt it was one sarky remark too many. I was in trouble.

“You know, if the government requires teachers to work until the crazy age of 67, they’d better pay for face-lifts, hair dye and hair pieces.”

Honey laughed. She was my special friend on the staff. I could tell her anything. She knew I was facing a disciplinary hearing over the infamously idle Toyah Trott, whose dad was a plumber, prosperous enough to have care lavished on her nails and sunlamps dazzled on her plump body - amongst the pounds and pounds of which I doubted there was one ounce of compassion for any other atoms in the universe.

I went off to a table in the corner of the staff room and began to craft a reply to the charges I faced. Words like “regret” and “unfortunately” were soon creeping in and a sudden squall of disgust with myself tore the paper into pieces. On a new sheet I wrote out my resignation, stuffed it into an envelope and took it to Jewitt’s secretary before I could change my mind. I would take my pension early at fifty-nine and thereby forfeit five per cent of it - the price of my self-respect. The day after I received a note to say my resignation had been accepted and that charges of professional misconduct would be dropped.

The news of my summer term departure did not take long to spread. Honey said it was a pity that a fine career was ending on such a sour note.

“I wish I’d gone at forty” I sighed. “I had a chance to be my brother’s chef at The Steam Engine. But I don’t really regret it. Teaching paid the bills. And it only got really bad in the last two or three years.”

“It paid the bills? You changed so many lives!”

“Perhaps. Footballers should retire at the top of their game. And so should we.”

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Five teachers were leaving. A dinner was organized. I was the most senior and long-served, so the Head’s eulogy for me was last. I listened on the top table in pained silence as he laboured to pay tribute to my talents and express his phony regret at my premature retirement, *depriving so many youngsters of my knowledge and wisdom*. What tosh! Our eyes met as he scanned the tense room - everyone knew what an effort it was for him - and I saw again a glint of impatience in them to be over and done with the chore. I felt so sorry for him that when he sat down and it

was my turn to reply I decided to abandon my resolution of saying only a curt thank you, and instead added the wry comment I'd made to Honey. It provoked a laugh - and in many eyes apprehension.

I wanted to get going as soon as common decency permitted but a few colleagues kept me talking as I did the rounds. When I reached the table of my understudy Philip he and his PE friends made room for me. Phil Madeley, in his mid-thirties with a high brow, cool grey eyes and well defined features was quite a hit with the girls. Like me he was a single man. He had been a rucker player and, like me, a stalwart of the Earlstone club until a back injury forced him to retire. I had been his mentor and after an indifferent start he'd become a solid if unspectacular teacher - destined to decline, no doubt, along a similar arc of insignificance as me, when his handsome face folded and *went south*. I had saved his bacon two years previously when a pretty girl who was jealous of the attention he gave to her friend complained that he had laid his hand on her shoulder. I had been within a few feet of the event - someone had pushed someone else onto the girl and Phil had steadied her - perhaps for a few seconds longer than necessary. It looked pretty innocent to me. My word against three pupils was enough to win him a reprieve from censure - or worse - and he was grateful. That sense of obligation which Jewitt had preached about - paying credit into accounts - had already been, literally, a factor in Phil's regard for me because I had helped him with his gambling problem. Towards the end of certain months, I had lent him the odd tenner or twenty - with fatherly advice - and usually he paid me back, ignoring the advice. He was a calm, gently spoken man which made his one and only outburst of anger I had witnessed all the more striking - a ten second cursing of his father's meanness.

The three of them at the corner table had had a fair bit to drink, and when Phil and his mate Nigel went off to the toilet I was left with Gemma Cassidy, the young woman in charge of girls PE. Gemma's face was startling - a face of two halves; the eyes and nose were feminine and pretty; the cheeks and jaw square and manly, the mouth small and thin. The boys had very unkindly nicknamed her Butch.

"Sorry to be leavin', Pete?" she slurred over the quivering pint freshly slurped in her hand. Her familiarity was a little unexpected in view of the fact that in two years I had barely exchanged three words with her.

"Am I sorry? You want the tale or the truth?"

"The truth. What will you miss?"

"Nothing. Well, Jane Moyle in Art." (Honey was my private name for her.)

"Weren't you an item once?"

I excused her impertinence on the grounds of the ale and said that, yes, we had been *very close* many years previously, quickly adding Philip to the list of the Missed in an attempt to steer her away from the painful subject of Honey.

"Oh, Phil will be *inconsolable!*" she exclaimed too vehemently for it to be sincere.

"Oh I don't know about that" I replied, wishing the other two would return. She had a Southampton accent - which I find particularly vile - and I was beginning to find her manners repellant. So I tried to inject some matter-of-factness into our conversation. "It's a chance for him to come into his own and show leadership skills. I'm sure he'll apply when the job's advertised."

I looked up and saw the other two at the bar. I studied my watch and was about to withdraw when she astounded me.

“Fuckin’ hypocrite!” she hissed “It was him who first called me Butch.”

I felt myself blush.

“And *you* don’t know him properly, Pete. I overheard Toyah Trott in the changin’ room. Oh yes. I know all about the allegation against you.”

I blushed again and was on my feet when she pulled me back down.

“You think he’s like a son to you, don’t you? Our Toyah went to him to complain about you takin’ the piss, and he told her to get her mother to write a letter. Accusin’ you.”

“You’re drunk!”

“I am! But it’s true. March 22<sup>nd</sup>.....I heard her in the shower. Ask the bastard when he comes back. It’ll be a treat to see his lyin’ face try to get out of it.....*And* I’ve seen him glancin’ up girls’ skirts in assembly when he thinks he’s not being watched - ”

I wrenched myself free and left. I had no intention of ever seeing a one of them again.

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I had always taken pride in being a good judge of character. As a teacher-governor with much experience on interview panels, I could usually see straight through the bullshitters and recognize those candidates with potential. When Philip Madeley had come for interview he had not come across as very exciting and his manners were less than exemplary. The words *thank you* seemed to stick in his throat and if they did emerge, seemed to cause him pain almost. But I liked his artlessness and modesty - and with an upper second Honours Degree from a university of the first rank he easily out-qualified his rivals - one of who smelt funny; and a second one had something green like soaker peas down his trousers. The other two quickly talked themselves out of the job, and I made it clear to the Head that there was no way I would be able to work with either. He was minded to re-advertise the job at one point, so as the candidates did a tour of the department I managed to take Madeley to one side and whisper in his ear that the job was his if he really wanted it - but he had to make the right impression. The twenty minute demonstration lesson he taught on the execution of Charles I wasn’t bad, although he started nervously - like Charles I suppose. The ten pupils - a mixture of swots and grots - responded pretty well. This seemed to galvanise him and in the second interview that afternoon he shone. But one lady, Rosalind Crane, a parent-governor whom I held in esteem, had her reservations when it came to our final pow-wow.

“There’s something about him....” she said with a frown, meaning something she disliked. She tried to explain but it all came out wrong and even sounded stupid.

“It’s as if he’s been play-acting all along....deliberately trying not to impress...so we admire his modesty and give him the job. And now it looks like we will....”

I told her that I wasn’t quite sure what she was driving at. She only shook her head and looked worried, so I said my piece.

“He’s a bit....*gauche*, I admit. Obviously clever.... I reckon I can polish him up.”

The other female governor, a Liberal councillor, had hung like a blushing schoolgirl on his every word. When both the Head and the local vicar cast their votes for him it was all over. A blow-in?

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So, as I drove home numb and stung that night after Butch’s outburst, the words *there’s something about him* kept saying themselves in sinister tones in my head. And another word - a

very disturbing word - kept popping up as a refrain too. Once home, I opened the bottle of wine I had promised myself and the battle between the two halves of my mind joined in earnest.....Gemma Cassidy was a half-ugly woman scorned, bent on revenge.....How did she know for sure it was Philip who had called her Butch?.....But hold on, I had realised only one week after he had started work what a scathing wit he possessed.....That should have made me realise that my original assessment of him was not quite accurate.....Perhaps Gemma did have cause to denigrate him in my eyes, and, knowing how highly I regarded him, had made up the Toyah story.....No, she was drunk.....Philip's ambition to succeed me was no secret - we had discussed it. He had no motive to bring my retirement forward.....Or did he have more debts which an improvement in salary would help to relieve?....What a treacherous young man! To repay my kindnesses in such coin!....No, no...Gemma misheard the girl or made it all up for spite.....To spite *me*? On my retirement bash? She hardly knows me.

It is a shock when a certainty topples into uncertainty. I finished the wine and toppled into bed.

Poor Honey. I only wish I'd told you of my suspicions the very morning after. Of course, I never intended to sever my long-term friendship with you, begun when we joined the school as probationers on that same September day longer ago than I dare calculate, when you had been a slim, blonde and stunningly pretty Miss Jane Honey BA. Your face was always a smile and I sometimes wondered how on earth it could cope with grief. We had not worked out *as an item* because you wanted children and I had my doubts. We agreed to part on more than just amicable terms, and in the early years afterwards we were more than just amicable on certain occasions. Keith Moyle, the businessman she eventually married, never suspected and we were discrete. Honey had come to me when her marriage was sailing in rough waters once. I knew Keith through the Archeological Society and one Sunday afternoon, as we were cleaning some shards of pottery, I told him straight that he should cut down his drinking and have non-alcohol days as I did. (I too was a mild alcoholic but kept the desire to drink more or less under control.) He asked me indignantly what business his drinking was of mine and I had my reply ready. "Jane is a dear.....colleague and, as you know, an old friend. She's unhappy. I knew straightway there was something wrong and I asked her. Do you want to risk losing her?" The following week saw her old smile and the beam in her eyes return. They shone with gratitude and words were not needed. Poor Honey. She was only 56 when Keith developed early onset dementia at 61. Ironically, the children Honey had wanted so much - and who could have shared her burden - all miscarried.

