

THE CRAZY OIK

ISSUE 1 – SPRING 2009

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Front cover

L.S Lowry – Father and Sons (detail) 1950

Back cover

L.S. Lowry – Man on a Wall

THE CRAZY OIK
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EDITORIAL

THE CRAZY OIK AND THE SAINSBURY'S CARROT

If the Archbishop of Canterbury said there was no God you could hardly be more surprised than when the Pope of proletarian literature - Alan Sillitoe - said there was no such thing as a proletarian writer – specifically “an oxymoron that only a moron would use”. Well – up to a point Lord Sillitoe. One might argue there are only good writers and bad and the reader shouldn't bother about where they're coming from, but the proletarian writer *is* a literary entity, (just ask Ken Worpole) and an unjustly neglected one who doesn't get a fair shake when it comes to publication. Alan, of course, can't be considered a prole these days – he said goodbye to all that long ago – but has he written anything better than *Saturday Night* and *Ragman's Daughter* since?

We merely contend that the industry winnowing process isn't perfect. These days we get literary equivalent of the Sainsbury's carrot – scrubbed clean, perfectly sized and shaped but – well - bland. As Will Self put it in a recent *Guardian* article:

You might've thought that such unreconstructed individualists as writers would have found the transition to collective word-farming difficult to take - that some would rebel, or engage in seditious samizdat publication. Not a bit of it! Suffice to say, all those burgeoning creative writing courses in the run-up to the Great Recession had produced a startling uniformity of both style and approach among younger writers: these were creative labourers deeply conditioned to accept the kind of intrusive and critical editing that forms the corporate culture at the Ministry of Fiction.

Crafty oiks, like Lord Sillitoe, learn to jump through the Ministry's hoops but there's also the crazy oik who just feels the urge to write. He doesn't sign up for Professor Amis's writing course at Manchester University (and he probably wouldn't get in if he tried) but he just has to get that stuff on the page even if it finishes up in a shoebox in the wardrobe. We don't say Ray Blyde is a better poet than TS Eliot or that Tom Kilcourse is the new Chekhov. We simply say these writers are interesting and funny and that if it had been left to the industry you'd never have come across them.

Prole lit is a vast oilfield under a desert where all the drilling rigs are owned by the middle class: result – a desultory trickle. The Manchester based

magazine *Voices* tapped this reservoir for a while but that was dismantled twenty five years ago. The Crazy Oik is, therefore, a modest new borehole into that neglected reservoir. We look for eccentricity, authenticity, a spark of wit, or as Jack Conroy, editor of the *Amil* put it “we prefer crude vigour to polished banality”. Feel like contributing? Know any crazy oiks? Get in touch.

Ken Clay April 2009

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Voices (now defunct) – the complete run of the magazine of proletarian writing *Voices* 1972 - 1984 appears on the website www.mancvoices.co.uk. Reprints of the magazine are available in 5 volumes via the website.

The Penniless Press – not an exclusively oik magazine, and certainly not entirely crazy, but a fine, alternative organ edited by Alan Dent, strong on European radical influences and a champion of the unknown genius. From 100 Waterloo Road – Ashton – Preston PR2 1EP
Website www.pennilesspress.co.uk

Ken Worpole – the true Pope of Prole Lit has identified and encouraged the genre in his great book **Dockers and Detectives** reprinted in 2008 by Five Leaves Publications.
Ken’s website is at <http://www.worpole.net/>



DECLINE AND FALL

Ken Clay

Ralph had gone crackers before, at the age of eight. It had been triggered by the stained-glass gloom of the church hall his class moved into after the bright neatness of the infant's school, and the fear of chaos which sucked him into a panic whenever the teacher left the room. After the tearful hysteria came the convalescence at home: four months with his mother and his books, toasting muffins on a black wire toasting fork, building skyscrapers with the dominoes and playing with his newts in the sink. Nervous debility they called it then. That wasn't how he felt now but something, somehow, was going wrong.

'It seems a perfectly normal testicle to me' said the doctor. Ralph looked down at his pants round his ankles. What made him say it he couldn't imagine; it just came out.

'Why is a fat man like a Cornish borough?'

The doctor looked up in surprise. The reflector, a purely decorative feature, flashed on his head.

'Because he never sees his member' said Ralph hurriedly, as though anxious to get it over with. It was as if he had been momentarily possessed.

'But you're not fat at all Mr.Ralph. Indeed for a man of your age' the doctor picked up his card, 'forty eight - you're remarkably trim.

'It's thanks to home cooking' said Ralph.

'Wife watches your diet does she?'

'My mother' said Ralph 'She has a gift for rendering food inedible'.

'She should open a slimmer's restaurant. Has it been painful?'

'Not exactly.'

'Then why are you here?'

'It feels...!' Ralph searched for the impressive medical periphrase, 'incipiently pretumescent.'

The doctor returned to his swivel chair. Ralph pulled up his pants.

'Well that's a new one on me. Incipiently pretumescent ... hmmm.'

He reached for a block of sick notes.

'Not decorating the hall by any chance?'

'No.'

'Sleeping all right?'

'Yes.'

'No problems at work? Threats of redundancy?'

'No.'

'What is it you do exactly Mr.Relph?'

'I'm an historian.' Again that strange compulsion. 'I mean I'm a clerk, in the Export department at Carlisle Industrial Chemicals

The doctor had a bad memory for faces and an even less distinct recall of his patients' complaints. Medicine bored him; it was just a messy form of engineering. What really interested him was sociology; how people lived, what their homes were like, what they ate, what they spent their money on. The card said he'd treated Ralph six years ago for influenza. He noticed the address: Lawson street, it was on the estate. That was the area he most liked to visit - those rooty working class interiors!

'Yes, I remember you'. Now he was holding his head between finger and thumb, his left arm was stretched out as if summoning higher powers. 'Bedroom full of books, big dog, upright piano, foreign dictionaries...'

Ralph was astonished. This man really did care for his patients. It was a performance which never failed to impress those who were tolerant of his vocational deficiencies.

'Bust of Augustus on the mantelpiece in the front room, potted palm five feet high grown from a seed brought back from Marrakech' and then, his eyes growing wider as if he could scarcely believe his own memory, 'Mother smokes a corncob pipe!'

'Exactly right. The palm tree died though - that bad winter.'

'Really? Well come back if it does start to swell.'

Ralph walked out reassured but still bowlegged. The doctor scribbled on the card: 'Hypochondria anxiety induced' and rang for the next patient.

Back at the office Ralph spent an hour in the toilets with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. It was modesty rather than fear which impelled him to stick it inside his Fair Isle pullover before returning to his desk. The boss, Chief Clerk Arnold Waxblinder, had only recently risen to power and still felt too guilty to discipline an old friend. Furthermore Ralph didn't like to flaunt his accomplishments. He might reluctantly slip into a foreign language if there

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were no English speakers on the other end of the line, just as he might, if pressed, explain to Arnold the constitution of the Roman Legion in the reign of the Emperor Claudius. But he had discovered in his younger days that enthusiastic monologues on history or foreign parts made people regard him as a freak, a poseur and a snob.

Waxblinder had made the coffee. Ralph considered it foul; it was currently Mellow Birds made with powdered milk. He felt he was drowning in mellowness after drinking similar concoctions for the past ten years. But he didn't protest, not wishing to hurt Arnold's feelings.

'A telephonic communication from Jenks' said Arnold putting the kettle back into the filing cabinet, 'regarding that consignment of paradichlorobenzine for Barcelona, could you procure the appropriate Brussels nomenclature and inform the Overseas Distribution department of same?'

'Jenks phoned: get the Brussels number for that paradi and tell Brian' thought Ralph. It was a game he liked to play; to see how fast and how much he could compress Arnold's inflations.

A cup of unusually glutinous sludge slid towards him. Opalescent globules of fat floated between slicks of metallic grey.

'Additional dried milk' explained Waxblinder, 'The container was almost depleted, and it is Friday afternoon, so I inserted it in its entirety. A permissible indulgence I'm sure you will concur.' They slurped synchronously.

'An unprepossessing prospect' said Waxblinder staring out of the window at the high, corrugated asbestos wall of the Packing Shed. 'I doubt if tomatoes will thrive on this window ledge.'

'We didn't last long with our view of the golf course after old Dekker retired. This place reminds me of school.' Ralph's voice faltered slightly.

'He seemed to wield some strange power over our masters. Under his sovereignty we were inviolate.'

'Now we're on our own.'

'Until Monday'

'Monday?'

'A new recruit, a temporary, reinforcement by courtesy of the Youth Opportunities Programme, joins us in our labours.'

'Better than the dole I suppose.'

'Well I wonder. It rather depends on one's inner resources.' Waxblinder had raised the concept of inner resources to the level of a mystical power. A week didn't go by without his alluding to them. 'I, as you know, never pass an evening in the week without completing some little household repair, even if it is no more than wiring a three pin plug. I find that the house, the garden and the vehicle provide an unending series of tasks and that the regular habit of meeting such challenges not only saves one a great deal of money but also develops one's inner resources in a manner which more passive pursuits such as reading, listening to music or watching television cannot do. Armed with this capacity for independent constructive activity I feel that retirement holds no terrors for me - nor even the dole, I hasten to add.'

'Yes' said Ralph. What he felt most in need of himself at the moment was ten years' solitary confinement but he didn't want to upstage Arnold by saying so. After another hour's desultory scratching in a large ledger Arnold meticulously repacked his briefcase; the *Daily Telegraph*, the Tupperware box and the empty powdered milk tin which would store nails in his garage. Then he checked his Japanese quartz watch against the speaking clock and accompanied Ralph to the main entrance.

'Poets day' said Waxblinder as usual.

'Piss off early, tomorrow's Saturday' answered Ralph mechanically.

Since it was Friday it would be fishcakes - one of his mother's few successes. And since it was the last Friday of the month Ron would be visiting after tea. Two beams to illuminate the gathering darkness of life with his mother as she declined into an eccentric senility. Eating was becoming particularly hazardous. He had got used to cutlery with old, dried food on it, and white, wispy hairs in his sandwiches but lately there had been tea made from dried rosemary and lentil soup made from a packet of birdseed, not to mention dottle in the custard and a peculiar pattern of whorls and streaks, like a fading Hokusai seascape, on his supposedly clean plate. After a great deal of thought he concluded that it could only be dried dog saliva. Rufus was a geriatric Red Setter which drooled continually. Years earlier, in its destructive puppyhood, it had chewed volume six of *Clarendon's History of the Great Rebellion*. That had cost Ralph half a week's wages. Further cause for detestation

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emerged in one of his mother's revelatory reminiscences: 'I said to your Dad that my children were going to have distinguished names, and even distinguished initials too, because that was what would appear on briefcases and signet rings. It was about the time that the Rolls Royce was coming into fashion, George the Fifth had one of course, possibly two, and I was about six months gone when we were listening to the wireless and they were going on about names. And I looked down at Blackie, the Labrador we had at the time, I'm sure she knew exactly what I was saying to her, and I said to her, Blackie, I said, what do you think we should call him? And she looked up with those big brown eyes of hers, lifted a paw, cocked an ear, and would you believe it! ... Barked twice!

Ralph did believe it, and cursed the whole of canine creation whenever he thought about it. And yet his anger rarely broke the surface; it seethed, instead, under a shell of self-discipline augmented by a sense of personal worthlessness. Occasionally perhaps a steamed pudding covered in salt or the need to retrieve the current *Guardian* from under a pile of rotting fish skins in the dustbin stirred up a tidal wave of rage. And such was the violence of the subsequent quarrel, for Mrs. Relph did not take criticism calmly, that the neighbours might easily hear this student of Goethe and Pascal, this lover of Macaulay and Burke, call his mother 'a scrofulous, senile, old slag only fit for the knackeryard.' And she, by way of a response, might label her elder boy, the master of five European languages and the author of an as yet unfinished two hundred thousand word historical novel 'a shiny-arsed, pen-pushing nobody who'd be lucky to find any other woman to put up with him.' Then the waves would subside to a ripple and soon the usual, glassy Sargasso would supervene.

After tea he sat in the middle room alongside Eamonn Andrews bellowing at ninety decibels from the twenty six inch TV and read the letter from Roderigo which had arrived that morning' Roderigo answered his questions on Las Ramblas and the Barrio Chino, recollected the good times they'd had the year before in Cataluna and complained how tiresome his mother was becoming now that she had added incontinence to deafness. Ralph put the letter in a box-file marked VI. There were five other files full of similar letters from solitaries with similar mothers in Vienna, Munich, Bordeaux, Naples, Antwerp, Copenhagen and Basle. Travel was one of

Ralph's escape routes and there wasn't a day of his annual five weeks holiday which he didn't spend abroad.

Ron arrived at half past eight. He brought his mother a large box of liqueurs. He used to bring Walnut Whips until Ralph told him how she had found one under the table and carefully brushed it onto a shovel and thrown it in the bin. There was the usual interchange about the kids with Ron explaining yet again that he only had them every other weekend. After enduring a final bulletin on her arthritis and a check to see if he was wearing his vest he was allowed to retire to Ralph's bunker - the front room. Ron had brought a bottle of claret which he introduced as a cheap supermarket plonk. He knew Ralph would see through that one but his habit of undervaluing his own generosity had become automatic. The TV had been accepted as a used cast-off from a departmental colleague and numerous other items in the house, from the washing machine to the cut glass fruit bowl had been similarly smuggled in. Ron didn't feel guilty about his relative affluence although he had reason to. He was ten years younger than Ralph and had risen cleanly through the academic system. Ralph might have done the same but the awesome burden of penetrating the middle-class world, a burden partially embodied in the list of expensive things required for the Grammar school - uniform, sports gear, satchel was too much for his parents. Father was out of work then and said that if it was in Ralph it would come out anyway. By the time Ron came up to the same hurdle they were all working. And when father died Ralph willingly supported Ron through University.