So, which side of my mind finally won the Battle of Madeley? Gemma's side, but not immediately. Over that first summer and autumn of retirement, I saw and heard nothing of Phil. He was appointed acting Head of History until interviews could be arranged in November. My resignation on the very eve of the deadline had limited, so the Head said, the field of applicants. He would rather wait and appoint *the right person* to be in post at the beginning of the second term in January. I had told Phil that this would create an ideal opportunity for him to show leadership and organisational skills; that this was the Head's way of putting him on probation; that the November interviews would be a formality if he could impress everyone. My door would, I assured him, always be open if he required advice. But there had been no knock and the phone had not rung. I saw myself as a chess piece which he had used and then swept from the board. Gemma had told the truth, and the word I did not wish to hear would not go away.

When I heard from Honey that an outside candidate from the north of England had been appointed to run History I had very mixed feelings. The temptation to ring Phil and commiserate was strong - but not as strong as the feeling that natural justice had been done. If he had really plotted my downfall, then I was glad he had not prospered by it. When he rang me in late November I was tongue-tied. I let him do most of the talking - complaining about the woman who had eclipsed him.

“Jewitt fell for her charm in a big way. And my figure couldn’t compete with hers. Reverse sexism. I’ve a good mind to leave. Leave teaching altogether.”

He went on in this manner for a good five minutes. He spoke of ingratitude and disloyalty and I bit my tongue. His voice was steely and cold; disturbingly cold. In the end I felt obliged to say something about disappointments and set-backs - until he interrupted me.

“Peter. I’m struggling to pay off a debt. I’d be really grateful if you could lend me a couple of hundred until December. I’ll pay you back when I get paid.”

This, then, was his real reason for ringing. I was about to say yes when my anger boiled up.

“Absolutely not, Phil. You used me. You betrayed me.....You’re not the friend I thought you were...”

I waited for him to respond. The silence became a burr. He had gone.

### **3 Locks**

Old-fashioned front doors with yale locks were a deterrent to burglars. Modern plastic doors encourage chancers to try their handles and walk in, even in broad daylight. Householders can be brushed aside, threatened and assaulted and seconds later the burglar has gone with laptop, television, car keys (car), cash and any valuable readily to hand. There is a ready-made market for stolen goods at car-boot sales. The police started warning people to lock their doors day and night, as such walk-in crime was on the increase. If criminals pulled their hoods over their heads, who could identify them? Those summer riots gave them courage. The chance of detection was almost zero. Each afforded camouflage for the other - and for others more cunning still who saw an opportunity to use them to commit more serious crimes.

In and around Earlstone that January and February such cheeky burglaries were happening so often that there was talk of an organized gang. Youth unemployment was sky-high and poverty on the increase. An alarming number of victims were aged. They were an easy target. They were more likely to be alone; they forgot to lock doors; they were weak and gullible; they got confused and their recollection was unreliable. It was obvious which were old streets. Hardly any children played in them. Windows had net curtains and paintwork was neglected. Certain cars announced - *my owner is old*. I thought of Keith Moyle in the big house just outside town standing with no close neighbours in all that vulnerable land. I knew his symptoms were intermittent, but in the end I phoned Honey at school.

“How’s Keith?”

“Oh, much the same - good days, bad days. His sister is a godsend - drops in odd times to make sure he’s alright. He’s promised not to cook and not to go out. He’s not ga-ga you know...not..”

The *yet* went unspoken.

“But is he keeping the door locked? There are so many villains out there. And your house is so isolated.”

“Of course he keeps the door locked.”

She began to tell me of a decision they had taken to sell their collection of porcelain in London. Keith had knocked over a vase worth hundreds and just laughed.

“It was a miracle it didn’t break. Anyway, I’d feel happier all round if it was gone....Oh, Phil Madeley’s in the staffroom - would you like a word?”

“No - there’s someone at the door. I’ll be in touch. I’ll drop in on Keith one afternoon this week. Bye.....I love you.”

There was no-one at the door.

*Right, Brains, my body had said. We’ve both retired now. So if you’re going to start stagnating, I’m going to hurt in various places. Joints for a start. You don’t need me any more - just sitting reading the odd book, tinkling the keys and pottering.* I kept thinking about Tony Goodluck, a colleague in RE. He had worked on until he was a dodderly and increasingly lampoonable 62 to finance his second wife’s younger son through university. It had been his fate which had played a part in my decision to shred the Toyah letter. I remembered walking into the foyer one afternoon and pausing to look at the staff photo taken two years previous. The handsome man just right of centre, second row with the smile was the same man shuffling past me at that very moment, bowed down with marking, grey and drawn, bowed down by pressure. If you had not known it was Tony, you would never have said they were the same man.

And after three months in blessed retirement he had been diagnosed with a terminal cancer, and by the following spring he was dead. Body had decided enough was enough. I took pain killers for my arthritis. Some days were fine, but many weren’t. In the end I enrolled at a Health Spa, and exercise and swimming seemed to help. I was telling Body to pull himself together - he *would* be needed, I hoped, for a good two decades yet. With that in mind, I decided to walk to see Keith one sparkling midday in late February. Daffodils and blue hyacinths were peeking out and the strengthening sun was in my eyes as I walked out of town towards the woods, so I could not be sure it *was* Philip Madeley in the car flashing past back in the direction of town. I stopped for a bite to eat and a pint at the Canal Bridge, favourite haunt of barges ancient and modern. The arthritis in my knuckles caused me to do something I hadn’t done for years - drop a pint on the floor. When I emerged after half-an-hour I was surprised to see a long queue of cars heading out of town. Many drivers were doing three-point-turns as no traffic was coming from the opposite direction. There had been sirens wailing past a while earlier and as I walked on around the final bend on my journey I saw two police cars blocking the road. At the road block a very polite officer stopped me from walking any further.

“The road is closed to all traffic and pedestrians, Sir. There’s been a serious incident.”

“Good heavens! What?”

He was not at liberty to say. I told him the friend I wished to visit lived only a couple of hundred yards further on, but he shook his head. I would have to turn back. I argued until his polite smile faded into impatience. As I walked home, I kept looking at my image of that passing car and tried to decide what it was *exactly* which had made the name Phil Madeley leap into my head. It may have been entirely due to a meaningless link - the car was blue like his. It had gone past well in excess of the 30 mph limit. Phil drove fast. Was that all? What make or model that car or his car was, I had no idea. It was one of those sleek, nippy things that immature drivers play road games in. The windscreen had been partly reflective due to the light. I had caught a glance of an arm in dark material. Phil wore a dark suit to school. How could it be him though? He would have been teaching at that time. No. It was the lunch hour.

That was why Honey had popped home.

#### 4 Enquiries

The English seem unperturbed - unaware even - of England's decline, perhaps as one always in the company of an ageing or ailing person fails to notice alteration. They jet away from urban blight and dereliction to paradise and on their return say ridiculous things like - *It was nice, but I wouldn't want to live there.* And so it was with Earlstoners. Earlstone was squat, square and ugly but most would (hotly) deny it. If I, an outsider, dared to opine that, for example, the sixties brick building block which had shouldered its Victorian elders and betters out of the way was a terrible eyesore, the response was a shrug. It was not that anyone admired it; people simply had not noticed how ugly and disproportionate it was, a huge cuckoo in a nest of addled eggs.

Earlstone town centre was a taken-for-granted necessity, to negotiate like a toilet, a utility room or a garage. You went in, did your business, came out and closed the door. It amused me to study the grim faces there amongst the rectangular concrete. None looked up beyond it and few looked around; faces were blank as they stared inwards at their cares and woes, as blank as the boards on the empty shop windows staring at dreams destroyed. As an historian I *did* look up and it used to be my pleasant task to take young Earlstoners along the High St to point out architectural features which their self-centred eyes otherwise never saw. Such eyes, exposed to ugliness over many years, develop a clouding of the lens. In such a town, genius was in short supply. It had no poets, no songwriters, no authors or philosophers. I had washed up there from my native Liverpool after my first love affair went wonky, intending to stay only as long as it would take me to face going back and risk bumping into a perfidious fiancée. Earlstone was pleasant enough in those days - no doubt a little smug, as many English towns were. The local Gazette celebrated its trivia every Friday - weddings, charity events and amateur sport - and reflected a lack of malice and danger on its streets, a docility which also pervaded its classrooms. Although I never made a conscious decision to stay, nothing happened to hasten my departure. Then of course there was Jane Honey to keep me close, the second mistake and even bigger regret of my life. So I made myself comfortable in that easy-going town.

Even Earlstone's criminals were prosaic and predictable, and this middle-aged man on my sofa, Detective Inspector Box, was, I sensed, a missionary long deprived of a mission, a twiddler of thumbs and filer of paper, an officer rarely if ever stretched, praying for a challenge.

"You appreciate, of course, Mr Smedley, that we need to interview anyone who knew the Moyles."

Paul Box did the talking while his silent junior never took his eyes off me. It would have been better not to have understood their tactics. If you know what signs of guilt are being looked for then you become self-conscious in your determination not to show them.

"How well did you know them?"

"Honey - *Jane* - was a dear colleague. Of thirty-five years. I got to know Keith field-walking."

"Honey?"

"She used to be Jane Honey. A nickname."

I ought to have said at that point we had been lovers. It was known about at school. Keith knew. His sister would know.

"We have been given to understand that you and Mrs Moyle were a little more than colleagues. If true, why not say so straightway?"

"It was years ago. I didn't see the relevance."

My hand trembled a little as I raised my coffee cup. The watchman noticed and cleared his throat. The interrogator glanced at him and looked back at me.

"How long ago?"

“Thirty. She wanted children. I didn’t.”

“So after that - just good friends?”

He had leant forward and peered up at me, reminding me of a bird looking for an insect under a branch. How had he found out? I fixed my eyes into an honest stare and took a chance.

“Good friends and colleagues.”

“So. Is Mr Moyle’s sister lying or you? She says Jane Moyle confessed to her that she continued having sex with you well into her fifties. Off and on - if you’ll excuse the expression.”

I sighed, got up and went to the window. The cylinder of seeds was swinging with sparrows and bluetits, sharing. They were making a better go of the world than we were.

“Alright. It’s true.”

“When was the last time?”

“It was five or six years ago. But once Keith showed signs of dementia, she felt very guilty. Saw it as a judgment on her almost. I can understand her confessing to Deborah - the sister. She started going to her church. I suppose now I’m a Probable not a Possible. You trapped me. Nice footwork.”

“I trapped you? I think not. Please explain. . . . . Do you think you deserve to be a suspect, Mr Smedley?”

“The sex gives me a sort of motive. You want to know now where I was at the time of the attack.”

“What time would that be?”

I was about to say *nice try* but the thought of Honey attached to wires and machines in Naunton hospital made me stop.

“I was on my way to see Keith. As you know, he was often on his own and vulnerable. I set out from here at a quarter to one on foot and called in for lunch at The Canal Bridge. I came out at about twenty to two. I couldn’t get through because of the roadblock. The landlord of the Bridge and the copper who turned me back will confirm it.”

Keith’s sister had made the grim discovery at about the time I was biting into my cheese and onion baguette.

The junior officer scribbled away then stopped, pressing the point of the pen into his pad very meaningfully. Box’s brain was going through the gears. He really thought I was his man. I studied him more closely as he studied me; his skin was not good, puckered like an apple left too long in a bowl. I shook my head.

“You’re wrong,” I said. His stare left me and alighted on my one piece of porcelain, a small vase on the sideboard showing a magnolia in flower and a pale blue Chinese woman under a parasol. I went over and picked it up.

“Jane advised me to buy it at an auction in Leicester years ago. I’m not much of a materialist, as you can see. Owning things doesn’t appeal.”

The bareness of the living room, I meant; as if I was in the process of packing to move out.

“Would you like more coffee, DI Box? Would you, young man?”

Neither answered. Box was - so transparently - putting the finishing touches to an ingenious theory, frowning because one factor wouldn’t fit.

“Were you - are you - still in love with Mrs Moyle, Sir?”

“Yes. That’s why it wouldn’t make sense for me to try and bash her brains out.”

But it was a good motive to bash out Keith’s and steal their porcelain as a distraction from the real intent.

“You really are way off line, Inspector. I’d hate you to focus on me and lose sight of the real

culprit.” (But that’s exactly what the real culprit would say.)

“You’re a history man, Mr Smedley” said the watchman, speaking for the first time, taking me by surprise; you can never work out how a face should look from a voice, nor how a voice should sound from face. The face was fat roundhead working class, Championship footballer - honest toiler with little talent; the voice was risen-above-my home background Grammar School somewhere in Yorkshire.

“So, how old was Mrs Moyle’s porcelain? What was its provenance?”

I slowly shook my head in wonder. *Provenance*. He looked pleased with himself.

“You already know all that, young man. You’re both wrong. I’ll make some coffee.”

While the kettle boiled they cooked their theory over a low hum of conversation just audible through the door. I left them a decent interval and then went back in with the coffee pot. They watched me press down the plunger. It was slow.

“Sure you don’t want any? No? Well, I will. Kenyan. Fairtrade.”

Box walked to the front window and looked at my Rover. Honey’s collection might just fit in the boot, give or take a vase. His theory was going from the baroque to the rococo.

“The pathologist puts the time of death at between twelve thirty and one,” he told the coming magnolia. “How long does it take to drive from here to the Moyles?”

He already knew, of course. He turned, as I knew he would, and placed his hands flat on the window sill.

“Ten minutes? You’ll never catch him if you let this take your brain over. It’s a walk-in robbery. Opportunist. Like all the rest *you haven’t solved*.”

He grinned then grimaced. *Touché*.

“No way,” he said eventually. “The thief knew already there was porcelain there. It wasn’t a walk-in and look-see. Laptops have been going...tellies, digital radios, microwaves. ....Pots? The lot? Doesn’t fit our Earlstone villains.”

Nor me clubbing Honey, you clever idiot.

“Maybe the perpetrator has been preparing the ground, Mr Smedley. Turning up at various addresses uninvited in January to lay down a false scent.”

“Another interesting theory, Inspector. A bit risky though. Better to take advantage of the villainy of others. Here are my keys. Take a look in the boot.”

I threw them to him and he promptly dropped them. He nodded to his watchman who picked them up and went outside. A moment later the boot lid went bump and he came back in.

“You do understand, and I’m glad you do, that we have to consider all angles. Do you have debts, Sir?”

Debts. The blue car flashed down the road in my mind again - and again I tried to look inside.

“Debts? No. I have a healthy quarter of a million. Unless the banks go belly-up. Toss me your pen - I’ll write down the account numbers.”

“Not just at the moment.”

“A quarter of a million?” whistled the watchman. “On teachers’ pay??”

“I’ve robbed a few banks as well in my time, Officer.”

The joke fell flat.

“Did you entertain hopes that one day you and Mrs Moyle might get together again, once her husband had died, if not before?”

He had me there. It was if he’d lit a sudden fire underneath me because I went all hot and I knew it showed. It would be a serious mistake to lie now.

“Of course I did. In my dreams. I still do, if she comes out of the coma.”

“And did *she*? Once Keith had gone into a home - or passed on? When did you last have sex?”  
Clever.

“You’re asking me the same question as before to see if I change the answer. It’s still five or six years ago.”

“Which?”

It had been a longer, more tedious staff meeting than usual, even worse than the Flo Forward effort. We had amused ourselves by exchanging quick smiles then eye-rolling expressions of boredom like classroom sweethearts passing notes. Then afterwards Honey’s car wouldn’t start. ....*No need to call a taxi....have a lift with me.....A cup of coffee would be lovely, Honey.....*When I looked up she was in her underwear.....*You’re as lovely as ever, Honey.....Just look at you.....*

“It was a Monday night after school. I ran her home. It might have been that summer when Keith was diagnosed. After that we were brother and sister....Five or six years ago! Do you know where you went on holiday five years ago, young man?”

He shrugged and blew out his cheeks.

“You’re barking in the wrong wood. This is crazy. I wouldn’t hit anyone. This isn’t Agatha Christie.” Well, it might be. A dark arm through a shiny windscreen....I’d almost waved at the car. I “looked” in the boot and saw pots and pots and pots. Where would he flog them? Abroad? In dribs and drabs, as necessary, when his horses failed.... what RUBBISH! I was as barmy as Box. The boot became empty again, just a foot pump and a tool kit.

“Something occurred to you....Sir?”*Sir* can be made to sound so insulting as an afterthought.

“No, no. Just trying to tie that year down to a post. Did I drive to Brittany that summer? Or the one before? I give in.”

“If the past mattered, we’d remember it better” said Box - and lo and behold he smiled. “But if you mean the year Moyle took ill, it’s four years ago” - smile switched off - “July 2008.”

*Do old people really have sex?* - the young watchman seemed to be wondering. *What do they see in each other?*

Box was preparing to leave. “The key questions still to be answered,” he said “If and when Mrs Moyle recovers - did she walk in on the scene or was she part of it? Did she see the face of the murderer?” Box tapped his junior on the shoulder. “Till then, if you wish to say anything else to us, here’s my card. Think about it.”

## **5 My Enquiries**

Keith Moyle’s sister, Deborah, was a great talker. She worked for a literary agent and I thought it bizarre that someone with so little control or judgment over the trivia which poured out of her could decide whether the material she was taking in was of value. But when I called her and told her I wished to visit Jane in hospital she told me very curtly that the police had restricted visitors to four relatives who had to wear ID badges at all times. She put the phone down. It had to be the shortest speech she’d made in years. In her stupid, claustrophobic mind she held me to blame. Three men were separately arrested in March, interrogated for hours and days then released on bail. Keith’s body lingered in cold store. I was in a kind of limbo too, neither guilty enough nor innocent enough in the eyes of the police. Finally, I was unable to resist the urge to make a phone call I had sworn never to make.

“I’m sorry I was so short with you. I was upset. I heard you’d been behind a certain person’s complaint against me. If you’re still struggling, I can lend you the money.”

“That’s alright, Pete. I’ve been meaning to phone you.”

Of course you have, Philip. But you've got nothing to tell me, so it's another lie. Have I put you on the spot? I hope so.

"It's nice of you to offer...but I had a big win....."

"You know, I wondered if you had. Did I see you in a new black Audi last week?"

Now, what do you say to that?!..... He paused much longer than he should have done in answering such a simple question.

"...Not *that* big a win! Still got the Toyota."

"The blue one?"

"...Yep. Getting to be a bit of a crate.....Terrible thing about Jane Moyle."

"And her husband. Indeed it was."

I was at that Health Spa I mentioned, breast stroking my way slowly towards the shallow end when the certainty of Phil's guilt arrived. How odd it is that thoughts can suddenly dart into consciousness like shooting stars from the dark. Two obligatory large ladies were standing there chattering away - apart from jaw exercise they only burned calories getting in and out of their bathers - and when one of them laughed in a similar way to Honey, a whinny, I heard her say *He broke the vase and just laughed*. The certainty of Philip's guilt arrived so forcibly that I pulled up as if I had cramp. She had been explaining her decision to me over the phone to sell their collection. Then she had asked me if I wanted a word with Phil. He had overheard! I began to swim again and by the time I reached the deep end any doubts had vanished. And I knew that he must have deduced from my phone call that he knew I knew. He had surely seen me as he passed that day. I heaved myself out and went into the fog of the steam room.

\*

"Hi Phil. Me. Peter. Can I talk to you in private? Something on my mind."

"Say it on the phone."

"No. I'll buy you a bar meal at The Canal. Do you know it?"

"Of course I know it."

He was almost angry.

"If it's pleasant, we can sit outside."

"Thursday evening. Friday is my easy day."

It was a pleasant April evening, so warm that I took my jumper off and laid it on the bench. Quite a few tables were occupied on the lawn by the canal. The resident ducks and geese were patrolling and looking for scraps and handouts. The landlord had opened the Boaters Bar on the ground floor and food orders were being taken there and sent upstairs. I was sipping my second pint when Philip appeared on the wooden steps, twirling his car keys on his little finger. He sat down and I fetched him an orange drink while he studied the menu. I told him I was having the fishcakes.

"The police suspect I have something to do with the murder, Philip."

"You!"

"Yes. The inspector has a vivid imagination. If Jane hadn't been attacked, I reckon I'd have been arrested - at least."

"Why?"

"Don't be disingenuous, Phil. You know why. Want a steak?"

“No. I’ll try the gammon. New potatoes, not chips.”