It was only now that the brothers were getting to know each other. As a boy Ron had always seen Ralph as a bookish, bespectacled eccentric, fastidiously neat, eerily detached. And since by now he was thoroughly bored with sociology and quite disenchanted with the academic world he found in Ralph a perfect guide to his latest passion - literature. Ralph's tonic enthusiasm blazed in comparison with the dreary lectures he had occasionally dropped in on, and what he lacked in rigour he made up for in range. Frequently Ron recognised that the text he was struggling with in English had been absorbed decades earlier by his mentor in the original German or French. Ralph refused to consider these accomplishments as in any way comparable with Ron's academic achievements. He had that reverence for institutional learning common to the intelligent work-

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ing class and imagined oak-panelled staff rooms with erudite, quotation-loaded conversations, fuelled by unlimited supplies of Port, bouncing between chintz armchairs and leather sofas. Ron described an introverted clique of dreary status-seekers. The younger specimens claiming to absorb knowledge almost osmotically, without effort, while secretly devouring every obscure journal they could lay their hands on: their elders emerging infrequently from committee meetings to damn with faint praise any challengers to their out-dated ideas. Ralph, he concluded, was more like his own ideal than three quarters of the faculty of Social Science. He had only recently learned of his brother's literary project - the massive historical novel. His own creative inclinations, which Ralph enthusiastically encouraged, were crystallising, but the subject was more personal. Ron produced six sheets of double spaced A4, perfectly typed on the department's golf ball, and read:

'I could hear our dad coming up the back yard, hear his boots clacking on the slate-blue, diamond-patterned tiles, and the ticking of his three speed as he wheeled his Rudge into the coal-shed. I felt I wanted to run for it but felt ' at the same time, that I had to stay; it was, after all, only partly my fault. Ralph was upstairs, as usual, sticking pins in the *Daily Express* map of World War II, the one with the silhouettes of tanks and planes in the corner and rows of black soldiers ending invariably with a soldier who had been split clean down the middle. The war had finished six years earlier but it was the only map of Europe they had in the house. Ralph liked to measure distances between all the major towns and note them down in an indexed book. My mam glared at me and said: 'You stand there and take what's coming to you!' Dad came in smelling of sand and iron and cigarettes, and hung his big, black overcoat on the nail under the stairs. On Thursdays he looked forward to his favourite pork chops. He glanced expectantly at the oven and took off his bike clips. I had only been asked to keep an eye on Snowball and hoped he would understand but I felt a shiver run through me when my mam blurted out, just as he was rolling his sleeves up for his wash in the old, brown sink: 'Dog's had thi chops Frank. I've made you a nice tater pie instead.'

It was yet another colourful fragment from his growing mosaic of childhood reminiscence. Ralph listened and laughed. The detailed precision of Ron's memory delighted him and he found it

strange that even now, forty years later, he could still be hurt by learning of his parent's low opinion of him as a child. It was from an earlier piece of Ron's that he had discovered they called him 'That one' when he wasn't there. The present offering went on to describe his father's gambling and his mother's great gift for the withering nag. Ralph chortled and squirmed and another bottle of claret materialised from inside Ron's mac.

'You always took dad's part' said Ralph when he had finished.

'I admired the old chap.'

'He could be a monster you know; lazy, extravagant, selfish, feckless, dictatorial.'

'He had a lot to put up with. She was always going on at him. Christ! Those rows!'

'But she was the one who kept us on the rails. We would have finished up in the workhouse if it hadn't been for her. I've been thinking about it a lot since you started reading your pieces. Your allegiances are quite the opposite of mine even though we experienced the same events. I wonder if it isn't your bad marriage which is at the root of this paternal bias. I realise that the historian cannot fail to bring his prejudice to his material but my own recollections incline me to believe that the old man', he paused for effect and took a swig at the wine, 'was verging on the clinically insane, and that if he hadn't died prematurely of pneumonia would have finished up in an asylum.'

'Mad!?' Ron didn't know whether to laugh or feel outraged. 'How can you even suggest it?'

'You remember his moods surely?'

'Moods?'

'Sulks.'

'They didn't last long. He would storm out, bang a few doors, perhaps throw his dinner on the fire, unless, of course, it was pork chops, come home drunk, kick the dog - the usual domestic tiffs.'

'I remember them more vividly. They were more extreme than you seem to think. He used to sleep on the couch night after night; remove himself completely from mother's company even to the extent of coming out to eat only at night like a giant mole. We would listen to him grubbing and rooting in the kitchen after we had gone to bed, looking for the food she had hidden, guzzling, if he failed to find something more substantial, whole pots of jam or tins of con-

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densed milk. One such mood, complete with this apparatus of bizarre behaviour, lasted no less than six weeks. And, by way of escalating reprisal, she would take the food to bed in a pillowcase and he would hide the valves out of the wireless set. Then he buried the handle of the mangle in the backyard and she cut the backside out of his overalls. Neither of them would even remotely allude to these goings on in the truculent, laconic intercourse of the day. But the great feud, the one which lasted six weeks, ended with an explosion into cathartic violence when he exploited her passion for birds. He set mousetraps baited with bread on the lavatory roof and arranged the seven sparrows he caught in a pie dish and put it on the table saying that if a man had to hunt for his supper after a hard day's work it was coming to something and that Snowball had better look out if he got really hungry. It was about that time that I began to suspect that he wasn't all there.'

'Are you pulling my plonker Ralph?'

'On my honour Ron. I feel it would be a betrayal of the academic ideal to which we both subscribe if a lecturer in the faculty of Social Sciences at one of the country's largest redbrick universities was knowingly misinformed in such matters.'

'Six weeks!? Wireless valves!? Mousetraps!?' Ralph was so deadpan that Ron still couldn't help being suspicious of all this.

'What worries me' Ralph went on lugubriously, 'is that we two, as the unfortunate recipients of these deranged genes, must inevitably exhibit symptoms ourselves one day. My natural temperament, I've always felt, has been one of modest self-effacement and responsible restraint, and yet now, after years of virtuous self-sacrifice, I feel impelled to ask where this course of honourable altruism has led me. I find myself removed to a stygian office at the back of the block, working for the odious Waxblinder, a man I taught to do the job, and trapped, domestically, in a geriatric cul-de-sac in the role of male nurse. I sense the writhings of a secret self struggling for supremacy, an imperious demand to break these chains, to assert the primacy of my needs for once.'

They had both drunk more than usual and when Ron made the ritual request to hear some of Ralph's own work, a request which Ralph had always denied, he was amazed and gratified to see him produce a green, paperback triplicate book with 'Vol XII' on the cover.

'Perhaps just a paragraph to give you the flavour' said Ralph leafing through its three hundred tissue thin pages.

Theobald, marquis of Camerino and Spoleto, had defeated the garrison of the castle and sentenced the prisoners to the customary castration. But the sacrifice was disturbed by the intrusion of a frantic female with bleeding cheeks and dishevelled hair. 'Is it thus' she cried, 'that ye wage war against women whose only arms are the distaff and the loom?' Theobald denied the charge saying he'd never, since the Amazons, heard of a female war. 'And how' she furiously exclaimed, 'can you wound us in a more vital part than by robbing our husbands of what we most dearly cherish, the source of our joys and the hope of our posterity?' A general laugh applauded her eloquence; the savage Franks, inaccessible to pity, were moved by her ridiculous yet rational despair and with the deliverance of the captives she obtained the restitution of her effects. As she returned in triumph she was overtaken by a messenger from Theobald who inquired what punishment should be inflicted on her husband were he to be taken in arms again. She answered without hesitation: 'He has eyes, and a nose, and hands, and feet. These are his own and these he may deserve to forfeit by his personal offences. But let my lord be pleased to spare what his little handmaid presumes to claim as her peculiar and lawful property.'

Ron couldn't help admiring the supple, if somewhat old-fashioned style but the subject appeared outrageously arcane. Ralph sat staring into the distance remotely. Ron got up and looked over his shoulder; the page he had been reading from was blank. He took the book and riffled through it; all the pages were blank.

'Its Gibbon' said Ralph flatly.

'You memorised it!'

'Must have done.' He took another swig at the wine. 'I read Gibbon every night before I go to sleep. I've read the entire history many times. What a stylist! His prose is a miracle; his transitions are superb. You should try it Ron. Insight and observation may validate the scientific treatise but the literary text stands on one quality alone mastery of language, the aesthetic dimension, without that it relapses into anecdotal garrulousness. You are now ready for this development. Cultivate Gibbon!'

Ron was intrigued; was it all an elaborate hoax, a stratagem to avoid reading his novel? He recalled the other odd features of the evening

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on the way home. Ralph was eccentric but this was unusual even for him. Why had he sprawled in his armchair with his right leg over the side and half his fly buttons undone? And why, after having read the label on the bottle, had he repeatedly referred to the claret as an excellent Madeira? It was disturbing.

Monday began with Arnold Waxblinder inculcating the virtues of bourgeois self-improvement in his transient helper from the Y.O.P. Inner resources were his theme reinforced by practical example. The morning had been devoted to the benefits and varieties of do-it-yourself double gazing, the respective prices, the economies of energy saving, the details of assembly, the price of glass, the optimum air-gap, the prevention of condensation and the alternative plastic systems utilising polystyrene and perspex sheet. The new recruit disguised his boredom believing that a good report might get him a permanent job. Ralph worked silently in his usual industrious manner but when Arnold finished and took up his pen once more Ralph noisily flourished a copy of yesterday's *Le Monde* and after a brief 'While we're on the topic just listen to this' read out a half page article in fluent French, on the new solar powered steam generator which had just been installed outside Marseilles. A profound silence followed.

'Was that French?' asked the new recruit.

'Time for an infusion of caffeine' said Waxblinder opening the filing cabinet.

During the break Ralph appeared agitated and when Arnold went to wash his cup he poured his untouched offering onto an *Amaryllis* which Arnold was cultivating on the window ledge. The boy, as yet unversed in the etiquette of the permitted diversion, began to press Ralph for ideas and instruction as a way of heading off yet another desiccated monologue from Waxblinder. And Ralph, who for twenty years had refused to be drawn further than a sentence on the weather launched into an analysis of the philosophy of history.

'It was that foggy Teuton, the Nibelung of Philosophy, G.W.F. Hegel who said that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history - an uncharacteristically transparent remark. And this superficial cynicism was echoed forty years later by no less a figure than Alexandr Herzen who said that history was the

autobiography of a madman. His contemporary, the priapic prophet of Yasnaya Polyana, Leo Tolstoy, defined it similarly as a deaf man answering questions which no-one had asked. Personally I incline more to the grandiose notions of Collingwood and Vico who see history as a unique hermeneutic device, the key to our understanding of the world.' Waxblinder was beginning to feel uneasy. He scowled, scraped back his chair and went out slamming the door loudly. When he returned forty minutes later Ralph was still lecturing. Now he was pacing up and down the small office with one hand clutching his lapel.

'What then do we make of the greatest of them all? I speak, of course, of Gibbon who claimed no more than that history was the register of the crimes and follies and misfortunes of mankind. Condemned out of his own mouth you might think, and yet it is from him that the spirit of the age, the *zeitgeist* radiates most purely. How quintessentially eighteenth century is his mordant sarcasm towards Christianity, that pernicious enfeeblor of the Empire. He is the English *philosophe*, Diderot, D'Alambert, Voltaire and D'Holbach all rolled into one. And who, at that time, was our class-ridden nation of entrenched reactionaries exalting as the finest embodiment of English sensibility? Johnson! The bullfrog of Lichfield'. At this point Ralph stared directly, accusingly at Waxblinder. 'That lexiphanic windbag! That ponderous celebrant of the dull and the dutiful! That establishment, toadying lickspittle grovelling for his state pension, brown-nosing round the ample posterior of George III! Today we read Boswell while Johnson's costive, clotted prose justly moulders in obscurity. But Gibbon continues to delight; his luminosity waxes. The Roman Empire was the pretext for an excoriating commentary on his contemporaries. And so, even today, there might be, in some hidden stagnancy of our society, another such crystal distillation of the present age and all its ills, disguised, possibly, as an historical novel fashioned in neglected isolation by an anonymous clerk.'

Waxblinder, by now, was thoroughly shocked. In the past, under old Dekker, Ralph had responded to the lightest touch on the reins; a slight cough at one thirty was enough to terminate the lunch-break, and a discreet shuffle of papers after coffee in the afternoon would set his head down for the rest of the day. But this! It was grotesque! Waxblinder had rationalised his own digressions as somehow relevant to the general education of an engineering clerk,

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but these outpourings on history and half hour readings in some foreign gibberish could only be seen as dangerous, subversive indulgences. Arnold resolved to speak about it the next day.

But the next day Ralph didn't turn up. He stayed in bed writing. The doctor came in the early evening and, after scrutinising the stacked volumes and fingering the bust of Augustus as a boy suddenly seemed to notice Ralph.

'Ah yes! The testicle!' he said breezily, 'And do we now have actual tumescence?'

'It feels like a balloon' said Ralph. The doctor pulled back the bed-clothes.

'Looks normal.' He lifted it gently. 'Feel anything?'

'No, strangely enough.'

He put a thermometer into Ralph's mouth and a stethoscope on his chest.

'Just felt like a day in bed I suppose.'

'I've got things to do. The office is beginning to interfere with my work. I know I'm not respected there. They don't understand.'

'Who don't?'

'Johnson and his snivelling secretary Boswell. All day long he drones on interminably about double glazing or his dictionary or the immortal classics or changing the prop shaft on the mark III Cortina while that sycophantic spaniel writes everything down as though it were the word of God.'

'A personality clash?'

'More than that. I've put up with it for thirty years but now my work is reaching a climax. These distractions are too much. I need peace and solitude.'

'The chemical giant I think you said - Carlisle's?'

'Yes.'

'Well you just have a good rest old chap. I'm sure you deserve it.' He picked up his bag and had a last look round. 'This really is a damned fine collection! I ought to read more. Keep meaning to. Can't seem to find the time.'

'Well I must get on doctor.' said Ralph pointedly terminating the interview. He picked up his gold rimmed half-frame glasses and the green paperbacked triplicate book which had been lying on the table.

'Quite' said the doctor, 'I'll call again tomorrow.'

The next day, as the doctor was coming down the stairs, he met Ron. They talked in the front room.

'Do you do much fieldwork these days?' asked the doctor wistfully. 'I find proletarian life-styles fascinating. Only last week I had a remarkable case of malnutrition - a building site labourer, lived in a hovel, slept on a mattress on the floor, rat droppings in the kitchen, mould in the loo, subsisted entirely on sausage rolls and Guinness. Quite extraordinary. Couldn't recall when he last had a bowel movement. Now that I admire. The English fear constipation more than nuclear war.'

'How is Ralph doctor? Nothing serious is it?'

'No. Just nerves.'

'A breakdown? He has been a bit strange lately. Does he need psychoanalysis?'

'Do people still believe in that sort of thing? I wouldn't recommend it. No, we'll soon have him back in harness with a daily dose of chlorodihydromethylphenylbenzodiazepinone.'

'I think that's easier said than done.'

'A bit strange you say?'

'As if he'd been taken over by someone else. He seems to think he's Gibbon.'

'The long-armed Asian ape? Good God! Yet this might explain the palm tree. Was he disconsolate when it died?'

'No, Edward Gibbon the historian. I looked him up in Britannica. Apparently he died of a swollen testicle - a hydrocele. Perhaps Ralph has schizophrenia.'

'I doubt it. What do you think? I rang his firm today. Couldn't contact Johnson or Boswell but spoke to a very sensible chap called Backslider. He maintained that Ralph was deficient in inner resources. Recently he has been giving quite uncharacteristic lectures on bullfrogs, disrupting office routine and apparently telexing sales offices abroad, in Spanish, telling Roderigo he was being poisoned. Bizarre what? I'd really like to see what goes on in those places. Do you ever organise visits to coalmines and car factories?'