When I came back from the bar he was smirking to himself as he did when about to say something scathingly witty.

“As soon as you mentioned the imaginary Audi, I knew you knew, Peter. I could hardly believe it when I saw you walking along Leicester Road. I couldn’t decide whether you’d seen me.”

A table of teenage girls were laughing and shrieking at the aggression of one goose who wanted a share of their food. Philip chuckled.

“So what did you do with the porcelain?” I whispered.

“In a lock-up I’m renting. This orange is in a warm glass. I’ll just get some ice.”

I watched a barge untie and chug away in the direction of the woods. A child had grazed its knee on the grass and was screaming. I heard the bump of his glass on the wooden table, but didn’t look up at him.

“You bastard. I love Honey Moyle.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. She came home.”

“Did she see you?”

“Fortunately for her - no. She came in, saw her husband lying there and I thwacked her as she knelt by him. I’d been round a corner. She didn’t see me.”

“Thwacked her? You make it sound like a cartoon.”

He asked me if I wanted another pint before the food came. I didn’t answer, but he went to fetch me one anyway.

“If you’d lent me the money, all this might have been avoided, Pete. And if that silly woman hadn’t got my job - your old job.....she’s nowhere near as well qualified as I am.”

“Jewitt likes to appoint women HoDs. He likes the attention they give him. I should have told you...then you might have left and gone elsewhere. I had no idea you were a monster. I argued for you. You played me like a fish. You sold me Tower Bridge. God....”

“Ah! Here comes the food. Starving.”

The pretty girl put down the plates and exchanged grins with him. He asked her where the vinegar was for my chips. She giggled and fetched a shaker from a nearby table. He looked more serious and told me that when Jane came round it would all work out for us - for everybody. The husband was dying slowly anyway; it was a blessing; the porcelain was insured. He urged me to eat up before it got cold. I hugged my pint and took large gulps while he carefully separated rind from his meat and threw it to the greedy goose.

“Everything all right for yooo?” cooed the waitress.

“Fine.”

He asked her for ketchup and she went off to get it. Between greedy mouthfuls he said “If there’s one thing history teaches us, Pete, it’s that nothing matters. In 1485 there was a battle beyond those woods. You’d never know *now*. The fields aren’t telling. How futile people and their great causes are.”

“You have an alibi, I assume.”

“Why? You won’t report me. Let me think of one though...yep, I was marking in the staffroom. One day is the same as any other. Colleagues would say they saw me even if they didn’t. It’s perfect, you know it is. Come on, eat your salmon cakes.”

I stood up bursting with the urge to shout “murderer.” Instead, I went to the bar. The smirk had returned when I sat down again.

“I’ve just had another good idea. I’ll tell you when I’m ready. I’m retiring early. Like you did.”

“What if there’s forensic evidence? You must have left something....a fibre, muck off you shoes,

a hair...I don't know. If I turned you in, they'd put you under a microscope."

"Do you honestly think I'm so stupid? And you won't turn me in.....Look, do you mind if I throw your chips to the geese?"

They surrounded him like St Francis of Assisi. He was loving their attention and nearby table were thinking what a nice man he was. I grabbed my plate and threw the fish cake onto the grass and it disappeared under a turmoil of feathers, bills and paddles and wings until one waddled off with it, pursued by the others, to the delight of the whole lawn. He told me - in the earshot of others - that he had worn some old pumps which he had never unpacked in his flat. They had never touched his carpets and never touched the interior of his car.

"I put them on on the pebbles of their drive. I wore a hoody - threw it away and the lab coat I nicked from the Chemistry lab. You should be impressed. You recommended me for the post after all. If it wasn't for *her*, you wouldn't give a toss. In fact, you'd be secretly pleased. Be honest. Don't look so miserable. She'll come round. I only thwacked her once."

"What with?"

He picked up my plate and wiped it clean with a serviette then screwed it up and threw it straight into a bin ten yards away. A lad smiled at him and he raised a fist in mock triumph.

"Rosalind and Gemma were right about you. How could I have been so blind! You're a ...."

"Psychopath?"

"Yes."

"Are you scared?"

"Yes."

He stretched and yawned. He said it was a beautiful spot. He loved this time of the year - all the pure white blossom in the hedgerows. How perfect the world would be without us. He knew I thought the same. So saying, he let his stony grey eyes which had been admiring the view, settle on mine. Mine steadily held their own but it was an effort. It was easy for him.

"Do you intend to kill me?" I asked, breaking the game. "You just want to shock me and impress me first?"

He shook his head in sorrow and surprise. Would he be so ungrateful after all the favours I had done him? Would he take such a risk? He knew he could rely on my silence. I would not want to make myself look ridiculous making wild and groundless accusations.

"Am I making sense?"

I nodded.

"So, you worked out the odds, but tell me this. If you're such a good gambler, Phil, why are you always broke?"

"Be quiet and listen. One day, you'll look back and be grateful to me. You'll never tell Jane. She'll get over it too. I've paid you back all I owe you. Slate's clean. Time is such a good healer. Think how peaceful it is now on the other side of those woods. Well, I'm going to have to love and leave you, as my mother used to say. First lesson with the Drongos - then three frees, thank God. Take care. Thanks for the nosh."

He tousled the hair of the admiring boy and I watched him walk back to his car. I drank more beer and watched the ancient stars come out over the battlefield a few at a time as the families and couples around me drifted away home. A grimy moon was hiding behind thin cloud. The pretty waitress came over and told me they were clearing up and shutting the lawn bar. She asked if my friend had gone. She seemed disappointed.

I shuffled and swayed home, only half believing what I had been told. Had it been some amoral charade? I began recalling other comments he had made and they lined up to taunt me while he

hovered in the background like Banquo's ghost

- *Another war wouldn't be a bad idea*

- *Would the human race be a jot the less without this or that individual?*

- *Take away a few hundred great men and where would we be?*

- *I was at the supermarket - what awful people...*

He was telling me he had given me enough clues about himself, so it was my fault. The pavement was sparkling with frosty stars. The thought of oblivion was dangerously attractive. What hope was there? I found myself strangely short of breath and stopped for a while. As I turned into the close where I lived a car door swung open and a voice invited me in. It was DI Box.

"I'm pissed" I said, falling onto the passenger seat.

"Jane is showing signs of coming round. I thought you might like to know. She might remember who attacked her. There again, she might not even remember who she is. The blow caused a bleed."

We sat quiet for a long time. He wanted the news to sink in. We watched the moon fading and brightening as it raced from cloud to cloud. Eventually he said he was a suspicious bastard. Years of contact with liars had ruined his trust in people. Most liars could be exposed in minutes, but odd ones were a challenge. He had been through all the local villains - and even arrested a few. He had had plain-clothes men and women at every car-boot sale for miles looking for a piece of the porcelain to turn up.

"If it were a local yobbo or crackhead, desperate for a few quid, surely a pot would have surfaced by now. Not a sign. Then I find out that you're a bit of an expert on pottery, after all. But you never said."

"Mediaeval pottery. Porcelain is as different as chalk from cheese. Mr Box, you really must press the reset button on this."

"And take Forensics! They can't find a bloody thing that doesn't belong there. All the hairs belong to the victims or the visitors and relatives who've come forward. *And* the fibres!.....No tyre tracks on a pebble drive. All my hopes are pinned on Jane remembering the villain or the car he drove. A bit thin. So where do we go from here? Can you give me a clue? Let me put a scenario to you.....for you to comment on, off the record. Because I can't sleep. I need to get it off my chest.....A man and a woman are desperate to have a life together. The husband stands in the way. She would have left him - was planning to leave him - but then he falls very ill. She feels obliged to stay but equally she feels trapped - staring at years and years tied to a dying man. In the end she agrees to a mercy-killing, quick and painless, dressed up to look like a burglary gone wrong. But the most devious part of the plot is for the murderer not to pretend to be a hundred miles away but to be on his way on foot to visit the victim! He plans to drive there, do the deed, load the boot with the loot and leave before the sister turns up to check on the brother - and raises the alarm. He'll park up afterwards at or near a pub. He'll tell the landlord he's out for a walk and make sure he's remembered by dropping his beer on the floor. At the roadblock he argues with the PC for the same reason. He turns back when he can't get through, goes back to the car and drives home. Is that ingenious or what? But there again, it's a woman's privilege to change her mind. The wife rushes home. There's a big row. He hits her in a mick. Or maybe - this would be really ingenious but quite risky - he clobbers her by agreement. People know they used to be an item. If she gets attacked, lover boy's in the clear. Only he hits her too hard. The doctor tells me she has an exceptionally thin skull. Now then, Peter. Am I hot or cold?"

“Freezing.”

“Why are you so drunk? Guilt? Remorse?”

“Good night. You couldn’t be wronger. Press the reset button. Get some sleep.”

## 6 New Developments

I told that stupid woman she had no right to prevent me seeing Jane. She was not a child!

“You’re not even a blood relative! You self-righteous bible-basher! What do you understand about us? Keith was a self-pitying drunk who couldn’t get an erection. God knows why she stayed with him!”

But she had long put the phone down before I got into my stride. I phoned Box and asked if Jane had seen her attacker. I needed to know. *Why did I need to know? What had it got to do with me, who was wholly innocent?* He put the phone down too.

It was a week into May when Honey came out of hospital. I decided it would be wisest not to contact her - better leave it to her to get in touch if and when she was ready. The local newspaper reported her recovery in a few words and added that she had no recollection of the attack. Box informed me that her medical condition was a confidential matter. His tone of voice was so cold and low. It would do him a power of good to be told of Phil’s confession, so that he could bring him in and grill him for a few days. But Philip was good at pretending in interviews. He would enjoy being disingenuous, furious, astonished and amused in turn, maybe tossing Box a tantalising red herring too slippery in the end to make anything of. He would enjoy the challenge of Box who was also quite cunning. Box would know of his debts - I would tell him - and he would throw them at him out of the blue like the police did with those vicious nail-rods to puncture runaway vehicles. But Philip would have worked out in advance that this would happen and would do a neat side-step.

- *So, I had debts. Millions of people do. Are they all suspects?*

Box would put it to Phil that he had overheard the mention of porcelain. I would tell Box that too.

- *Porcelain? I had no idea she had any.*

Box would mention my sighting of a blue hatchback.

- *A blue car? Not many of them in the county are there? Quite a phenomenon. I was at school marking that lunch hour. I always mark and prepare then. Ask so-and-so and so-an-so.*

Exasperated, Box would demand to know why I, an ex-colleague, would report him if there was nothing in it, and Phil would shake his head sadly. *I’d been like a father to him; everyone knew I loved Jane Moyle; I had imagined seeing his car; I had gotten it into my head that he had betrayed me over a matter at school leading to my resignation - (nothing of the sort!) - and I had nurtured a motive to be revenged on him; resentment had sent me slightly loopy in the vacuum of retirement. Of course we’d met at The Canal Bridge - and talked of how the department was going under Mrs Glover; what his plans were and how I was spending my retirement. Yes, I had consumed a lot of alcohol that night **for my age** and maybe had some kind of fantastical mental experience as a result...delirium tremens??? Oh and by the way, he would be suing the police for wrongful arrest.*

Box would put his head in his hands and conclude that I was a bigger bastard than even he could imagine. Or he would tell himself that at least one of us was pretending. Trying to decide which would drive him crazy. Maybe we were a double-act. He might have us both followed - to lead him to the loot. But Phil would know. He would never fall for such a simple trick.

I had the regional news on. I liked the female presenter - she was so pretty. I enjoyed watching her trying to look natural while her male co-presenter read out the next story. He couldn't do it - the strain showed in his face. She was perfect. Now she set her face and spoke earnestly of yet another raid on a vulnerable old person - this time in Staffordshire. My blood chilled when I heard the name. Madeley. He had been bludgeoned to death. Neighbours were interviewed and one said she had seen him at his front door at around noon on the Friday before. They all said how he was unpopular and a bit of a loner. The reporter on the spot told of a curious and eerie coincidence - of how the victim's wife had been killed in a similar attack twelve years beforehand - while he was at work.

"No-one was ever charged, although police confirm that Mr Madeley was questioned under caution. Now, tragically, lightning has struck twice."

The face staring at me from the screen had cold grey eyes. The shape of the head, although with tufty white hair, was familiar. An hour later my phone rang. I hardly recognized the slow, slurring voice. It was Honey. Had I seen the news? What a terrible coincidence. Diane, the school secretary, had rung her. Philip Madeley had been fetched out of a Monday morning lesson to be told that his father had been murdered. It was quite a shock for me to have a near-certain guess confirmed. I changed the subject and asked her when I could come and see her.

"The formidable Deborah has been keeping me at arm's length. She's appointed herself as moral guardian. I don't understand why you told her about us."

"Deborah's trying her hardest not to show it, but a part of her hates me now. The policeman asked me some very personal questions about us. It made me feel more guilty than ever. Why did he want to know?"

"Box is desperate, Honey. He's so desperate that he honestly believes that I'm involved somehow. He didn't say so?"

"No. He didn't go that far. He just told me that someone had phoned anonymously and given him your name. He was bound to investigate, he said."

"Did he ask if you hoped we might be together some day?"

She hesitated. "Yes he did."

"And you said?"

She began to weep. I told her not to feel guilty. She was not to blame.

"If only you knew, Peter. If only...."

She ended the call. I sent her an email.

*If only I knew what, Honey? Do you have any idea who attacked you? A suspicion which you thought so crazy that you didn't dare even tell the police?*

Hours later she replied.

*Dear Peter,*

*I walked in and found Keith in a pool of blood. I thought he'd had a tumble. That's all I remember. I felt guilty because a part of me - a horrible, selfish, cruel part of me - wanted Keith out of my life so that we could be together. That can never happen now.*

I replied immediately.

*Honey,*

*There must have been a car there. Do you remember the colour? You mustn't blame yourself. We can't help our thoughts. I thought the same thing as you - and still think it. I've made some shocking mistakes in my life but not marrying you was the worst. Maybe in a year or two you will feel less angry with yourself. Time heals*

And I dared to add.....

*but it's running out for us, Honey*

....deleted it, restored it, deleted it again, then restored and sent it. I waited until past midnight and finally she sent back *there was no car*. I was relieved she made no comment on the rest.

I knew from crime programmes that the police organize news conferences for the bereaved to address, so that forensic psychologists can evaluate the likelihood of their guilt. No doubt Philip knew too. He was the picture of misery with the face of an undertaker as he appealed for help in detecting the murderer of his father. The police officer seated next to him announced that the murder had occurred some time between Friday afternoon and Sunday, the body having been discovered by a milkman on Monday morning. George Madeley was 71, so Philip had obviously been a late arrival. What had the experts made of him? Earnestly, stopping to weigh his words, keeping emotion in check, he had spoken in a low voice to those assembled. Could a clever psychopath fool a clever psychologist? Would he know what not to say, what not to do, how not to look? To me, it was a master class in deception, the meticulous portrayal of a relative fighting grief in order to maintain his dignity in public.

The television report switched to a view of a substantial house set back from the road in a small town called Turnbury. I remembered Philip cursing the man's meanness. He would no doubt stand to inherit many hundreds of thousands of pounds and would be an obvious suspect. So what alibi had he trumped up for the Friday evening after work, the whole of Saturday and Sunday? He would never rely on an accomplice. Perhaps he would say he had no alibi, having been alone in his flat, thus trusting to artlessness again, as he had at his interview for the history job. I had drunk some wine - enough for me to phone up and to commiserate.

"What a terrible shock for you, Phil. I bought a sympathy card. Can I bring it round?"

"What's wrong with the post?"

"Now, now. That ain't very friendly. I wanted to ask you how sure you are you'll get away with it."

"Get away with it?"

"Your latest murder."

"My father's dead. How can you say such a thing?"

You know, his indignation almost convinced me there and then that he was innocent. I recovered with a chuckle, telling him no-one was listening in; I would come round. I didn't give him the chance to refuse. He lived in a flat in a modern barracks, one of Earlstone's defunct hosiery factories restored. I struggled to climb the stairs. He opened the front door, looking around and behind me.

"Taking a chance aren't you?"

"I suppose I am. But a second colleague attacked plus your dad would be too much of a

coincidence.”

I wondered then for the first time whether Box’s ears had pricked up at the news of Madeley Senior’s death. Why should it? But at some point the penny would surely drop. If necessary, I would put the penny in the slot.

“A bit risky - even for a skilful gambler like you....”

“You can have fifteen minutes. I’m expecting somebody.”

The room was a chaos of exercise books, text books, Cds and Cd cases.

“Mmm - I see you’ve been tidying up.”

“Have you been drinking? You seem to be struggling. You should be taking better care of yourself. At your age.”

“I’ve had a glass or two. I was wondering what your alibi was.”

“Gemma Cassidy.”

“What? She hates your guts.”

“She does. But she likes the rest of me. Saturday and Sunday we were canoeing in Dovedale. Ask her if you like. She’ll be round in a minute.”

“So how did you do it? It’s sixty miles round to Turnbury. Did you go up after school?”

He smirked. He was dying to boast.

“I know you did it. You more or less said you would at the Canal Bridge. Come on, impress me.”

“How could I do it? I took my car in for a service early Friday before school. Didn’t get it back till Saturday morning. They didn’t have a courtesy car.”

“But you did it. You got the train up to Burton on Friday evening - or hired a car.”

“You’re freezing. I went home with Gemma to her place in Fairleigh Parva. She fed my face...and I fed hers.....”

He kept smirking. If I hadn’t felt so feeble, I’d have wiped that horrid smirk away.

“You did it. Butch is covering for you.”

He leant back and did a genuine laugh. A crazy laugh. It was unnerving to see it for the first time after so many phony ones.

“Do you honestly think I’d trust her to keep a secret? She blabs after one pint of lager! She’s a decent lay - noisy cow - and that’s it.”

He cared for nobody. Not even really about himself.

“You know, I’ve always thought that it’s a real misfortune for some people - I mean to bump into a being like you. There was a girl in Brum - a secretary - eating her sandwiches by a fountain when some nutter just came up and put a machete through her neck vein...then somebody gets out of a car to have a go at the arsehole driving up too close behind them, and gets stabbed to death. It’s just a lottery. You’re the losing ticket. And I - me the great judge of a character - bought you. You bastard.”

He looked at his watch and opened his palms.

“Peter. I’m not going to give you any more clues. You’ve already had a cracker. If you’ve become as stupid as the Staffordshire police, you’ve been neglecting yourself. You were one of the brightest people I’ve met. Come on. Sober up and work it out! Dad was miserable. He had arthritis - much worse than yours. He was looking forward to nothing. He refused to trim his leylandii and was suspected of poisoning a neighbour’s dog. Lots of people nearby had a motive. He was loathed. He affected everybody’s quality of life. Whoever did it, did him - and me - *and* themselves and others a big favour.”

“You’re a monster. Get yourself looked at.....what is the point of this? Just money? You made a mistake somewhere. I’m going to find it.”

He shrugged. “The Staffordshire police can’t pick a hole in me. They think I did it of course. A few bits and pieces stolen as a camouflage - crappy stuff. I have the motive but not the opportunity. How can I drive nearly sixty miles and kill somebody in my lunch hour? Without a car?”

There was a knock at the door. As I left, Gemma looked even uglier than I remembered her. She saw revulsion in my eyes and her face changed from pleasant surprise to resentment in an instant, and the greeting froze on her tiny mouth.

I woke up one morning not long after and just lay there, without the will to move. I had sprung out of bed in those earliest days of retirement, particularly on sunny Mondays, as I used to do as a child, relishing yet another day of fabulous life. If time is a healer, it also puts a scab on novelty. As the classroom faded, so did the novelty of being away from it. To maintain the memory, I had even drawn up a timetable to remind me which set of tormentors I would have been facing at any particular time. I lay there that morning and realised to my utter disgust that I was depressed. There are excuses on wintry days when change is arrested and no progress seems possible. But the May which I had so looked forward to with its hedgerows in white bloom, chestnuts in scarlet and cream flower and woods welcoming me with fresh grass, foliage and seas of bluebells, had been tainted by events.