Ron asked the doctor to let him know if he could do anything to help, and the doctor asked Ron if Durkheim was still read and if there had been any studies on the inner city riots. Ron left with one of the green triplicate books which his mother had managed to

DECLINE AND FALL

smuggle out of Ralph's room. It was Vol V and each page was covered in tiny black italics. Surely this would illuminate Ralph's dark depths. It was a week before Ron managed to identify that racy scrawl as Esperanto much less get it translated.

Ralph meanwhile had never been happier. As the twilight deepened and the autumn rain battered on the windows he listened to the news from Paris on his short wave radio and spent two hours writing rapidly, in a notebook marked Vol X. Then, sipping hot cocoa with milk, but without a skin, from the best family china, he took down his idol and read for the umpteenth time, yet with the same hypnotic attention as when he first read it, chapter forty - the account of the Byzantine Empress Theodora, complete with its hilarious, lubricious Greek footnotes.

MEMOIRES OF A TOURIST

Ron Horsefield

Went to the palace at Fontainebleau today. It was home to Francois I, Henry II & IV, Louis XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, Chas X, Louis-Philippe, Nap 1 and 3. There was a Louis XVII but he died in jail before he could be crowned, a victim of the Terror. I say Terror since this is the usual bourgeois liberal bollocks designed to provoke disgust in the minds of voters who might go Commie or Labour. There were far more innocents killed by the govt in the reaction to the Paris Commune (20,000 at least) and more have been killed by Renault, Peugeot and Citroen since, and they've not been stigmatised - idolised more like by every piss-head boy racer in France of whom there is no shortage.

And there was a Nap 2, son of Nap 1 who Nap 1 handed over to after the debacle of 1814 - at Fontainebleau as it happens. The table they used for the abdication is the size of one you'd have an espress at in the Bar des Sports. Nap 1 probably thought he'd do a Putin by saying to Wellington and the Czar - "er..no mate I'm not in charge. This is the geezer you need to talk to" - pointin to Nap 2. But the allies weren't takin any of that old shite and they kicked both their arses out of it.

All the above rulers were rich gits as can be seen by the high class decor reminiscent of the top class John Lewis catalogue available only to MPs, yet none of them could have wandered down the road to the Mercure hotel and logged on to find the weather in Singapore or the latest test score or wot some Yank film starlet got up to with a donkey. Of course the internet had not been invented then but even if it had the rulers might have baulked at the price - 10 euros for 3 hours - and said "Fuck the Mercure, I can get free Wifi at MacDonalds - well not quite free since I have to buy a cheeseburger - but I don't have to eat it coz I'm King. I can donate it to the Pope sayin it's the liver of Mary Magdalene who was both a soak and a goer."

One wonders, alluding to MPs, how the lives of our own rulers might mirror that of the Sun King. One imagines John Prescott spending a morning on the croquet lawn, then a few pints in the library (Have you read all them books John? Books? Wot books?)

after which some gentle coition with the mistress in his favourite wheelbarrow position - ie on her back on a John Lewis occasional table (none of that Boulle and Chippendale shite) with the deputy PM standing, holding her legs as if he's pushing her over a bump in the lawn. Then a snooze in the adjustable old git armchair, a Parker Knoll Lazeeboy Imperial Mk IV with a lever on one side and a shelf that slides out for your legs. Around noon, his valet de chambre, Braithwaite, approaches, shakes him gently by the shoulder and whispers the magic words "The pies have come your excellency"

These were the ratiocinations wot went through my head as I wandered the corridors replete with gold and ivory and porcelain and fat Japs snappin everythin in sight - being Zen Buddhists and Confusionists your Jap ruler lives in a cardboard box and squats on the floor. No wine just shite green tea. The palace doors don't even have hinges they slide on runners like some cheap Ikea room divider. Poor sods. No wonder they go mad over here. And their girls aren't naked with their tits on display like the wall paintings of the kings of France but geishas swaddled in reinforced concrete cocoons so impenetrable they'd make a 1950s' corset look a piece of piss to get into. I glean this from the films of Ackroyd Kowasaki and Ken Mitzigaynor.

Yet rather than these reflections of a cheapskate oik I should have echoed the words of Ozymandias, the top dog in some god-forsaken ancient mid eastern shithole who famously proclaimed "Gaze on my works ye mighty and despair" And where is Ozzie now you ask? He's no more than a pair of stone feet in the desert. So it just goes to show.

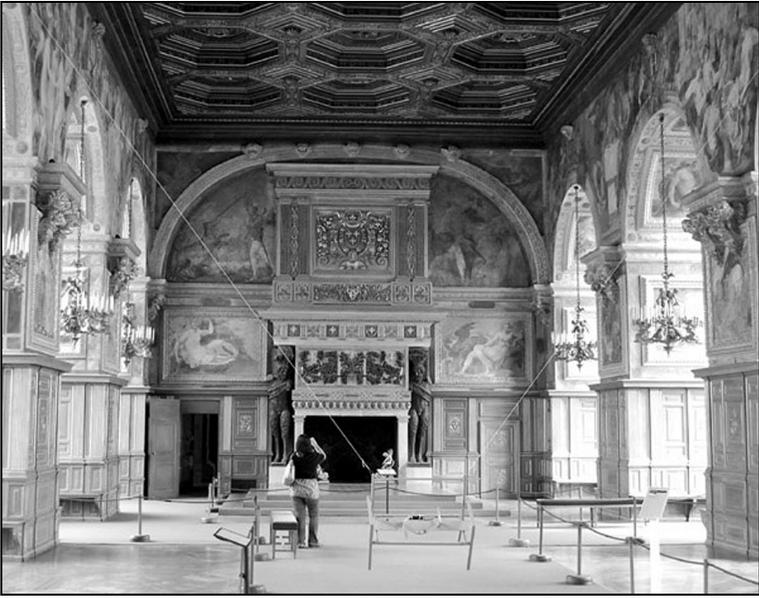
Tomorrow I hope to visit the house of the great poet Steve Marmalade. I'm sure there'll be free wifi there since most of his stuff was so short you could send it in a flash or so weird no fucker would think it was French. If the Maitre d in Macdonalds came over and saw Steve plonkin about without buyin owt Steve would just look up and say "No squire - this isn't a communication - just look for yourself" and he'd swivel the laptop round so that the boss could read it and the maitre d'd say "Cor! You're not wrong Steve! That's bleedin gibberish that is! Sure you've not honked into the keyboard? Praps the cat's been walkin on it." Then if Steve finally did want to connect he could have got away with logging on in the bogs, connectin

THE CRAZY OIK ISSUE 1

for two seconds, an then dashin out shoutin "Balls to your cheese-burger an stick your king sized fries up your arse!" It may not scan too well but it has a certain *je ne sais quoi* I like to think.

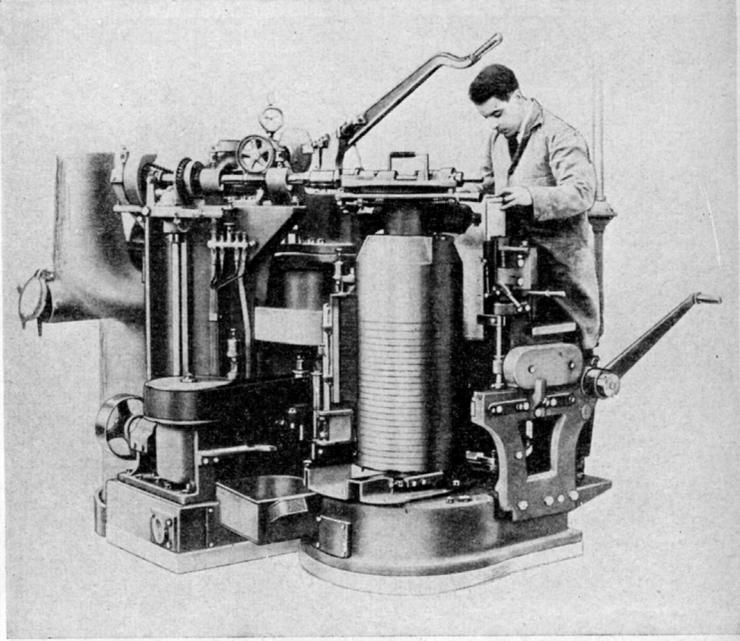
These'd be the cruxes of poetry and kingship in our time and it is incumbent on us to try and imagine how former geniuses and nobs would have coped with what we have to put up with today.

Ron Horsefield - Fontainbleau - September 2008

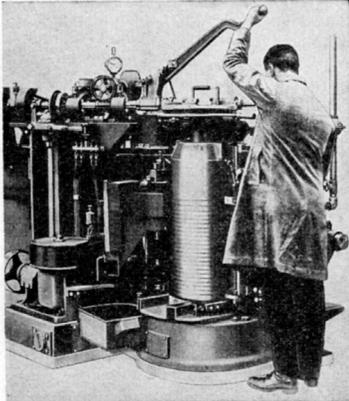


The Japs take Fontainebleau

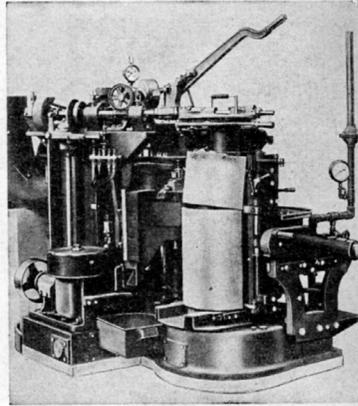
THE PLATES ARE CAST READY FOR PRINTING



12. The matrix for the Moulding Press is now brought to the Junior Autoplate machine. This machine will cast rotary plates from molten metal, and will cool, trim, and deliver them at the rate of two per minute. Above we see the operator fixing the matrix into the casting box, being careful to see that everything is square.



13. The matrix having been fixed, with one downward stroke of the pump sufficient metal is forced into the casting box for one plate, which rapidly sets, taking the impression of the type from the matrix.



14. A button is pushed and the plate is delivered as can be seen above, with the waste end cut off. The plate is ready to be fixed round the cylinder of the printing machine.

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MY LIFE IN PRINT

Ray Blyde

CHAPTER 1

Sed looked expectantly towards the casting machine, waiting for the first plate of the start page to spin around. The warning bell rang, the box opened, the operator with his index finger and thumb on the stop button, peered in to check that all was well. The plate hand broke off the plate from the tail and placed in front of Sed for inspection. Sed examined the plate for imperfections, the heat rising from the plate dried the inside of his nostrils. He sweated profusely in the hot humid atmosphere and to add to everyone's discomfort the roar of the presses concussed the eardrums.

"Hold it," he shouted. The operator pressed the pump button then the stop button bringing the machine to an abrupt stop. Sed called the overseer, a tall lanky man of six feet six. Jasper Perkins, nicknamed Diesel by the staff, was supercilious and sarcastic at his worst and condescending at his best.

"Whats the problem Kirk?"

"The plate's chilled. There's still some moisture in the matrix."

"They're getting six minutes in the roaster. Is there something wrong with those tired old eyes?"

Sed looked at him and shook his head with exasperation.

"Look for yourself." The overseer bent down to take a closer look. Shiny patches made the type look distorted and indistinct. Jasper rubbed the affected area with a small piece of woollen cloth, a blanket of smoke rose from the plate. Diesel squinted through the fog.

"Take the matrix out and I'll give it another whirl. Put this mat in and be quick about it, the edition's late already. Oh, and before I forget Kirk I want to see you in the office after this edition!"

"Won't it do later?" said Kirk

"No it won't, you be there." Kirk nodded, being shop steward or Father of the chapel, so called because historically Caxton used a derelict church to initiate the first printing in England.

It was a bind having to go into the office to be lectured by that supercilious twit. He couldn't think what it was about, but to be on the safe side he'd take his deputy in with him. Alec McDonald was a short thick set Scot from Glasgow who would resent going any-

where other than the pub. He would consider it a waste of good drinking time. As he expected Alec was none too pleased.

"Och, whats the matter wi the mon, surely he can hang on till later?"

"He says not. He probably wants to do a flyer after the first edition."

"Whats it about?" Sed shrugged his shoulders.

"I've no idea. Come on lets get it over with"

Sed and Alec knocked on the door of the overseer's office and waited.

"Come." It was a tiny office which looked smaller with four large men in it. Alec always said that there was more room in a phone box. Diesel cleared his throat.

"Right, I've had a complaint about Roy Plummer."

"In what respect?" countered Sed.

"He was listed to work on the fifth floor casting ingots."

"Are you complaining about his work?"

"No, he walked off the job before the end of his shift?"

"Had he finished the work?"

"That's not the point, he's paid for a seven and a half hour shift!"

"How d'you know he left early?"

"He was seen leaving the building, and he didn't clock out."

"Well we all forget to clock out occasionally" said Sed

"He's making a habit of it."

"This is clear case of victimisation", countered Alec

"Don't make me laugh McDonald, you haven't a leg to stand on, the man was clearly trying to skive off and I'm not letting him get away with it. He won't be paid for the shift!"

"Well, we'll see what the chapel have to say about that. Is that it?"

"I'm determined to stamp this practice out."

"Can we go now?" Diesel nodded and stood up suddenly banging his head on the air conditioning trunking. Relations between management and the unions were usually confrontational, especially when it came to negotiating the annual wage increase, management always complained that negotiating with so many unions was costly and time consuming. However, at this precise moment good will, had there been any, had flown out of the window. They opened the office door and came out backwards.

"We're no going to get a pint now are we?" said Alec as they made their way down the staircase.

"No. I think we'd better have a chapel meeting in the morning."

"What time?"

"Straight after the last edition."

"I'll put it on the notice board."

"In the meantime I'll have a word with Roy Plummer. Plummer had never been a popular bloke with the chapel or the management. He was always in late and went home early. Someone always covered him by clocking him in and out. However, this time someone slipped up. He found Plummer sitting on a bench behind the casting pot reading the Sporting Chronicle.

"Keeping out of the way as usual Roy?"

"Oh, hello Sed."

"Can I have a word?"

"Sure, 'ave a seat."

"I've just come out of the office. Diesel's accusing you of beggaring off early yesterday."

"Well, there was nothing to stay for."

"It's a good job we don't all do it."

"Look Sed I ran out of old type to melt down."

"Why didn't you go into the composing room and check if there was any more?"

"You must be joking, I don't go looking for work. Look I came in early to get a flyer. I did all the work that was there."

"As a matter of interest, Johnny Richie was in on that job today and he was none too pleased because he had extra work to do, work you should have done yesterday."

"Oh, well, he always complains "

"Well Diesel's threatened not to pay you for the shift."

"The bastard, I hope we're not going to let him get away with that?"

"I'm calling a chapel meeting in the morning."

"What time?"

"Four am",

"Aw, bloody 'ell Sed, I'm on the early finish ."

"Tough, this meeting is for your benefit, you'd better be there. If your not there you'll be fined by the committee."

There was the usual restlessness and discontent when chapel meetings were called mainly because the men were tired and would much rather be on their way home. Decisions could also be influenced by the amount of beer consumed that night. Sed knew this and could foretell what would be said and by whom.

"Call to order," said the chairman Colin Dunne.

"The F.O.C has called us together to discuss what the chapel should do in answer to the overseer's threat not to pay a chapel member to wit Mr Roy Plummer for his shift on Tuesday the fifteenth inst."

"Get on with it" yelled someone from the back of the meeting.

"Here it comes" thought Sed.

"Stop the job", shouted malcontent number one, Pete Sharp.

"Ban overtime!" said number two.

"We can't ban overtime, because we seldom get any."

"Through the chair," said Colin again over the general hubbub.

"The F.O.C."

"All right gentlemen, I don't want to keep you any longer than necessary, but as you've all heard Diesel is refusing to pay Roy for his shift. Someone saw Roy leaving before the end of his shift, and unfortunately he didn't clock out."

"Well he wouldn't if he was going home."

"Even a blind man on a galloping horse can see that" said another

"Order," said Colin.

"We all forget sometimes," someone interjected.

"I told him that, however, he insists that he will not pay him for the shift."

"Ang on a minute, what about me," said Johnny Richie. "I had to do the extra work for that git Plummer, I'd like to claim two hours overtime,"

"Come on let common sense prevail," said Bill Backhouse. "I propose that you go back to see Diesel and tell him we'll make sure it doesn't happen again and that we will bring Roy before the committee and discipline him, we won't of course, but he won't know that."

"Balls!" yelled the malcontents. "He did nothing wrong. He did the job. Lets put a stop to this fella once and for all,"

"Ok," said Sed. "Calm down. It's not a good thing to commit yourselves to the ultimate sanction for a thing like this, use your heads. If you threaten to stop the job you won't get the backing of the branch committee, nor the union in London, remember the last climb down over the Sunday paper we all got fined."

"So we're going to fold up again?" growled Ralph Parker.

"No, I think Bill's got the right idea, we'll give Diesel an assurance that it will not happen again," said Alec.

"Hey, 'ang on a minute before you throw me to the lions you bas-

tards, you're just making a scapegoat out of me!" said Plummer angrily.

"Well, I didn't expect you'd like it Roy but think on, your already on a verbal warning, another verbal and a written and you could be out." Someone seconded Bill Backhouses proposal and it was carried by twenty votes to nine.

The officials went to see the overseer directly after the motion was carried.

"That's what the chapel propose," said Sed, hardly able to stifle a yawn he was so tired. He would normally be tucked up in bed by this time. Diesel shook his head and stubbed out his umpteenth cigarette.

"I'm still not disposed to paying Plummer, he's a shyster and you know it. He's had so many chances"

"Well, its up to you Mr Perkins, but you might be saving yourself a lot of trouble."

"Hmm... you say you'll take Plummer in front of the committee and fine him Kirk?"

"I can't say what the committee will decide in advance, but obviously we want to deter him from doing it again." It was obvious that Perkins was still not convinced.

"You know I've a good mind to give Plummer another verbal warning!"

"Come on Perkins meet me half way I wouldn't be doing my job if I agreed to that".

"All right....but I may live to regret it."

"I don't think so." assured Sed. "Thanks, I'll tell the chapel and they can get off home."

Sed was exhausted as he drove home. Luckily there wasn't much traffic except for the odd bus, black cab, and few paper wagons trying to beat the deadlines to catch trains with the last editions. The F.O.C.'s job was not getting any easier. Larger size papers were in the offing, this meant longer hours because management refused any increase in the size of staff to cope with the extra work. The sun was just breaking over the horizon; it was going to be a nice day. He groaned at the thought that he would have to be up early to pick his mother in law up from the station. She was staying a few days, or was it weeks, he was too tired to remember.

CHAPTER TWO

"Are you staying in bed all day?" Sed screwed up his eyes as his wife opened the curtains letting in the full strength of the midday sun. Sed pulled the clothes over his head and turned over.

"Come on, here's a cup of tea don't let it go cold. Don't forget mother arrives at central at twelve fifteen, and I want to do some shopping then you can pick up the kids from school." He marvelled sometimes at the number of words she could get out without taking a breath.

"What time is it now?"

"Eleven o'clock!"

"Hells bells Gwen, I didn't get in till nearly six o'clock this morning!"

"Well it's not my fault, you will have these silly union meetings. I didn't ask you to be F.O.C.." The sound of her voice irritated him. No she hadn't asked him it was a job nobody wanted. The last F.O.C.. was nearly driven to a nervous breakdown. He tried please everybody and pleased no one, eventually the management made him an overseer, then nobody had any respect for him.

Whilst driving down to the station he tried to unscramble his brain, as Gwen kept chuntering on at him. What does that woman find to talk about. He cast his mind back to their courting days, she was so shy he couldn't get two words out of her, still it didn't matter then she was so breathtakingly beautiful. He looked across at her now, she was still pretty he supposed tending a little towards the plump side, not a bit like her mother thank God. What was the saying.....you look at the daughter you see the mother in twenty years time, or was it the other way around? On the station approach he was lucky enough to spot an empty meter.

"You sit tight, I'll go and fetch her," said Gwen slamming the passenger door behind her.

"Blast and damn her, why does she have to bang that door." Especially since he felt so delicate through lack of sleep. It was getting increasingly warm in the car so he opened all the windows to let in the cooling breeze, then settled back to take in the scene around him. Offices were emptying for lunch. The young didn't seem to have a care in the world, make the most of it, thought Sed, that soporific state won't last long especially when they get responsibili-

ties. Sed decided he'd better snap out of it, then he caught sight of the two women coming down the station concourse towards him. He got out and took his mother in law's case and gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek.

"How are you ma?"

"I was all right till I got on the train." Sed looked at his wife, she avoided his gaze. She settled in the back of the car and Gwen in her usual place. He knew he was going to have to enquire about what had transpired on the train.

"What happened?"

"Well you wouldn't believe it, this man next to me put his hand on me knee."

"Perhaps he did it accidentally?"

"It wasn't an accident, you should have seen the lecherous look in his eyes!" Sed smiled to himself. If he had a pound for every time mother in law was threatened with rape he'd be a rich man.

"Did you report it when you got off the train?"

"Humph! Some hope, he'd only deny it. He looked like one of those pumps."

"You mean Puffs," said Sed, trying to suppress the urge to burst out laughing.

She was seventy eight and in pretty good health for her years, but of late she seemed to slip into flights of fancy since Frank died. Sed got on well with Frank. He was an old no nonsense printer, who liked nothing better than a pie, a pint, and a good old chinwag. He'd turn in his grave if he knew how obsessed Janet was with sex. He once told Sed that he could never understand how Gwen was conceived because they very rarely slept together due to Janet's dislike of the physical side of marriage. Frank often remarked that it must have been a virgin birth, and the last time that happened a star rose in the east.

"Can we go to Sainsburys? I want to do some shopping," said Gwen breaking his train of thought. Sed gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, and set off to do as he was bid.

"I went over to Mrs Jolley's yesterday," said Janet. "We had a nice cup of tea. She's got some nice curtains up, and a new pelvis over the window." There was no response from Sed or Gwen. The kids, Tracy, who was ten, and Mark twelve, loved their grandmother, but Mark consistently provoked her, Whenever Sed and Gwen had a

night out, and Janet babysat, which was a misnomer really because she didn't look after them, they ran rings around her. One of the tricks he used to get up to was to keep changing the channels on the TV when she was watching her favourite programmes, especially Coronation street. She in turn would wait until he was in bed asleep, then she would creep upstairs, wake him up and ask him did he want to buy a battleship. Sed rang home one evening when Gwen was out visiting one of her friends. Mark answered. Sed asked him to put Janet on.

"Hello!" She sounded far away. Mark came back on.

"She's got the earpiece to her mouth Dad!" Sed laughed, it was typical of her, but in fairness she didn't have a phone at home, and they couldn't persuade her to have one installed.

"Hello!" she shouted again.

"Hello ma, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm at me son in law's. Me daughter's out."

"I know ma, it's me Sed!"

"Hello, can I take a message, you'll have to speak up I'm a little deaf."

"It's me ma....for goodness sake."

"Hello, I'll tell him you called when he gets up tomorrow." then she put the receiver down on him. He looked at the phone in exasperation. She'd try the patience of a saint. He looked around the canteen to see if any of his crew were still playing cards, but they were conspicuous by their absence. He was obviously going to be late back. However, it wouldn't look too bad if some of the boozers were back late as well, which they invariably were.

When he arrived in the foundry Diesel was standing there with his hands on his hips looking at the clock.

"Your three minutes late Kirk, you should be setting the example!"

Sed nodded and took his place on the machine. They had done about half the required number of plates, when there was a loud explosion from the back of the metal pot. The pot hand swung around holding his head, the back of which was covered in molten lead.

"Stop the machine!" yelled Sed.

"Are you ok Charlie?" Charlie sat down on the bench and started rocking backwards and forwards pulling chunks of metal and hair from the back of his head.

"Wet plate Charlie?" queried Sed.

"Bastards, somebody's thrown tea on the black metal. It's bloody dangerous."

"I know," said Sed. "I'll have a word with the machine room F.O.C.."

"Get him to the medical room Kirk," interjected Diesel with increasing impatience. "Get someone else on that pot, the editions late already!"

"Stuff the edition Perkins, there's a man been hurt here, in fact you'd do more good if you got a grip of the machine room overseer, and read him the riot act about his staff throwing liquids on the black metal!"

"Are you addressing me Kirk?!" The veins on Diesel's neck were standing out like roads on an ordinance survey map, while his eyes protruded like organ stops. Sed lunged forward and stood eye to chest with the overseer. Those who witnessed the confrontation thought it was going to develop into a bout of fisticuffs between David and Goliath. Alec pushed them apart and told them to cool it. The two men stood glaring at each other, neither prepared to give ground. Alec dug Sed in the ribs.

"Don't do this, its what he wants," said Alec under his breath, the whole department plus the machine room watched the confrontation with interest, and anticipation, the general consensus had always been that Diesel needed someone to teach him a lesson. The problem was that whoever took it upon himself to do it would assuredly finish up as on of the long term unemployed.

"Take Charlie to the medical room Sed!" advised Alec, hoping that it would break the deadlock.

"I can go on my own. I didn't burn my legs you know."

"Come on Charlie," said Sed eventually. "I'll come with you."

"I'll see you in the office later Kirk!" Diesel was as pale as a corpse, and his hands were shaking visibly

"Suit yourself" retorted Sed as he passed through the exit doors to the basement.

When Sed got back to the foundry the staff had gone on a break. The klaxons blared out sounding like old motor horns as the presses began to roll with the first edition. One of the overseers, Bill Smith was preparing a matrix for the next edition. He looked up as Sed approached.

"Are you ok Sed?"

"I'm all right, what time are we back?" Bill looked up at the clock.

"They haven't long gone, you've got about thirty minutes."

"Thanks!" said Sed "I'll go and have a pint" The pub, the Brown Bear, adjoined the front of the Sentinel building. It was the nearest pub, and there was a fair amount of after time drinking done there, that was until the police took it into their heads to raid it, then they'd all move on to next drinking establishment. When Sed got in, the place was heaving with printers and pressmen, and the air was thick with cigarette smoke. Claus Benedict a sub editor, or one eyed Ben as he was sometimes called was in his own corner of the bar. His corner was jealously guarded, he even had a plaque put up with the inscription, "Claus's corner keep out." Clause had a glass eye which he used to take out and drop it in his pint whenever he went to the loo. No one ever drunk Claus's beer by mistake or otherwise. Alec waved Sed over to an empty space on their table, as he took his seat Ralph Slater came to the table with a sheet of paper and a pen in his hand.

"Put your name down on here Sed " Sed looked at the paper.

"What's this?"

"Put your name down for a quorum to hold a chapel meeting about Diesel's conduct towards you tonight." Sed looked up at him, gave him back the paper without putting the pen to it, and took a swig of his pint.

"I don't think so Ralph."

"What d'you mean you don't think so, we could have him down to the branch, he still pays his subs to the union."

"I think we'll let sleeping dogs lie. There'll be other opportunities."

Ralph's lip curled down. "You're a weak bastard Kirk! Look, this guy's shit on us so often you could muck spread a ten acre field with it."

"Hey Slater!" said Alec, "You're a great guy for making bullets for other people to fire, why don't you go back over there finish your drink and mind your own business."

"And another thing Kirk, your an outsider, not one of us!" With that Slater turned around and angrily pushed his way through a bunch of drinkers spilling beer all over the place, and disappeared through the exit doors.

"What did he mean by that?" queried Alec. Sed took another swig of

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his pint.

"What?"

"You're not one of us?"

"Have you got three or four hours....its a long story." Alec looked at his watch.

"I've got ten minutes, or rather we've got ten minutes!"

CHAPTER THREE

When Sed left school, he wasn't very academic. He'd failed his eleven plus dismally, his school reports were laced with comments like..."Has a limited concentration span, will never reach his potential without a lot more effort." He had a few hidings from his father for either failing to do his homework, or doing it with the TV on with the sound on high volume. His first job after leaving school was in a cycle shop in Liverpool city centre. There was plenty to do, and it was never boring. However, his father kept insisting that he should try to get a "proper trade." Sed thought at the time that his father set a fine example, he had a "proper trade," as a French polisher, and hadn't stained or polished a stick of furniture for ten years or more. He had a brush, or as he put it, a difference of opinion with the boss, and finished up punching him on the nose. It wasn't his fault of course, it never was, when anyone got on the wrong side of his bad temper.

One evening when Sed was looking through the evening paper, he saw an ad in the situations vacant section for "Boy wanted for skilled trade, must be sixteen and two months." Sed copied the box number and address and resolved to write making application as soon as possible. He didn't say anything to his parents, he thought that if he was successful they would be chuffed.

Within ten days he got a reply, and was invited to go for an interview on the following Monday morning at ten am. The job was for an apprenticed stereotyper. He hadn't a clue what a stereotyper was and thought it was something to do with typewriting. The morning of the interview, to make a good impression he put on his best sports coat and slacks. His mother eyed him up and down and said, "What are you doing in your best clothes?"

"I'm meeting a mate in the dinner hour, and we're going for a bite to eat," he lied.

"If you get cycle oil on those trousers you'll have to answer to me mind!"