I forced myself out of bed, put the radio on and tried to slip into my routine, but somehow my timing and positioning in the kitchen were out. I dropped things, bumped into things and all at once felt so dizzy that I slumped onto a chair. It was as if I had entered into a foreign, even a hostile environment. I experienced a strange fear. I saw Tony Goodluck walk past me buckled down by bags of books with a ghastly smile. Death had seemed remote and a puzzle to me in early childhood; remote, because sixty or seventy years seemed an impossible number to tot up; a puzzle, because I could hold my breath and start breathing again at will; surely no-one was forced to die if they just decided to take one more breath, as I could as a child, so easily. At that point I used to think of my mother who was ten times older than tiny me and terrified myself that she was so much nearer her end. But even she had forty or fifty years left and this brought some relief. I contrasted guiltily that childish fear with the secret impatience of the middle-aged adult who had grown tired of her “moods”. I contrasted myself too with Philip Madeley who had been blatantly honest. I decided then and there that he had also killed his mother. I breathed in deeply but the dizziness persisted. To be out of my element that morning upset me, even made me furious, as one thing after another went wrong and objects went spinning out of control or got misplaced. It is a commonplace to say *fish out of water* but it reveals so clearly what is an essential base for our contentment than the phrase intends. To be a smooth operator in the classroom was an unconscious pleasure which I only truly appreciated after the event. Had I been forced to return, God help me, to that work environment after many months away, how ridiculous I would have appeared relearning that smooth routine involving devices, leads, plugs, cupboard doors, drawers, piles of books and all the maps and wall charts around me. It had been my world and I was master of it. Subconsciously, I had begun to feel useless and the strange disruption of my tinier, delimited and trivial world that morning brought it home to me. I understood in a terrible flash of insight how my mother had felt towards her end; due to the weaknesses - in swollen knuckles, painful knees and other key joints - she had been no longer mistress of her world. Things had become too heavy, too intricate, too time-consuming, too risky, too exhausting. It was even too demanding for her, near the very end, to get dressed and she had sat in her dressing gown in front of a TV set she could no longer hear, unable to read

subtitles, next to a case of books which sent her within minutes to sleep, too heavy to hold, too difficult to read and understand. She died one March morning in hospital of congestive heart failure but had been gradually giving up the elements of living for years, one by one.

It occurred to me that Box would be feeling the same depression that morning in *his* little domain; everything - phone, laptop, files and message-runners - everything familiar would be to hand, with only inspiration lacking; his Chief Constable - like a football chairman, impatient for results - would be applying steady pressure. Had he seen the link between the murders? Even if he had, what proof?

Dizzy spells recurred and tests that June confirmed not only osteo-arthritis but, to my horror, a swollen, weakened heart. Within a few years I would seize up or collapse. Drugs would stabilize me but the doctor recommended abstinence from alcohol which he thought might have contributed to my cardiac condition but as it had the effect of numbing the arthritic pain, I ignored the advice. The prospect of life with a term forces a reappraisal. A life with Honey was finally off the agenda. One evening, reflecting on what a struggle it had been to brief the glum minister preparing to celebrate my mother's life at her cremation, I wrote my own obituary under the influence of a very quaffable red wine. After barely a page I put the pen down and wept. The most significant thing I had done was to appear in a twenty second regional news interview about a Viking settlement we had discovered at nearby Elmsby - Elmer's village; no-one knew a damned thing about Elmer but he had at least given his name to a green pond, a clump of trees and some postholes. I threw back my head at the thought and laughed. A glass or two later, I made a very important decision; I would either expose or kill Philip Madeley; he was a monster; I was no Frankenstein - I had not created him - but I had given him a hand-hold in our lives, argued for him and sustained him.

## **7 A Sudden Insight**

In February and March I had enthusiastically sowed seeds in trays but now the seedlings were withered or sprawling. The promising May weather had turned sour in June. I was drinking a very bitter coffee one morning and staring at that timetable I had taped to the cupboard door, looking from the filled-in squares to the spaces, trying to be cheerful, when I realised how Madeley had killed his father. *Let's meet Thursday evening. Friday is my easy day.* I threw the coffee away and went outside to look at my bedraggled roses and shake off the raindrops. The black cloud that had settled over the house had not moved far and another heavy cold shower drove me back inside.

It had just occurred to me that my timetable had been different to his - I had a two free periods on Friday mornings separated by a lesson after break. After his first lesson, due to the incompetence of Hodge, the Deputy Head who drew up such an unbalanced timetable, Madeley was free until quarter to two. Ample time to get to Turnbury and back. He could disappear unless he was needed to cover for a colleague - and he would take the gamble of not being looked for to answer a query from a parent or a member of staff. He had booked his car in that particular morning to stiffen his alibi; around the corner a hire-car would be waiting. I turned the notion over in my mind - even took his place driving to Burton and beyond, parking at a decent distance in a quiet spot, slipping into the house, greeting and murdering his father, putting a few ornaments and gadgets into a bag, walking away, driving away, stopping in a remote lay-by to dispose of the weapon and the swag.....back in time for lunch, telling a colleague I'd been marking some really ropy stuff that morning.

Had it occurred to the Staffs police to ask him about his non-contact time? Another gamble. Enough time had since intervened to persuade colleagues, if asked, to confirm they had seen him at some point that morning, in a corridor, in the hall, in his room, beaver away. He might even have gone out of his way before or after his excursion to cross their paths. Would they, on a busy day, remember precisely when?

I phoned him that evening to tell him I knew how he'd done it.

"Peter? I hardly recognised your voice. Are you okay? Not drinking *again*?"

I told him my theory and he laughed, though not because he was amused; there was an edge to the laughter - it was rather forced - as if he had been taken by surprise.

"But hold on, Detective Smedley. How can you explain Dad being seen alive by a neighbour at just gone twelve?"

"You must have killed him a while after that and then driven back. It's do-able in an hour or so for a mad-head like you. I remember the time you gave me a lift - you scared me half to death." He had done seventy in a fifty miles-an-hour limited road, overtaking on blind bends.

"Peter, that's just too fantastic. I have to hang around till a neighbour conveniently sees him? And then rush back on crappy roads? Unbelievable. Get real!"

After he had abruptly ended the call, the triumph I felt faded. If there was surprise - and even fear - in his laughter, I sensed something else as it replayed itself later that evening. Anger. That night I made doubly sure front and back door were locked.

Of course, he would not worry about leaving traces of himself - hair, fibres, prints - in a house where he had been a visitor. But what a master-stroke of evil genius for him to give my name anonymously to the Staffordshire police! The detectives - a man and a woman - who had come down to interview me were very apologetic - which I assumed was designed to lower my guard - and assured me it was a routine enquiry they were obliged to make; the phone call had most probably been a hoax, possibly made by an ex-pupil. They just needed to *tick my box* and ask me to give an account of my movements that Friday. I had been at home....the rain had scuppered my plan to go out for a walk....I had been alone all day, listening to music and reading. I kept calm and waited to see how they would react to this, and whether they had any other reason to suspect me. Finally it emerged. They had realised that Philip Madeley was an ex-colleague and had re-interviewed him to see if he could explain why anyone would give them my name. What a nerve - he had even taken the risk of giving them cause to suspect that I was his agent in the murder! I imagined him shaking his head in feigned surprise....and then it had come to him; he recalled telling me once how ungenerous his father was, recalled me saying how sorry I was for him.

"He told us that you had been a better father to him than his real one, Sir. Can I read you his statement? *Mr Smedley also felt very badly about me not getting promoted and seemed even obsessed with it. The last time we met in April, a couple of weeks before the murder, he had a little too much to drink and was in tears.* Mr Madeley thought you took a very special, even an unusually special interest in his welfare, Sir. You knew he had debts, didn't you?"

That burly man looked around my lounge while his sweet blonde companion watched me. At the roots along her parting the mousy brown was returning.

"You a bachelor, Mr Smedley?" he asked, as his wandering, wondering eyes returned to my face. He had seen no flowers, no photos, no knick-knacks, no evidence of a feminine touch. When I told him I had never married, he asked me how *I* would describe my feelings for Philip Madeley.

“I have no feelings for him, in the sense you mean.”

“I didn’t mean to imply..”

Of course you didn’t, you see-through man! I held my tongue. I was not going to fall into the trap of getting annoyed or upset. What a twisted mind you had to have to be a police officer. The woman asked me unexpectedly if I knew Turnbury. Of course, they had rehearsed their double-act on the way down.

“No. It’s north of Burton, I believe. It has a ruined castle...”

“Never been?”

“Never.”

“How did you know it has a castle?”

“I’m a historian.”

“Is the red Rover out front yours, Sir?”

“You know it is.”

“A large saloon car of that colour was seen around noon in the area that Friday. We’ve appealed for the driver but nobody has come forward. You knew Mr Madeley was in financial difficulties and had a strained relationship with his father. Were you ever tempted to go up and speak to him on his behalf? You had time on your hands.”

“No. You’re freezing cold.”

“Mr Madeley - George - had a very bad temper - loads of disputes with neighbours - and he could be violent. A discussion could very easily turn into a quarrel and a fight....”

I shook my head and sighed. From a briefcase, the young woman took out a plastic evidence bag. Certain fibres, she said, removed from the crime scene could not be accounted for. They were woollen - possibly from a pullover. Did I happen to have a maroon pullover? My poorly heart thumped and seemed to miss a beat. I had taken my pullover to The Canal Bridge that night. At some point, when I was at the bar, he had pulled fibres from it. I was too dazed with admiration to reply.

“Did you not hear what I said, Sir?” She had a beautiful voice with a rich Lancashire burr, making the question even crueller.

“I’ll go and fetch it for you.”

When I brought it in, her eyes lit up. I smiled sadly. What a clever bastard he was. The man put the jumper into a black sack and tied it. He sat down and asked me if I had been questioned by the local police about a similar crime in February.

“Yes, I was. The same person - the true murderer - phoned the police then too.”