"I'll be careful he assured her." On arrival at the newspaper office he was shown unceremoniously to the overseer's office by a snotty nosed, spotty individual no older than himself. The overseer was a squat bad headed man about fifty five, called Mr King. He motioned Sed to sit down and asked whether he was gainfully employed at the moment? Sed said he was, but wanted to get into a skilled trade.

"Humph" said King fingering through the papers on his desk. "You realise of course that you're not the only applicant for this job, so tell me why should I give you the job?" Sed looked down at his shoes and noticed that one of his shoelaces was undone, and felt on the brink of panic.

"I d..don't know whether I'm the most suitable applicant because.. I don't know anything about the job, but I'm willing to learn."

"Humph" said King again. "What's Sed short for?"

"Nothing," replied Sed, "it's just I was christened Sed."

"Most unusual!" said King opening his drawer, his shiny bald head fascinated Sed. He could almost see his face in it. He closed the draw and looked again at Sed over the top of his half moon reading glasses.

"Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"I've got a brother in the merchant navy."

"All right, thank you young man, I'll be in touch." Sed thanked him and walked out of the office closing the door behind him. He looked with interest at the rows of printing presses stretching the full length of the basement floor. Operatives were climbing on ladders with buckets and cloths, while others were threading the newsprint through the rollers. Everywhere smelled of oil and paraffin. The snotty nosed kid said,

"You going to work here?"

"I don't know, I hope so."

"It's all right, I'm waiting to go in the readers."

"What's the readers?"

"They read the copy before it goes to press...to see if there is any spelling mistakes and such like. What're you here for?"

"There was a job advertised in this paper for a stereotyper."

"Oh," said the lad wiping his nose with his already contaminated sleeve, "They make the printing plates back there." He pointed towards the far end of the basement where he could see men in their shirt sleeves lifting silver-plates off a machine.

"Does your dad work here?"

"No does yours?"

"Of course, he works in the machine room, and my uncles in the comps."

Sed came away from the newspaper office feeling reasonably confident. He'd been frank and honest. There was an atmosphere of excitement about the place. He'd seen films about newspapers with people rushing about the place meeting deadlines, and suchlike. He would look forward to working there given the chance.

It was only eleven thirty, he felt hungry, and decided to go for a bite to eat at a coffee bar near Lime street station. Tomorrow he would tell the boss of the bike shop he was a bit off colour. After a sandwich and two cups of coffee he decided to go to the pictures. If it was still too early to go home after the pictures, a visit to the Walker Art gallery would be the next port of call.

Sed got a letter from King the following Monday morning. He was all fingers and thumbs opening it. He devoured the contents with restrained enthusiasm. He'd got it...he'd got it!

"Ya hoo!" Sed showed the letter to his mother.

"Whats all this?"

"I got it ma."

"What for heavens sake?"

"The job I applied for." Then explained the circumstances. "I wrote off last week, I didn't tell you or dad because I didn't think I would get it."

"Oh, your father will be pleased."

"Aren't you?"

"Of course Sed, I'm pleased as punch for you." His mother gave him a big hug. "Sed, you're a dark horse and no mistake."

The morning Sed started in his new job, he was told by King that he had to be in ready to start work by eight thirty. He arrived by seven forty five, and found the department in semi darkness. He had no idea where the light switches where, so he just explored to his heart's content. It felt a bit like being in a Christmas grotto, he was

full of anticipation with no idea what to expect. The first thing he was aware of was how warm the place was. He caught a glimpse of the coke fires under the casting pots, it reminded him of a stoke hole of the old steamships that his grandfather used to tell him about when he was a small boy. At this point the department was suddenly bathed in florescent light.

"Good morning lad!" A florid faced heavily built man appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning," replied Sed

"Who're you?"

"I'm the new apprentice!"

"Are ye now, and what do we call ye?"

"Sed Kirk," said Sed

"That's an unusual name, I'm Bob, welcome lad. When you've settled in perhaps you can get me some fags and a couple of sandwiches from "Browns."

"Hey," said another voice. "Dont be sending the lad out on his first day." The owner of the authoritative tone was a tall slim man with thick head of jet black hair and a toothbrush moustache.

"I'm Jack Degan the F.O.C..."

"F.O.C..?"

"Shop steward lad, spelt backwards cough, easy to remember eh?"

"Er... yes I suppose so," said Sed, thoroughly flummoxed by now.

"Come on, I'll show you your locker." Sed followed him like a lost sheep into the locker room, the confined space was full of men in various stages of undress.

"This is our new apprentice chaps." There was no welcome response as such. Someone quipped.

"I hope he's better at making tea than the other one!"

The first couple of days he found himself brushing up and running errands for the men in the department. He strongly objected to this.

"When am I going to start learning my trade?" He directed the tirade at the other apprentice Ralph.

"You've got a lot to learn. What d'you think I've been doing for twelve months, it's all part of the five year apprenticeship."

"Maybe, but, I feel like a skivvy!"

"You'll get no sympathy from them in there, because they've all been through the mill. Look if you keep your gob shut you can

make a few bob here, they haven't a clue how much sandwiches cost, so play your cards right and you'll get free scran as well."

Sed didn't want to have free grub at anyone's expense, let alone fiddle the cash.

"I don't think they like me very much?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well ever since I arrived, someone asks me did I have any relatives in the trade.?"

Ralph sucked his breath in and shook his head.

"Touchy subject that."

"Why's that?" queried Sed.

"Well." said Ralph eventually. "Everyone in this department has someone in the trade, or in another department in the building. They probably think you're doing somebody out of a job."

"It wasn't my fault, the job was advertised in this paper. I just applied for it."

"Well to be honest, there's been some trouble with the union over it."

"What sort of trouble?"

"At the last union meeting it was brought up for discussion, they objected to you starting because, the chapel hadn't been consulted."

"Its not my fault, I can't help not having a relative in the trade."

"Its not you they're getting at, its King." They were interrupted the raucous voice of George Walker.

"Hey lad!"

"Who does he mean?" said Sed.

Ralph smirked.

"E doesn't bloody well mean me," and shot off. Sed approached cautiously.

"Right lad go out and get me a toilet roll." Two or three others joined in and eventually he had to write it all down. He took his time and mulled over in his mind what Ralph had said to him. When he got back he gave the fags out first, then the food. He gave George his. George looked at it and said,

"What's this?"

Sed looked at it and replied anxiously.

"It's what you asked for!"

"Is it?" he said sarcastically. He looked around at the others. "I sent 'im out for a toilet roll and 'e comes back with a buttered roll." He

stuck the roll under Sed's nose and said finally. "What d'you expect me to do with this, wipe my backside on it?" Sed was crimson with embarrassment. He wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. He didn't care what George did with it, he just wanted to get out of there. He turned on his heel and almost ran out of the department. The only place he could think of where he could be on his own was the bog. He pulled the door shut, sat down and cried his eyes out.



L.S. Lowry collecting rent

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Bob Wild

If our mam got to the Town's Yard on a Friday afternoon before my dad got to the bus for White City dog track then Friday night was a good night for me: if she didn't it was murder. But sometimes, even if she got there before he was paid she came home crying because he'd only given her thirty-bob instead of the usual two quid.

"Just look what he's given me! How can anyone manage on that?"

My dad was a council labourer, a big six-foot-oner in a blue bib-and-brace and a cloth cap Lenin would have been proud of. He was a hard worker and he earned more than most but he never complained that he only got paid the same. And it wasn't his mates' fault, he said, if "From each according to his ability" never got translated into "To each according to his needs".

My dad spent most of his working life knocking hell out of Bury Old Road and the rest of his time knocking hell out of the Capitalist System. When he wasn't raising up sets with a crowbar or pick, or digging down to rain-damaged drains, or shifting snow or breaking his back on the bins he was raising Cain at the kerbside.

In summer he worked on the tar-sprayer and if the weather was good he would put some overtime in: you were up the road if you refused. It was hard graft and he would come home knackered each night. "If the working man could only get a week's money in hand we could have this system licked!", he was for ever telling his mates. With his way of going about it though, it was always the Bookies who were a week in hand and my mam who was licked by the system.

My mam would say: "You *are* a fool Harry! Giving it the Dogs after having worked hard for it all week!"

"Oh for Christ's sake! Don't start that up again. A packet of fags, a line on the Easy Six and two-bob on the Three Draws! I don't ask for much! I might as well be dead and out of it if I can't have a bob or two to spend how I like on a Friday night!". He would slam the door so hard the room shook like an earthquake as he stamped up-stairs to bed to sulk.

One week though, he'd been lucky. His three, seven, twenty-one system of doubling up his bet had won him a fiver at Belle Vue dogs. It was the first he had ever owned and the first I'd ever seen. I

can still remember the curly, copper-plate writing promising to pay the bearer. It could hardly have got more attention had it been a personally signed photograph from Joe Stalin. Flanked by two brass candlesticks it stood for nearly a week propped in front of the clock on the mantelpiece before he gave it back to Belle Vue and deferred the Revolution indefinitely.

The following Friday was a real bad one. My dad had been so quick off the mark to regain that fiver my mam had missed him at the Town's Yard.

"We'll never have anything with him dragging us down all the time", she said, chucking her coat on a chair. "It's big-hearted Harry out there but he won't lift a finger for his own family. It's us that's going to the dogs".

My mam sat at the table staring fixedly into the teacup that was clasped in her hands, tears rolling down her drained, pale face. It was raining outside too, so I crept under the table, out of the way, with a couple of spoons, to play at boats with my marbles.

Mary Greenhalgh, our teenage milk girl, in her bother's brown overcoat and wellies, tapped on the door with a penny.

"Here, take the jug and get two pints", my mam said to me in a whisper. "Tell her I'll see her tomorrow". She was keeping the few bob she earned cleaning to pay off the grocery bill this week.

I did as I was told and took the tall white jug.

"Has your Jack got any Guinea pigs to sell?", I asked, as I followed her up the single step into the small cab of the milk-float.

"Yes, I think he has. I'll ask him and let you know".

"How much are they?"

"They're usually one-and-six but the tortoiseshell ones are dearer".

The float rocked with the added weight and the wheels moved a little: the shafts reared up on either side of the startled horse.

"Whoa! Bessie, Whoa!" Mary shouted, in a quiet voice.

The milk slopped in the churn and the chained lid clanked against the side. Mary gripped the rim of the churn-lid, twisted and removed it. The tightly fitting lid made a sucking noise as it came free of the churn. She picked up the long, copper, hook-handled milk-measure and her arm disappeared into the churn as far as her shoulder.

I stopped on the path on the way back to sniff inside the jug and took a long drink of the warm, creamy milk that smelt of cows and

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hay.

"You've been drinking that milk, you little devil, haven't you!? Just you wait 'till your father comes home!

I wiped the creamy ring from round my mouth on the sleeve of my jersey and denied having touched it.

"You're a bare-face liar" my mam said. "I don't know what's going to become of you. You'll end up in the Reformatory you will!

Just at that moment Mr. Hunter, the window cleaner, who looked like a stickleback with his raw, red face and watery blue eyes, poked his head and shoulders in at the back door and saved me. He was in such a hurry to get round the estate he didn't stop to hear why he would have to wait until next week for his money.

"See you next week then, Mrs. Wild", he shouted, from halfway down the path.

The man from the Prudential attempted to get his dues from *my* money box with the aid of a kitchen knife. It was one of those Black Sambo heads with a crooked arm that fed pennies into the mouth from an upturned hand which someone had given my dad. With much poking and shaking and encouragement from my mam he managed to prize out two buttons and a penny. The penny rolled under the big mahogany dresser with the mottled mirror, which served as a sideboard, and went into permanent hiding.

"You'll have to leave it and I'll see you again Mr. Hardman", my mam said, pushing me out of the way to let him get up off the floor.

I stood by the side of the dresser looking at the new wireless set my dad had got for laying some turf. The old set, a big black beehive, had developed a loud, steady hum. The high pitched warble and whine when you turned the tuning knob had given way to a permanent crackle of gunfire and the set had been given to the rag and bone man in return for a couple of donkey stones. The "new" one, a worse for wear walnut box with no back, a dirty, brown, woven cloth front with a circular speaker imprint on it, had only two knobs and gave off the smell of warm dust which choked you when you put your nose near it. I could see two rows of valves and, reflected in the mirror on the dresser, the dull red glow of a wriggling wire and the bright white light of another.

"Don't stand there gawping all night", my mam said, "See who that is at the door".

It was the rent-man. He looked disappointed as he put his little

black book back into the leather money-bag dangling from his shoulder and said to my mam: "It's six weeks now you know, Mrs. Wild. I'll have to report you this time".

"No, don't do that!", she said, "I'll come down to the Town Hall on Monday and pay off five shillings".

I knew what that would mean---another row. My mam would take my dad's suit---the one that my grandma had bought him to get married in---down to Broughton to that shop with the three brass balls over the door and I would have to fag along with her.

"Alright then", the rent-man said, "But I'm not supposed to let it go this long".

"If that's Michaelson at the door tell him I'm out", my mam said when the inevitable knock on the front door came. I knew it would be and so did she by the way she grabbed for her coat. Michaelson, and the doctor's man with the ginger moustache, bowler hat, and rolled umbrella, and the School Board man, were the only ones who came to the front door, all the rest went round the back.

"Orr. Why do I always have to go!", I began to say, but all the same I came out from under the table when I saw her feet moving towards the pantry for the carpet beater.

"Go to that door and tell him I'm out", she said, in a low voice from the back of her throat that I knew would bring a wallop for the least sign of defiance.

The coconut matting that covered the two square yards of cold, concrete floor under the table where I played to keep out of my father's way had left a criss-cross pattern of pain on my knees and I rubbed at them with the palms of my hands as I grasshoppered my way to the door.

Michaelson knocked again, flicking the loose hoop of metal on the door-knocker against the letter-box to make a clattering rat-a-tat-tat echo down the empty hallway. He always made an effort to get round to our house early on a Friday evening, though not strictly for orthodox reasons.

As I half-opened the door from the kitchen to the hallway the letter-box lid quietly closed on a pair of plain, chocolate brown eyes. Michaelson had seen my mam through the gap, shrugging her shabby black coat on, ready to slip out through the back door.

"My mam said she's out", I said, but he had already pushed past and

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was breezing into the kitchen with a falsely cheerful: "Hello Mrs. Wild".

"Oh it's you is it? You nearly missed me. I was just on my way out. I'll have to leave it 'till next week", she said, as she steered Michaelson into the front room.

"Just you wait! I know you, you did that on purpose", she said through her teeth.

I pressed myself against the sideboard, shielding my ear with my elbow.

Michaelson emerged from the front room, replaced his black homburg hat and buttoned his loose gabardine. He took out a white linen handkerchief, draped it round his large, hooked nose and blew into it.

"All right then Mrs. Wild. What size does he take?", he said.

I could see the pores on his oily, olive skin as he bent down to draw a line round my shoe on the newspaper my mother had placed under my foot. He had thin, purple lips and a tongue like a Chow and his breath stank of fish. I held my head to one side.

"Stop wriggling about!" my mam said.

As Michaelson closed the door behind him I got a winger round the ear.

"Now look what you've done! I've had to get you a pair of shoes because I couldn't pay anything off that bill. How I'll ever pay for them God only knows!"

"Did the gas-man come this morning?", she asked, hopefully.

"Oh yes. I forgot to tell you, there's eight-pence behind the wireless", I said.

"Is that all? It's usually about one and threepence. Are you sure that's all he left? Come here and look me in the face!"

The gas-man had been that morning and emptied the meter that was in the cupboard next to the sink. It smelt of damp gas and donkey stones. I watched him pull out the long, tin box full of pennies and empty it on to the table. He spread the pennies with the palm of his hand and flicked them, one at a time, with the second finger of his right hand, off the edge of the table into the cup of his left hand. Piles of twelve accumulated in a row on the table. The last pile had only ten in it.

"Here, give these to your mother when she comes home", he said.

"Look me in the face", she said again. "If you're telling me lies I'll give you what for. Where's the slip?"

"It blew off the mantelpiece into the fire", I said, uneasily.

"I'll give you such a tanning if you're not telling me the truth", she said, raising her arm.

I ducked out of the way and scampered back under the table.

"Come out from under that table", she screamed.

"No. I'll come out if you don't hit me", I shouted back, defiantly.

I waited a few seconds then said, "I want my tea".

"You get no tea until you come from under that table and say you're sorry!"

When I eventually came out she thrust the eight-pence at me so violently I ran right round the table in fright.

My mam never had enough money but she tried her best to make ends meet. Unfortunately she didn't have much idea how to make the money last nor how to cook cheap meals. My grandma said she was a bad manager. She was always telling my mam to buy some bones from the butchers and make some soup or to get some mince and a few carrots and make Cornish pasties like she'd shown her. My mam tried her best but it was never good enough for my grandma. She was very good at cooking chips and chops and egg and bacon but when she had some money she preferred to send me down to Roberts's for a tin of fruit or an Ellis's meat pie.

She said: "Run down to Lawson's and get three of chips and a fish with salt and vinegar on and take our Arthur with you. You can eat them on the way home, the pair of you".

When we got back home Miss Hicks, the clothing club lady, was sitting at the table with my mam.

"I suppose *you* want a cup of tea as well do you?", my mam said to me, reaching for the battered, aluminium teapot.

"Get yourself a cup from the sink".

The pots were piled in the green enamelled bowl in the sink ready for the washing-up that never got done. I chose the least chipped cup, swished a drop of water round the inside with my finger and swilled it under the tap. The milk-jug stood on the bare table-top, a blue bag of sugar by its side. I heaped in three teaspoonfuls.

"You'll get worms putting all that sugar in", said Miss Hicks.

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"They're all sweet toothed, my lot", my mam said. "They take after Harry".

I finished my cup of tea and lay down on the flattened peg-rug my grandma had made out of a sack and some old coloured-clothes that she had cut into strips. I stared into the fire and let my eyes go glassy.

It was dark and cosy near the fire. The washing hung low from the six blackened bamboo poles that spanned the ceiling. I could catch the drips in my mouth. In the recess to one side stood the big, iron-framed mangle with the loose handle and the large three-spoked wheel with the creaking cogs for turning the badly worn wooden rollers. My mam would sometimes let me feed the wash-ing through---long snakes of sheet and tight twists of shirt---but my dad used to shout at her and say:

"You'll have his fingers through there one of these days. You won't be told". Over the table an unshaded one-hundred watt bulb hung from a loose fitting directly out of the lath-and-plaster ceiling. The bulb was flecked with fly stains and the ceiling round was burnt brown.

I liked looking into the fire. You could see the knobbly faces of hob-goblins and sometimes volcanoes of tar bubbled out from the mountains of black rock or jets of vapour gasped and hissed like steam-engines as the blue-green gas-pockets squealed and whistled. I used to prod them with the end of the poker and they would crumble, disappointingly to dust.

My mam and Miss Hicks were well away: three cups of tea and there was no stopping them. I heard that Johnny Grocock had left his Misses---"her that used to be Lily Heys"---and gone to lodge with Nellie Greathead. "Her husband works on the Railway, a little fellow with a long head, you'd know him if I pointed him out to you". Mrs. Tickle was expecting another and poor Mrs. Sinclair had died. "How that woman suffered!" Not before time---or rather just before time-- -Betty Redford, from down the Grange, was getting married. "You should see the size of that girl! It's a disgrace! It was a litany repeated each week with different names but with the same "Eees!, Ahs!, Ohs! and Ha! Ha! Ha! Well would you believe it!" responses that inevitably ended with: "Do you mind if I pop upstairs before I go Mrs. Wild?", from Miss Hicks.

I felt embarrassed about Miss Hicks using our lavatory. There was

never any paper and I always had to shout down for some.

I used to think Miss Hicks knew the Queen because she had the same kind of perm and earrings and a pearl necklace adorning her expansive chest but my mam said she was a business lady during the day and collected clothing club money for Mr. Jacobs to help pay the college fees for her son who was very clever and going to be an accountant.

When she reappeared the shine had left Miss Hick's nose and on her mouth had alighted a bright red butterfly.

You don't mind if I leave it until next week do you Miss Hicks?, my mam said as Miss Hicks rummaged about in her capacious bag for her book.

"Don't worry Mrs. Wild, if it's a bad week. I'll book you down for half-a-crown anyway and book down just half-a crown for someone who gives me five shillings. I can put it right in my book next week, but don't forget to remind me." And with that she left.

My mam thought Miss Hicks was "a real good sort", "a real lady", "not a bit stuck up". She always had a cup of tea and a chat.

"I'll take you to Mr. Jacob's warehouse in Cheetham Hill and get you a blue gabardine to go with your shoes when I get the bill down a bit", my mam said to me. "Our Arthur can have your old one: his is halfway up his back already.

My dad had lost. You could tell by the way he wiped his feet, deliberately and for too long, on the mat inside the kitchen door and his rueful look and the embarrassed way he lowered his eyes when my mam said, hedging her own bets: "Well? How've you gone on?"

"How d'yer think I've gone on!", he said.

My mam's face went as white as the washing on the rack.

I quickly made for under the table, again, pulling our Arthur with me.

"Now don't start", he said, throwing a crumpled maroon note on to the table. "There's ten bob there and if the weather's fine tomorrow I'll get some gardening in. I've a couple that want doing down Sedgely Park".

My mam was not listening though. The storm of tears and anger she'd been brewing all evening bubbled and burst and drowned out the sound.

"Just you wait", she growled, through her clenched teeth. "I'll show

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you! I'll tell that lot down there at the Yard what you're really like! You and your principles, you make me sick! How can you look me in the face and give me ten shillings to feed five of us on!"

She picked up the note and flung it at him.

"What kind of a wage is that?!", she screamed.

Rapidly the invective built up, the language becoming increasingly strong as the exchange got more and more heated and violent. "Greedy devil" gave way to "selfish sod" and "selfish sod" to "filthy skunk". "Filthy skunk" to "bloody bitch" and "bloody bitch" to "lousy bugger". "Bugger" to cup, cup to saucer, saucers to frying pan. Fists were flailing and lips were spitting curses as round and round the large, gateleg table of the little room they chased each other, frothing with fury. Chairs fell over and a whole possession of pots went flying to the floor as the table-cloth got dragged into the uproar. Next door were knocking on the wall with a shoe. The racket ended abruptly with a backhanded black eye for my mam.

"Don't think you can come near me tonight! my mam screamed at the top of her voice to the quivering door as my dad escaped into the hall.

"You're mad!", he shouted. "Mad! Mad!, Bloody mad!", all the way up the stairs.

"You'll come home one of these days and find me gone!", she shouted back.

As she rooted us out from under the table she added, more quietly: "If it wasn't for you two and our Ernie I'd have been gone long ago. Get up stairs to bed the pair of you. You can have a wash in the morning. And if I hear one squeak out of you I'll be up there and---". We needed no second telling.

It was still raining in the morning. My mam went out early to light fires at the houses where she cleaned. It was Yom Kippur, or Yummie Kipper as our Ernie called it. He was always messing about with words was our Ern. My dad stayed in bed so we had to be quiet.

I peeped round the bedroom door and saw him stretched out, the white sheet pulled up over his face and tucked tight under the back of his head: his feet overhung the bottom of the bed. A gloomy half-light filtered through the many holes in the stretch of dark, red curtain that hung from the garden cane my mam had fixed up when

the wire broke. We'd been playing at bouncing on the bed, the three of us. Our Ernie, the daft nit, had grabbed the curtain to save himself when he had unexpectedly bounced off. He blamed it on me--- and after I had tried to help him get out of it by saying it was our Arthur. So my mam leathered the three of us.

The air in the room was stale and I could smell my dad's socks. The chamber pot was only just under the bed. It was nearly half-full of liquid the colour of strong, brown tea. I started to wretch when I looked at it, as if my stomach was trying to leap out of my mouth. My dad snored under the sheet and rolled over.

The rain was incessant that morning and so was the row we made until at last, unable to lie in bed any longer, my dad rumbled down the stairs from above and came crashing into the kitchen.

"How many more times do I have to tell you!" he roared, feigning blows this way and that with the back of his hand as we scattered like rabbits. He swept me up in his grip and plonked me hard down on the draining board next to our Arthur and, grabbing our Ernie by the shoulders bounced him up to the ceiling like a pile driver before thrashing him down to the floor in a crying, crumpled heap.

It was always our Ernie who got it: a thin, contentious, bone of a boy with an excess of wits and a wilful way. Our Ernie was four years older than me and the butt of all my father's frustrations. He was the focus of endless rows throughout the tortured length of a miserable childhood. Always breaking his glasses, spending his dinner money on toffees, staying in the cinema to see the picture a second time round, coming home late, and running away from home to stay at my grandma's. His head was always in a book: he just didn't match up to what my dad believed a boy should be.

"Leave him alone Harry, you'll kill him!" my mother would scream, throwing herself between them. They were still at it when our Ernie was twenty-five years old. My dad couldn't stand him taking so long in the bathroom or singing opera in Italian at the top of his voice or fiddling with wireless for foreign language programmes.

My dad stood in the kitchen, hands thrust deep in his overall pockets, looking out through the cracked pane of the sash window (the one our Ernie had broken) at the steady rain which was drenching the small, square back garden. The side wall of the house end-on, with its patchwork of red and brown, common clay bricks, would

FRIDAY NIGHT CALLERS

have obliterated the sunlight had there been any. Beyond the palings Mr. Proudfoot came out for a shovel-full of coal, got drenched, and quickly went in again.

"He's got a damned good job at the Asylum has old Proudfoot. Must be on at least a fiver a week and here's me grafting away all week and not two halfpennies to rub together!", my dad said, before going into the front room to grub in the grate for a dimp.

The front room had a thin threadbare carpet square and a short-legged straight-backed armchair with a sagging seat and the springs hanging out through the bottom. My grandmother's couch was against the wall. I heard my father talking to himself, rehearsing his political arguments. He was quietly shouting the odds about someone called Sir Bernard Docker and what ought to be done to the likes of Tallulah Bankhead: strutting backwards and forwards he was adjusting his face in the oval mirror above the fireplace.

On Sunday the weather cleared and my dad went gardening. I was glad because when he came home he put five bob on the mantelpiece for my mam to pay some off the rent arrears. Good! I thought, I'll be able to play out on Monday instead of having to go to Broughton with my mam and my dad's suit. My mam went round to see her friend, Flo Tate, and came back with five Wood-bines for my dad and they started talking to each other again.

By the time Friday tea-time came round again I'd managed to gather four-pence together by taking back jam jars and running a few errands for Mrs. France, next door. There was that penny under the sideboard but it still wouldn't be enough for a guinea pig.

I was sitting on the floor by the fire wondering whether I dare ask my mam to ask Mary Greenhalgh to ask their Jack to let me pay for a guinea pig at a penny a week when there was a knock at the front door.

"Oh my God!", my mam said. "That will be Michaelson already and I've not been down for Harry's money. He will have brought your shoes. Go and tell him I'm out and he can call back later.

At the door stood a small man in a smart suit and a sharp, unfamiliar face, currant brown eyes and a long, narrow, bald head with a bulge at the front.

"Tell your mother it's Mr. Jacobs", he said.

My mam had been listening at the hall door.

"Come in Mr. Jacobs", she said. "Is Miss Hicks ill or something?"

I stood with my ear to the front room door and listened to what was going on. Miss Hicks was no longer working for Mr. Jacobs, she'd been sacked. He had discovered that she had been fiddling her books by entering less than people had paid and then switching and swapping amounts of money about to avoid being found out. The police had been called in and she had admitted it. She said Mr. Jacobs didn't pay her enough and she had borrowed the money until she was straight to help keep her son at college. Neither he nor she knew exactly who had paid what, Mr. Jacobs said. "She's got the books in a hopeless muddle!

I knew my mam owed about seven pounds because she had told my dad it was only four and there had been a row about it. Anyway, she told Mr. Jacobs that she had nearly paid up for what she'd had and that as a matter of fact she had been paying off a bit extra because she wanted to get one of the boys a gabardine Mack.

"It must be around, er, let me think, er, about ten shillings I think it is that I owe", I heard her say.

I thought: "I bet she didn't look Mr. Jacobs in the eye when she said that. I suppose my mam's a bit too old though to go to the Reformatory".

Mr. Jacobs said: "We'll leave matters this week then Mrs. Wild. I'll call with a new book next week. You can bring him down to the warehouse in Cheetham Hill next Saturday morning".

My mother said "All right, a week on Saturday will be fine".

"Right you are then, Mrs. Wild. Good night. See you next Saturday" he said, as she saw him out.

My dad came home in a hurry and in a bad temper. I could tell by the way the heels of his boots rang on the path and the pace of his walk.

"Where the Hell did you get to for God's sake!?" he said, as he gave my mam two new looking pound notes. "I'll miss the first race if I'm not quick!"

He shifted the pots roughly on to the draining board and had a hurried wash, splashing the water about like a budgie and making a noise with his throat before spitting in to the sink.

"Oh Harry! Do you have to make that noise", my mam said.

FRIDAY NIGHT CALLERS

My dad's overalls fell in a heap on the floor. He pulled on some clean ones hopping round the kitchen on one foot in his hurry to be off. The cup of tea my mam made him was too hot to drink and half of it went down the sink when he held it under the cold water tap.

Michaelson came late. My mam thought he wasn't coming at all. Under his arm he had an oblong parcel tied up with string. He undid it on the table and tore off the thin, crackling brown paper to reveal a box with a Timpson's label on the end.

"Oh good!", I said, "Can I have the box to make a fort?"

"You can if they fit you", Michaelson said.