She shook her head. The first caller had been a male, the second a female. I smiled again in admiration. As well as a cruel wit, Philip was a brilliant mimic. He did Jewitt’s peculiar gait perfectly and his version of Gemma Cassidy’s Essex was hilarious. He was a series of gestures and voices, a soulless jukebox. I wondered how long all this had been in the planning. Since the interview? I looked at the darkened faces of the pair opposite who seemed to be expecting a confession. I could, of course, have ranted and raved - ranted that he was the murderer in both instances, that he had bamboozled everyone. They would have listened patiently; one might have taken notes; glances would have been exchanged and eyebrows raised. And, when I had finally subsided, one might have asked why, if my story was true, I had waited so long to tell it? I decided to say nothing. There had to be flaw in his planning.

Eventually I was interviewed under caution and released while the CPS considered if they had enough to make a conviction likely. There was no DNA on the fibres - and I concluded that he

was playing games again. To confound the experts, he had probably washed them. I told my solicitor nothing of those matters. He thought the case was very thin; lots of woolly jumpers were of that colour and there was no DNA; no jury, he thought, given a decent barrister to defend me, would find me guilty on such circumstantial and flimsy evidence. I was much less optimistic. The legal system and the media require - those awful words - an outcome and closure, and I would not be surprised to be charged. What course of action I should take in that event gave me much to think about - as I knew he knew it would. I would have the option of pretending that I had agreed to murder the father on his behalf and swear to that in court. I would sink and pull him down with me. But what a stain on my reputation! It would be more honourable to protest my innocence - even if my life expectancy had been curtailed - even if Madeley got away with it. I deduced that he was such a nihilist that a solitary life in prison was of no consequence to him.

### **8 Off The Record**

It was well after dinner one evening in July when my doorbell rang. It was DI Box and I thought my time had come. But he was alone and relaxed. He came in and I offered him coffee but he frowned. He told me my coffee was even worse than his and asked if I had anything stronger - he was off duty and had walked round from Ashby Rd where he lived. He had been talking to a few people - off the record - including Jane Moyle and a fellow member of the Archeological Society who was related to a good colleague of his at Earlstone police station. I fetched a bottle of wine and poured us a good glass each.

“They all say pretty much the same. You’re not easy to get to know and a bit of an eccentric; you have quite a temper but it takes a lot to make you lose it. But you’re not capable of murder - unless you’ve deceived them all. The average Earstone villain is pretty see-through. Whoever did Moyle and Madeley is devious. He understands Forensics. He pretends to look one way and sees the other. Look, I’m here on my own. I’m not recording you. You are the only suspect. There’s no evidence against the son. But I know there’s something you ain’t saying. Give me a clue.”

It was time. It was the wine.

“Phil Madeley is a very clever psychopath. A murderer.”

He nearly knocked his glass over. I told him everything and he listened with that bird-like fascination, head slightly to one side, eyes sharp and fixed. He wrote nothing down but when I’d finished he took out a notepad and asked me to tell him everything I knew about Madeley as a person, down to the most trivial detail. At one point, he asked me if I would consider going wired-up to his flat but I told him he was too clever to fall for that.

“The last time I spoke to him he was very careful. He knows now my only option is to point the finger at him.”

“Do I sense you admire him?”

“I did. Something bad must have happened to him in childhood to be so callous. The father was a right bastard. He reaped what he sowed.”

“But not Keith Moyle.”

I said nothing. He urged me to rack my brains for other things Madeley had done and said.

“What hobbies does he have? Is he a womaniser? Is he sporty? Is he a drinker?”

It was gone ten when he took his leave. The late twilight was exposing the stars hiding in the east.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about, Peter. It’s a pity you didn’t tell me all this earlier. Old man Madeley might still be alive.”

Of course, I ought to have felt guilty but where guilt should have been there was a void. I have to be honest, I couldn't have cared less.

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When I came in from shopping something in the air told me I had a visitor. I felt the kettle. Warm. A few grains of coffee had been spilt on the worktop. It was ten past four and school was over. Something must have been on his mind all day to come rushing round. I was on beta-blockers and my heart could not respond to adrenalin. I thought about calling the police on my mobile but did not. It took only a minute to reboil the remaining water, leaving a bleak silence after the kettle switched itself off.

Through the open kitchen door I shouted "Do you want a top-up, Philip?" but only the whining fridge answered.

I crept into the lounge and saw the back of his head above my favourite armchair. He avoided my eyes as I came round to look at him.

"You found the spare key then?"

"Easy. You ought to be more careful with all these jobs about," he said and smirked.

I placed his new mug - very milky, two sugars - on the low table and sat down at sixty degrees to him on the sofa where the Staffordshire officers had weighed me up.

"Have you come to finish me off?"

"Oh no. If I had, you'd know about it by now. Or rather you wouldn't."

His shoulders trembled at his wit. He said he was worried he'd told me too much.

"It's bothering me."

"Things are *bothering* you?? It's a good sign."

"What of?"

"That there is good in you."

I thought of the geese and the little boy. He smiled and picked up his new mug to drink two-handed like comforting soup.

"There is generosity in me. It was kind to kill Jane's husband. To him, to her, to you. I didn't - and don't - give a shit about the porcelain.....You're both pleased he's dead. People are such hypocrites, such actors. They feel obliged to say what decency requires. I find it so tedious. A soldier gets killed in Afghanistan and he is elevated to sainthood from the drunken wife-beating racist everyone knew him to be. People are so easy to fool and so keen to fool themselves. How ludicrous it seems to us today - the mass-hysteria generated by Hitler. Revolting. Have people changed? No. People are still revoltingly stupid - in spite of mass education. What are the new idols? Celebrities of no talent, cars, fingernails, hair, skin, deodorants....tattoos...What revolting, self-obsessed little monsters we all are - like the fat little tart who ended your career.....Cyclopes blinded by their own fingers.....Forests? Cut 'em down for tables and chairs....Flowers? Trample on 'em....Stars? They might as well not bother to shine..... Keith Moyle was on a slow conveyor-belt to oblivion. I only speeded it up. Father was a misanthrope. There was no *point* to him. He talked about selling up and buying a bungalow, a horrible bungalow like yours and your neighbours'. Little men and little women in little shells on little pensions, reading little newspapers reinforcing their little prejudices, bolting their little doors and windows to keep out the big bad wolf. Bungalow Bill. How do you define a bungalow?"

"No idea."

"It's half-way between a house and a coffin."

He barked with laughter. Didn't I find that amusing? He looked almost hurt when I shook my head.

"You are a very cruel man, Phil. An alien. Not generous in any way."

"Only as cruel as truth. No matter."

"Tell me how - precisely - you killed your Dad. That's partly why you came round. You need admirers. You killed your mother too. She didn't love you either."

He kept sipping his coffee as if he hadn't heard. I told him I admired him for planting my pullover fibres at the scene and he smiled to himself. Had he been a cat, he would have purred.

"Thank you for washing my DNA out, otherwise I'd have been in the cart."

"And then you really would have been forced to accuse me. Of course, you still might be...if the CPS is as predictably dim as ever... but you'll only make yourself look silly if you do. *Unless* you can work out how I did it - you're three-quarters there - and then persuade the stupid police to believe you."

"I told Box about you and he believes me."

"He came to see me off-duty. He told me he wouldn't rest until he pinned me down. He's quite bright. He bothers me too. But knowing is one thing. Persuading a jury is another. I *ought* to be relaxed.....there are clues....but I reckon that neither you nor he are astute enough to find them. It needs lateral thinking. You do the Times crossword pretty quickly. Is it a futile exercise - or can those skills be applied beyond? An interesting question."

I told him I was confused. He had talked about being bothered - but now he was challenging me to find the missing pieces in the jigsaw. I dared to add that, in truth, like many compulsive killers, he really wanted to be caught.

"Philip. I think you're schizophrenic."

His eyes briefly rolled up into his head leaving the whites to show his contempt.

"Peter. You're as crazy as I am. You know what frightens you most about me?"

"Go on."

"You agree with everything I say."

"Bollocks! Would your conscience honestly allow me to go to prison to serve your sentence?"

He put his coffee down and stared at nothing. If I imagined he was thinking this moral problem over, I was shaken when he confessed that it was bothering him that the police might put it into my head that he had put me up to kill his father.

"At first, of course, your natural moral outrage would lead you to deny it. But eventually that moral outrage might give way - in the light of your conviction - or the probability of your conviction - to something less moral. The desire for revenge. Or you might plead guilty and testify against me for a lighter sentence. You're old. To you, five years are precious. Of course, I plead not guilty and get a maximum term. That was the fly in my ointment. And now that I've just looked in your bag of pills, it's become a big spider. You have heart failure. That might alter everything."

He looked at me pointedly now, silently inviting me to swear not to implicate him in the second murder. There was threat in his eyes. My heart missed a beat but instead of fear, a feeling of total indifference about my safety overwhelmed me. He prized his freedom after all! Suddenly I felt defiant. I had been on the back foot for too long and wanted nothing more than for him to keep *bothering*.

"If I thought I was going to do your time while you were out somewhere canoeing or sailing, of course I'd drop you in it. Do you think I'm so dull not to have thought of all that for myself? You arrogant arse! Now you have a perfect motive to kill me, but the trouble is, now I've told Box, it

might well not be third time lucky.”

He ran the tip of his tongue inside his cheeks and muttered something. I had definitely scored a point. I goaded him by saying he would have to try and make it look like suicide.

“I’m under the pressure of police suspicion...I might be feeling suicidal with guilt...and I have a life-limiting disease.”

He finally shook his head. “Too risky, Peter. I’ve got a better idea. You can be just another random victim of a house-breaker! As I said, these days you can’t be too careful....fancy keeping you spare key under a brick....I ask you....”

In spite of my determination to stay calm I heard my voice waver. I felt very cold.

“Another victim? Three of us - no, four including Honey. That makes a pattern with one common thread. You.”

“No. No pattern at all. It would be just a detail inside a much larger pattern of widespread violent burglaries in the county. I’ve just had another brainwave. And do you know what? You won’t be around to see it, but the day after next there will be another break-in five doors away. I’ll have a decent alibi...not too cast-iron...alibis can be too cast-iron. Good coppers get suspicious.”

“And have you got an alibi for tonight?”

He got up and stretched. He had a full day’s teaching the next day and had to be off to do his marking, he said.