They were a bit slack and the left one hurt the side of my foot but I said they felt all right. I was made to walk, slipping this way and that, across the carpet in the front room.

"It's better to have them a little bit on the big side", Michaelson said as he deducted five shillings from the card and put his initials in the end column. "They'll give him room to grow".

I asked my mam could I keep them on.

"No! You can save them for Sundays", she said.

The other Friday night callers came and went, lucky or unlucky according to my mam's assessment of how much money she had or would have, and how much she would have to pay off the bills at the butchers, grocers, greengrocers, etc., to keep the credit going for another week.

Mary, the milk girl was late. I sat on the rug by the fire wondering if Joe Smithy, the greengrocer, would give me a wooden box to keep a guinea pig in and where I could get some wire-netting from. My mam was sitting at the table, as usual both hands clasped round her cup of tea, waiting for my dad to come home from the dogs. She was in one of her trances.

"Mam", I said. "Will Miss Hicks go to prison?"..

My mam slowly came back to life.

"Were you listening at that door, you little monkey!"

She paused for a second and then said: "Don't you dare say anything about that to your father!"

"No", I said, "I won't. . . if you'll give me one-and-a-penny for a guinea pig".

There was a knock at the door with a penny.

MY DAUGHTERS BOYFRIEND'S FATHER.

Ray Blyde

My daughters boyfriend's father.
Wants to change his job, and rather,
Hopes his prospects in the future
Will be good,
He's quite a handy fellow,
He can even play the cello
And works just as well
With metal as with wood.
He wrote several applications,
To local fire stations.
He was it seems prepared
To work at night,
They sent him up a ladder,
He got an awful fright,
He shouted "get me down from here"
He couldn't stand the height.
Once again without a job,
My daughter's boyfriend's dad,
Approached the local council,
To see what jobs they had,
"There's not much here",
The man declared.
"Why don't you come back later.
A vacancy is coming soon,
For a rat exterminator",
"I fancy that, I'll call again".
Said my daughter's boy friend's pater,
He got the job,
But killing rats,
It made him feel a cad,
"It's not the job I thought it was"
Said my daughter's boy friend's dad.
"Laying poison, setting traps,
Is not my cup of tea,
To see the little beggers die,
It's all too much for me,"

One night when all was quiet.
And dark as dark can be,
He stole back to the centre,
And set the blighters free.
They ran away in hundreds,
Left the council hopping mad,
He's such a tender hearted man.
My daughter's boyfriend's dad.

SPANISH NIGHTS

With my loving daughter I went to Majorca
We went to a hotel in town.
The weather was great,
So we soaked up the sun
In hopes of it turning us brown.

One night we decided to go for a drink,
To a club not far from our board.
For a hundred pesetas
There's no doubt we were told,
You can get as drunk as a lord.

Looking back on that night
There's no doubt they were right
There isn't a lot I can tell.
I remember falling all over the road,
Going back to the Siesta hotel.

The man at the desk was most helpful it seems
As he assisted me up to my room,
He opened the door, and I staggered inside,
And I thanked him with modest aplomb.

The door closed behind me,
I searched for the switch,
To lighten my way to the bed.

No switch could I find.
So I turned on my heel .
And went into the bathroom instead,

I swayed to and fro,
Wondering which way to go,
The handbasin lay in my path,
I took two steps backward
and slipped on the soap,
And fell with a crash in the bath.

Sometime later I managed to crawl to my bed,
I was sore from my feet to the top of my head.
So in future when drinking,
I must try to atone.
If I go near a club,
I'll leave my money at home.

PROCTOR

A fellow called Proctor,
Besides being a doctor.
Owned many large firms
I am told.
When dabbling in finance,
He played the stockmarket.
And even went mining for gold.

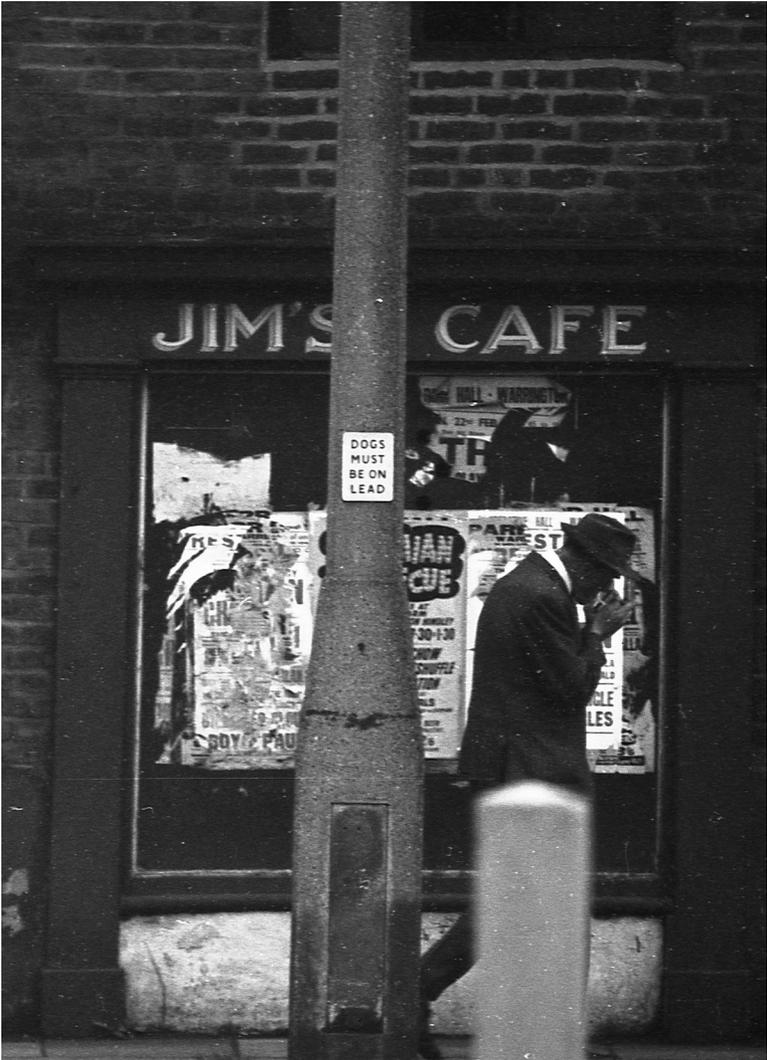
His interests and hobbies,
included the church.
Where he assisted the vicar
With sermons and prayer,
And played the church organ,
With dexterous flair,

His favourite pastime,
Was driving fast cars,

Which were tuned to perfection,
Then driven at speed
In a forward direction,
When an error of judgement,
Approaching a bend,
The car left the road
And began to transcend,
It broke into pieces,
And that was the end.

On his headstone, it read,
"Here lies Doctor Proctor,
A miner, choirmaster, director,
and rector,
Who died in a Victor,
while out for a drive.
Had he been concentrating,
Instead of debating,
The cost of share prices,
He'd probably still be alive.

A child that was passing,
The grave at the time,
Asked his father a question,
He had on his mind.
"How?" said the lad,
As he pulled up his socks.
"How did they get all
Those men in one box?"



RETIREMENT YEAR ONE

Ralph Bundlethorpe

Retirement! It's a bugger int it! Nobody told me it'd be like this. I still get up early – force of habit I spose. Have a cuppa – praps a bowel movement – examine me stool. Read t'paper if that lazy arse girl has managed to deliver it before half seven. I read everythin coz there's nowt else to do – even t'adverts. Then I look out of t'winder to see if next door's cat wants to come in. I buy her nibblers.

If it's not rainin or too cold I gets me coat on and goes t'park. I like to teach the youngsters the wisdom of the tribe (It must be coz I can't lecture me old workmates anymore). If little Wayne is havin trouble in t'toilets I show him how to hold his todger. I wave it about a bit. "Now then Wayne" I say "Try it wi mine. There's a bit more to get hold of. That's right wag it up and down. See how high you can get up t'stone. Now tug on it as though you was pulling a garden hose off its reel. That's right Wayne." They soon get the hang of it. Then I go over t' swings to see if any little girls want a push. Or if they're trying to toss up against the wall I help em to push their skirts into their knickers. Uncle Ralph they call me.

On t'way back I once bought another paper (Still the Guardian coz that's in line with me political position) but bugger me if it wasn't exactly t'same as the one I had delivered! How can they sell so many if they're all t'same? Gets in has another brew. Same four walls! No bugger to talk to. I ring the office but they've all got answer machines now. When I leave a message nobody rings back. "Owt you want doing lads?" I say. "Any likkul jobs? Owt you want deliverin in a likkul white van?" That's what I'd really like to do but when I enquired I was told that every retired old fart in the country is just queuing up for a job drivin a likkul white van. Some of em even pay to drive the van.

Sometimes someone'll ring me. Usually a girl sellin double glazin. Although I've had the whole house done I crack on I've not. Before you know it we're rabbitin on like nobody's business. Yis it'd be great to have it in – doors an all – an what was the air gap again? 20mm? Ooo that is a lot! An are you married Samantha? No? Courtin? Yis I thought so with a nice voice like yours. I bet you an him get up to some things don't you. An what colour are your knickers exactly Samantha?" I used to get lots of calls like that but they're droppin off

a bit now. I hear there's a government agency you can register with to say you'd welcome such calls and were always ready to listen and chat – but nobody seems to know what it is.

Turns t'wireless on to hear the news. Sometimes somethin's happened since the paper was printed. The highlights are when Gordon Brown comes out with a new economic statement to say we're well on course and things are getting much better. Or Jack Straw says he's against crime. It fair bucks you up that does!

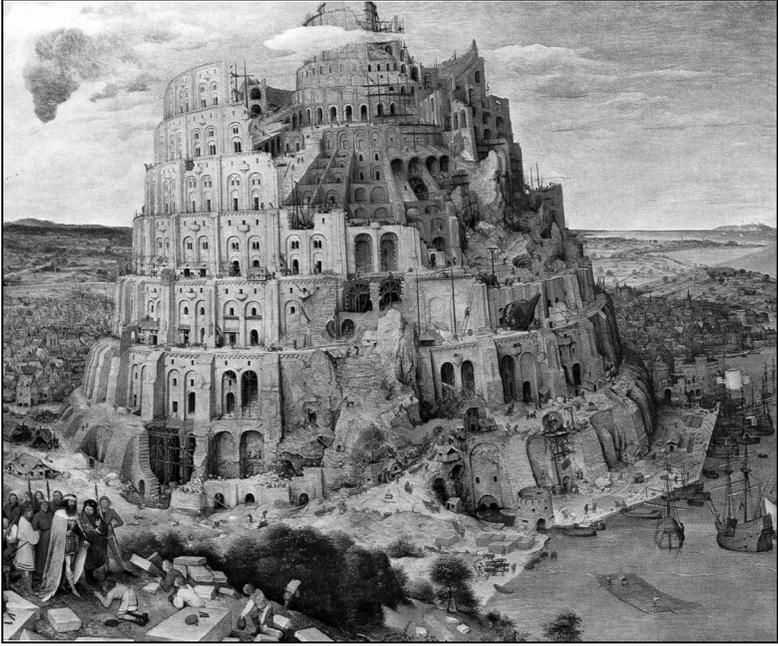
12 o'clock, on the dot, has another brew and me sandwiches. If it's Monday, Wednesday or Friday it'll be meat paste, and if it's Tuesday or Thursday or Saturday it'll be fish paste. It may seem a bit unadventurous but then again it's this regime that makes me stools so consistent. I might try crab if there's a holiday comin up. Holiday! What am I talkin about? No more holidays for me! Its one big holiday! But you've got keep regular if you want a rich and fulfilled life.

I like to keep active so if it's still not rainin or too cold I go out again to t'dogs home. "Got owt wants a walk?" I'll ask. "No, Pop" he'll say "Nowt your speed anyway. There's two greyhounds and a Dalmation but they'd be no good" "Bugger!" I'll say "Ang on" he'll say, and, shoutin down to t'cages he'll bellow "Is that three legged Corgi still in Ernie?" Then Ernie shouts back "No. That Paki restaurant owner took it. Said he had lots of customers who'd like to take it in". So I goes for a walk on me own. Sometimes I'll have an interestin conversation with other walkers I meet. Dog owners are the most approachable. "Nice dog" I'll say. "Yis" they'll say. "Is it a Pyreneen Mountain Dog or a Daihatsu?" I'll say. "Neither" they'll reply "It's a mongrel". If they're not dog owners the conversation is much more limited "Nice weather" I'll say. "Yis" they'll reply. No one ever says "No its not a patch on what we had in Singapore when I was livin over there in the seventies just above a drug den and a brothel..."

Me tea is the highlight. Gets in, hangs me coat up, puts me slippers on and starts to prepare the meal of the day. I love dawdlin over t'details. First I open the M&S box where it says "Open Here" an I takes out t'Chicken Kiev in its silver foil tray. If it's a Monday there'll be two Kievs so I have to use a tray I've kept from the night before – washed of course - and return the second Kiev to the fridge in the original box. I read the instructions in English, French, Spanish an German to see if owt's changed since I last bought one. Then I pop it in't oven for 25 minutes at 190 degrees C. I check the sprouts I left

RETIREMENT YEAR ONE

boilin before I went out for a walk. I can't stand them crunchy veg. Then I open me vac-u-vined half bottle of Mouton Cadet. Well I'm retired aren't I? You can't tek it with you! The half bottle usually lasts me three nights an it tastes just as good on the last night as it does on the first! While it's all doin and the wine is chambrein I listen t' six o'clock news. Gordon says were still on course and Jack's still against crime so everythin's OK. I still keep up standards for meals. No trays on me knees in front of t'telly for me. I put a tie on and eat at the table with a cloth and a knife an fork. Eee sometimes I feel like Lord Shite dinin at Chatsworth! Afterwards I wash everythin immediately an vac-u-vin the half bottle and put it back in the units (me cellar I like to call it). Then I'm right pogged. Usually I doze of in't chair. Wakes up for t'nine o'clock news on t'telly. Yis – there's a picture of Gordon saying we're still on track an Jack, with them bottle ended bins of his, saying crime must be stamped out. The blanket comes on on a timer if its between October 25th and March 28th. Gets in bed about half nine but usually gets up for a piss about 1.35am and 3.50am. Sometimes I turn t'garden light on and might see a hedghog.



THE TOWER OF BABEL

John Royson

My father was like a continental explorer locked in an airing cupboard or an astronaut put down the mines - though my mother would have said he was more like a mouse trying to become an elephant. Certainly she used to spend a lot of energy restraining his folly and urging her own sense of realism. This war of ambitions generated a tension which hung around the house like static electricity waiting to be discharged by a storm.