“I’ll just kill you and push off. I’m sure nobody saw me arrive.”

He put his mug down carefully on the table. I asked him how he planned to do it. He said he’d look for something in the kitchen.

“When I’ve finished my coffee. Not bad. Better than your usual.” An idea came to him and he smirked again. “At least this time I won’t have to worry about Forensics, having been here quite a few times. All I need to do is to wash my mug up thoroughly. Where do you keep your Fairy liquid?”

He glanced into the kitchen and his despicable smirk widened. The meat-mallet would do the trick, he thought. Would he mind if he took it with him afterwards?

“Are you coming in the kitchen or do you prefer to stay in the lounge?”

I could not move. He frowned at his watch. The whine of the fridge cut out. I had often wondered how the approach of death would affect me. What did those facing their imminent execution think of? I can truthfully say I was so terrified that my mind was a blank. He returned, picked me up and gently pushed me into the armchair he had vacated. My arms and legs were weak as in a dream. He put the television on. (This would be a mistake as all my friends knew I hated daytime programmes.) He seemed to read my mind and switched it off. He placed the book I had been reading face down on the arm of the chair.

“This should look a pretty convincing scene,” he said more to himself than to me.

The ringing in my head was so loud I thought for an instant he had delivered the first blow. But it was the doorbell. *Blast* he said. The door was opened and I heard a muffled exchange of words in which I heard my name mentioned. Somehow I got up and saw a woman standing in the doorway.

“I just popped in for a chat,” he said. “Good job I did. He’s not very well. Good to see you looking so well though, after all you’ve been through.”

It was Honey. I hardly recognized her, she was so thin and pale. He told her he was on his way out, looked back at me, smirked and vanished.

“God, Peter, you looked ghastly,” she said. “Whatever’s wrong?”

I could not make up my mind what to say. She took off her raincoat and felt my forehead. I asked

her to make a cup of tea and bring me my mobile phone. Finding Philip's number I texted him to assure him I had said nothing to Honey of his plan. But the alarming thought struck me that he might have already doubled back to kill two birds with one mallet. I told her to lock all the doors. She came back into the lounge and sat down. She asked me why I was so afraid and the truth spilled out. She nodded. She knew for certain now who her assailant was.

"You know?"

"The only thing which came back to me after I woke was a memory of a smell. It was a familiar one but it took me until yesterday to place it. It had something to do with the staffroom. As I was dropping off I realized it was Madeley's aftershave."

"You didn't see him though."

"No. I know it's a useless piece of information as far as the police go. But I never trusted him. Smarmy. Insincere. We'd better go."

"Where? Not to your place!"

"To Deborah's?"

"No way.... My brother will put us up at his hotel in Ashby-de-la-Zouch. I think I can drive."

"No. I will."

## 9 Lateral Thinking

It is very eerie how things disconnected in time can combine to stunning effect in the future. In the summer term of 2007, a boy called Liam, a lovely lad with a reputation for clowning, had been on his way to the canal to do some fishing, and one of his girlfriends had kicked out at him in mock-anger. He had stepped into the busy road and been instantly killed by a delivery van. At that very moment, Philip Madeley had probably been on his way home from his previous school in Derbyshire. He might have even heard of it on the regional news that evening, but given it no further thought. The boy's father had drunk himself into a stupor and finished in a heap amongst the bouquets of flowers on the pavement. I recalled Honey being heartbroken - Liam had been a lovable rogue with great talent for drawing (and graffiti tags - but let that pass.) How ironic that the death of her favourite would ultimately lead to the undoing of her husband's killer.

We were driving away to Ashby when I saw in a flash - literally - how Madeley's alibi could be destroyed. Liam's death had caused a storm of protest from the residents along Leicester Road who had long campaigned for a dropping of the speed limit. The County Council, with customary brass-necked stupidity, had refused to budge. After a schoolboy's death, they had no choice. Radar warning signs had been put in and cameras. As Honey sped towards the Canal Bridge pub and caused the **30** warning to light up, I told her to slow down. Instantly I saw again that red car hurtling past me, and that was that. If my hunch was right, not even that great genius Philip Madeley would be able to explain how he could be in two places at once - in school *and* on camera, just a quarter of a mile from Keith Moyle's dead body. As we passed Honey's house, I phoned Box.

## 10 In Conclusion

You know, it amuses me, having listened to certain people, to construct a fictional realm of mind and world for them to inhabit. Although, of course, I cannot deduce all they are thinking, there is enough in what they say to piece much of their mental activity persuasively together. Their unspoken opinions and comments can be deduced from their previous and current behaviour. Take Jewitt the headmaster, for instance. His eyebrow twitch made it obvious he was on the verge of paranoia and had agonies about his reputation. On dark Monday afternoons, during the

staff meeting, I caught him glancing at his reflection in the window to check his appearance out. I knew then that he must practise his turns of phrases in the bathroom mirror, setting his face in such a way as to inspire respect and admiration. He reminded me of a certain politician, now retired. But none of Jewitt's efforts could alter the fact that he was intellectually unfit to be leader.

I could also picture Wendy Cassidy applying make-up to the lower part of her face to tone down its masculinity. Had she been a man, she could have grown a moustache and beard as distractions. And how often did I notice Jane glance at Peter? She could not help it. Her face betrayed her discontent with her lot and I imagined her caught between the pleasures and remorse of adultery. I imagined her lying there next to her husband, like Emma next to Charles Bovary, in a foment of disgust, agitation and guilt. It was her casual mention of the porcelain which showed me a way to rescue her. If I had driven back a different way, Peter would not have seen me and I would not have been caught on camera. I found out later about the boy Liam. That smug detective told me. In answer to my own question, no, I had no recollection about that boy being run down.

To use Peter as the narrator of my story when he was in fact merely a character in it was a device which intrigued me. It also amused me to write the account in his sarcastic, complaining old-farty style. He was pretty transparent – I read him in a few seconds the first time we met. I did admire his stoicism in doing a job he had ceased to love. I knew it would happen to me one day and resolved to escape that fate. When that foulest of girls accused him of verbal abuse I saw a way to further my cause and rescue him at the same time. Perhaps I got him all wrong but my heart was in the right place. If he had not called me that word on the lawn of the pub and things had gone right for me at school, then I would not have implicated him in my father's death. It was an impulse, a bit of a joke - a challenge to his retired, atrophying brain.

I was only a child of six or so when I saw with horror how isolated we all are. I was eating of all things - you might smile - brussel sprouts and I looked around the table wondering if the rest of the family experienced them - their bitter flavour, smell and texture - in the same way as I did. Suddenly I realised, looking around from mother, to father, to sister - each at a different seat on that oblong board - that all of us had their unique perspective on the world and "owned" a unique segment of it to be given back at death. The insight provoked nausea in me and after I came back from the toilet my mother slapped me and screamed at me - for eating what obviously I obviously could not stomach. She told me that sprouts would never be put on my plate again. I only smiled to myself and never bothered to explain my nausea to such a cruel, stupid person. She behaved the next morning as if her fit of ridiculous temper had never happened. This set me thinking. If a horrible event could so easily dematerialize, then what did anything matter? Punishment – even for a murder – was futile. Did it alter the event? Did it deter others? If we cannot share the same vantage point on the world, then grief is subjective. What matters to me is of no consequence to a billion others. I find this a pain-numbing thought, the key to a queer kind of happiness. A ruthless energy terrorises substance and predators are the perfect embodiment of it. Pity and compassion are late-comers under the stars. The default setting is evil.

To "sit next" to Peter in the account and see myself and events from his angle was a challenge. What he hadn't revealed – consciously or otherwise - about his mentality, I made up. The philosophical – the nihilistic – musings are all mine in his mouth. But I am convinced that I am not far off the mark. His catch-phrase when things went wrong – as they increasingly did for him – was *And who'll care in a month's time?* I think Peter was the nearest thing to an ally I ever

had. I did not in fact threaten to kill him. That was a dramatic device. Jane Moyle turned up while I was debating whether to or not.

I have the satisfaction of knowing that I was not caught due to my own incompetence but to sheer bad luck. When the speeding ticket dropped through the letter box I saw it as the only threat to my crusade. After some reflection, I concluded that the left hand - the CID - would have no idea of the actions of the right hand - the police department which issues tickets. It could of course be argued that my love of speed and my impatience were my tragic weaknesses, as ambition was MacBeth's and self-doubt (not jealousy) was Othello's. But Peter and the police never guessed that I had put talcum powder in my hair and dressed in Father's clothes before hanging around outside his house until one of his noxious neighbours came past. He had already been dead for over an hour. I got back to school with five minutes to spare, parked Butch's car in the same spot from where I had taken it and dropped the keys in her coat pocket in the PE Office. She had no idea. What a gamble.

Perhaps you are wondering whether I had Peter exaggerate my antipathies towards others? No. They pretend to have feelings they cannot possibly have. If you don't believe me, look at their grim faces in cars when they have no need to smarm and charm. Those are their real faces, the ones they wear when they think themselves unobserved and do not need to make an effort to be nice. Animals are always honest. I wish I had been a bird. I was born all wrong. I am not unhappy here because having never been happy anywhere, I cannot define unhappiness. I have my privacy. I have a thousand more stories to write where I can inhabit and eat away from the inside the people I have known and disliked. Peter did not know it, but if he had guessed how I had killed Father, like Rumpelstiltskin I would have vanished. I enjoyed seeing his face in court when I gave my secret away.

As for all those opportunistic burglaries in the town, I have to admit I was intrigued by the risk and the thrill of performing one. I went into a road near to Peter's bungalow one January evening and saw that the upstairs light was on in one particular house. Downstairs was in darkness. I pulled the hood of my cagoul over my head, tried the door and walked in. On the kitchen table was a purse. As I left, I put it on the telephone table in the hall. In less than ten seconds I could have been a hundred pounds richer. But I am not a thief. There was not a soul about in the street. What rich pickings there were to be had.

Peter sent me a nice letter after the dust had settled. He said he felt sorry for me to have turned out this way. He and Jane have sold up and moved to the coast. I might be an ill wind but I did at least blow them some good.

And I did tell them where I had hidden the precious porcelain.

PM.