I remember him always as a tall and bony man with knuckly fingers like spanners and legs like rods with ball joints. His thumbnails were like rhinoceros horn, and when after flinging me up to the ceiling he gave me a rough nuzzle his cheek was like a wire brush. I remember too that his eyebrows had the texture of gorse and his huge nose was hooked like a tin opener. Throughout my entire childhood I never saw him out of his greasy overalls, and he always seemed to me about a hundred years old.

His father, his father's father, and even back to multiple-great-grandfather had been engineering workers: there was thus a direct link with the Industrial Revolution which he was proud to maintain. Punctual, self-disciplined, and no lying about in bed even when there was frost on the inside of the window panes. He was a living encyclopaedia of the Protestant Work Ethic, and he also embodied some of the lesser-known side effects - some which even Weber didn't write about.

The most important amongst these was summed up in the slogan - Make It Yourself. The origin of this may have lain in necessity, in simple home economy, but he took license and extended the notion into the realms of free expression. He tended our postcard sized back garden in a permanent Dig For Victory campaign. I was raised on cabbages infested with caterpillars and carrots like sticks of yellow wood. Sunday morning was shoe-mending time: he cobbled the family's footwear on a three-legged swastika last using old tyre treads for soles, and once built my mother a pair of stupendously high-heeled platform shoes so that she could look like Carmen Miranda.

It was a matter of pride to mend burst water pipes, make our own toasting fork out of an old brass stair rod, and manufacture coal bricks from coke dust and cement during the fuel crises just after the war. When my mother complained that she was sick, of the paintwork or that the wallpaper was giving her headache, he would re-decorate instantly. No dustsheets, ladders, or special apparatus: he just pasted small sheets of wallpaper on the kitchen table then stuck them up like patchwork, hardly even bothering to move the furniture.

If there was nothing to fix, repair, or maintain he would devise projects or invent objects which it became necessary to build. Somewhere in the ethos of Puritanism there must be a paragraph or two on moderation and restraint, but my father hoisted strict adherents on their own petard of activity. If salvation through good works was virtuous, there couldn't be too much of it, could there? This cult of self-reliance was thus his salvation: he elevated it to the point of manic creativity.

The first major construction I remember was heralded by the piecemeal arrival of the building materials. Each night as I dashed to the back door to greet him he would hold out his large bony hands like a conjurer then magically produce a length of timber or a sheet of plywood from somewhere about his overalls after which, to reinforce my amusement, he might playfully hit me on the head with it. This timber was stored in the kitchen: we ate amongst freshly planed two-by-threes and tea chest sides with shiny nails sticking from them, like silver claws. Eventually one day newspapers were spread on the front room carpet and the wood taken in.

"What's it going to be?" I asked eagerly, watching him sharpen the teeth of an old tenon saw.

"Well -we'll see lad" he said cryptically, "We'll see."

The sawing and banging and shaping began, I traced pictures in the sawdust which gathered like a thick coat of fur on the tiles of the fireplace. My father worked without plans or diagrams of any kind. I wondered who had told him how to do it. Meanwhile, my occasional task was to find the right sized screw or nail amongst the rusty mixture he kept in an old cocoa tin. I also recovered screwdrivers and chisels when they rolled under the settee onto the lino. Apart from supplying mugs of orange coloured tea and jam sand-

THE TOWER OF BABEL

wiches, my mother stayed, rather disapprovingly out of the way.

A huge framework began to take shape like an aeroplane chassis or a ship's hull which dominated our tiny front room. It became difficult to open the door, and we had to climb round the skeleton to get upstairs. At the end of a full weekend's work he lifted me on top of it to prove the structural rigidity to my mother.

"Take him down before he falls" she said.

"Do you know what it will be yet Dad?" I quizzed him again.

"Erm, a sideboard for your mother, I think" he said.

"But we've already got one" I said, probably annoying them both with this observation.

"I don't know why we can't buy a new one like any normal people" my mother complained.

"BUY one!?" This was heresy, blasphemous talk to the arch defender of thrift and minimum consumption. He even used to hoard old newspapers in boxes in the cellar. "Some of that information might come in handy one day" he told me.

In the weeks that followed we lived with wood shavings in the arm chairs and sawdust rising like puffs of smoke each time you sat down. The frame got bigger each weekend, whilst on workday evenings he busied himself with whatever other enthusiasm was currently being tried out. There was a period when some workmate gave him a broken camera. My father mended the punctured bellows with insulation tape, made a new hairspring for the shutter release, and then plunged us both into a world of the darkroom, trays of chemicals, and rolls of negatives hung from the clothes rack in the kitchen to dry. He painted the bathroom window black and twisted red crepe paper off a Christmas cake round the light bulb: then, using the sink and toilet bowl as basic equipment, we observed the magic of our own faces or the cat's slowly materialising to peer at us from the sensitised paper swimming in the acid.

A battle developed over the unfinished sideboard. My mother gave the ultimatum:

"Either it's finished, or it gets thrown out!" Although he was a foot taller than her and appeared to me much stronger and more clever, my father was always very compliant. She seemed to have some power over him, and as a child I had no idea what that could be.

The following weekend was devoted to panelling, then gluing and glazing, and my first lesson in French polishing. The best part of this was dissolving the shellac in methylated spirits. Sharp odours rose from the jam jar which I could have gone on sniffing for ever. We sandpapered furiously at the plywood sides and back until late Sunday tea-time, which was the deadline he had been given.

The finished object was a majestic piece of architecture - a huge series of cupboards and drawers on top of which rose two glass fronted cabinets with ornamental shelves on either side like a series of wings. All this was done in the very latest style - cubes and rectangles decorated with fan shapes and circles - like the furniture in an article "The House of the Future" we had seen in Picture Post. Bert Harris came in from next door to help with the lifting - but it wouldn't go through the door into the kitchen. They turned it round, tried it upside down, and even took the door off its hinges, but it was like trying to get a wheelbarrow through a letter box.

"It's not having any Jack!" Bert said. My mother was furious, but she gave in resentfully when my father suggested ripping the door frame off. So the sideboard stayed in the front room, jammed in amongst the three piece suite and a bulky cupboard we had inherited from my grandma.

The next weekend my father took me on what was to be the first of many visits to a junk market in town. This had three sections: at the top end there were mechanical objects (old radios, bike pumps, and mangles) in the middle, livestock (people selling rabbits and chickens from cardboard boxes) and at the bottom end "The Barrows", which were a series of hand carts piled high with second hand books. We spent hours sifting through these until our hands were black with dust and mildew. My father was convinced there were rarities buried in the grubby piles.

"All the knowledge of the world is in here lad, if we can just pick the best."

And so the conversion of the sideboard began. Week by week it was gradually filled with books. The drawers came out and were converted into shelves. Prize acquisitions went behind the glass doors, and eventually we had a small library in our own front room. Nobody ever read any of these books; it was enough for my father just to own them, but I can still remember their titles and spines. "Cas-

THE TOWER OF BABEL

sell's Family Doctor", "The Harmondsworth Book of the World", and a bound set of "Practical Wireless". All these heavier works of reference were at the bottom of the bookcase, as it had now become, along with "The Complete Metal Worker and Engineer" - four volumes of diagrams and sepia photographs of enormous lathes, milling machines, and overhead cranes. Up above, beyond my reach unless I stood on the pouf, were the classics: "Plutarch's Lives" which had marbled pages inside the cover, "The Edgar Wallace Omnibus", "Essays of Elia", an incomplete set of "The Odhams Press Dickens", and "Eothen" by Charles Kingsley in the Nelson's Illustrated Gems Series. For Christmas one year I remember I was given my own contribution to this collection, "Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia" which in keeping with family practice I never read; but it had wonderful pictures tinted pink and pale green.

So for years the bookcase remained towering over everything, only just short of the ceiling. And curiously enough it became linked with two of my father's other major projects. In the meantime there were the smaller ones: bicycles assembled from scrap parts and even a tandem made by welding two frames together. He told me that he had done his courting with my mother on a tandem and that he would like to get her back onto one again. His home made contraption collapsed on its first time out and was left in everybody's way for months whilst he threatened to repair it. Then there was the cigar box and batteries device. In boy's magazines at that time all the "Things You Can Make" and "Home Experiments" seemed to require a cigar box. My father smoked "Woodbines" in paper packets of five, but from somewhere he procured the necessary wooden box and fixed it up with the coil, wires, and a handle sticking out of the side. He asked me to hold the wires whilst he turned the handle. This was my introduction to The Electric Shock Machine. On Saturday nights if there was nothing else to do, he would get the machine out, dare me to hold the wires, and since I always refused would grab them himself and get me to turn the handle. I thought it was great fun watching him keep jumping back with a gasp that was half laugh, half pain. He said it was good, to toughen you up. My mother said we must both be stupid.

One day my father came home from work, produced three tickets from the oil-soaked pocket of his overalls, and announced "Special

treat! No school for you tomorrow!" Next day we were on an excursion train by six in the morning and travelled to London to see the Festival of Britain Exhibition. Three-D pictures: the sky: television: jet engines; and a planetarium. It was a new world! I didn't realise it at the time, but he must have come back completely inspired. It was an event which led to the bookcase being sawn in half and thrown out into the potting shed in the back garden - this to make way for his most advanced creation yet.

Again there was an initial build-up of materials: he began with radio valves and war-surplus electrical equipment from the junk market - assorted aluminium panels with knobs, dials, and looms of coloured wiring. These were brought home and taken apart with a hacksaw and soldering iron at the kitchen table. Then came transformers - heavy metal cores wound with miles of copper wire and covered with grease, jelly, and sticky black tape. My mother complained about the mess and the burn marks in the lino made by the hot solder as he shook the iron clean. We were banished to the front bedroom which was freezing cold, with piercing draughts coming through cracked window panes the council never got round to replacing.

"Never mind the cold lad. Soon we'll be plugging into the twentieth century!" he said. We put on extra clothes to keep warm and this time I was given the job of sorting resistors. He cut the tiny components off bakelite boards, and I put them into different jars according to their striped colour coding.

"What are these for Dad? What do they do?" He tried to explain, but I was no wiser.

This job was so complex that even for my father instructions were required. He pondered over diagrams which looked like the maze puzzles in my "Children's Annual" - hundreds of lines crossing and re-crossing each other, spattered with boxes and numbers and squiggly symbols. We shivered and fastened wires together almost nightly for two years. He replaced valves which kept blowing out; tested voltages with a black instrument box, and let me hold the silver snake of solder onto the hot iron as he connected a rectifier to a rheostat tuner: (I learnt the names but never knew what they did). My mother said she was getting fed up in the front room on her own every night and started going out dancing with a friend.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Eventually the Big Day came. He brought home an ex-RAF cathode ray tube which had been salvaged from some radar installation. It was only then that I really understood what he was building. He mounted the glassy cone on top of the other equipment and we switched on with all the ceremony of Blackpool illuminations. For a long time nothing happened. He twiddled the knobs and adjusted voltage regulators. Then gradually the surface of the tiny five inch screen began to glow a milky green colour. It flickered, a shadow passed across like some fleeting ghost, and then - Pft! - the picture collapsed to a dot in the centre of the tube. He fiddled and tested for another hour, but without result. We trooped downstairs into a pit of disappointment.

A few minutes later a neighbour called to say hadn't we noticed but our house was on fire. We dashed upstairs to find the room full of a dense, evil-smelling smoke. The set had been left on, one of the parts had burnt out, and flames had set fire to the curtains. Despite my mother's protests, my father threw the bedspread over the burning equipment and saved most of it. The curtains were lost, the wallpaper was scorched brown and black, and for ever after in that bedroom there lingered an awful smell that reminded me of the stink bombs some of the older boys threw at school.

My father was undeterred. Within a couple of weeks he had replaced the affected parts and I can still remember the whoop of joy he gave one winter afternoon when the glow and flicker were produced again and tuned into a moving picture. Here it was - television at last! Short sticks appeared to be hanging from a ceiling and moving around in spasmodic jerks. My father fastened cardboard over the curtainless windows to darken the room. We then recognised that it was a football match - but upside down. The spectacle was so exciting though that we watched it like that for weeks whilst he was putting the fault right.

There then began a series of Saturday night treats in which he and I used to sit wrapped in blankets watching "Cafe Continental" and the Interludes, eating sandwiches my mother had left for us and drinking mugs of Oxo to keep warm. He fixed a large perspex bubble in front of the screen which made the picture seem bigger. Eventually my mother relented and allowed him to bring the equipment downstairs so that she could invite the neighbours to watch the corona-

tion. A huge triangular cabinet was made and set across the corner of the room. It was for this reason that the bookcase had to go. We jammed the two halves into the shed where they warped and splintered in the damp and were used to store plantpots and old copies of the "Radio Times". Yet although we didn't know it at the time this household friend still had another major function to perform, another life to live.

Meanwhile the novelty of television had lured my mother back into the house, though at the same time it provoked a lot of rows. If one person was close enough to see the screen, the other two couldn't feel the fire. What time was I going to bed? Why didn't my father change out of those filthy overalls? He solved these problems in his own way. I realise now, looking back, that watching television, enjoying his own creation, was too passive for his nature, too close to idle enjoyment. So he retreated to the kitchen as his workshop.

There was a brief craze for illuminated handwriting which passed quickly to the acquisition of a small hand press. It was as if he was re-making the discoveries of the renaissance. He printed letter heads and visiting cards for friends whose only possible correspondence was with hire purchase companies or the police. There was a second fire one November when he decided we would make our own fire-works. And then he embarked on another project which might have united us all. A mate of his at work sold him an old Morris Eight. It stopped dead the day after he bought it. The engine was taken out by hand, then dismantled and overhauled on the kitchen, table. Once it was on the road again we could go for runs at weekend to the seaside together. But there always seemed to be some bearing or cylinder head which needed stripping down.

"Either get the thing fixed properly, or get rid. We should have a proper car!" my mother told him. He managed to find a solution, in which he intended to combine both these suggestions and ended up doing neither. He bought a second car to cannibalise for spare parts. We had to take a fence down to wedge this wreck into the back garden, after which he began a process of auto-surgery which resulted in two broken down vehicles and a collection of very well reconditioned differentials, clutches, and gear boxes.

"We can't lose anyway" he claimed: "All this stuff is an investment. Where else could you find a twenty year old radiator in that condi-

THE TOWER OF BABEL

tion?"

I suppose he must have retired whilst I was still quite young. It was hard to tell any difference since he still got up at six thirty every morning, still wore his overalls, and spent all day working with his hands. Fortunately for the sake of household peace his hobbies seemed to get smaller in scale. He started working on a board he rested across his knees, once making my mother a ring from some platinum wire and an industrial diamond he had saved from his old firm.

"Your father's getting sentimental in his old age" she said to me, "but at least he's less trouble." She probably imagined that the rage in him to create and grapple with the material world was dying out. But she was wrong. He was still to embark on his finest construction, even though it did turn out to be his last.

By now we had a rented television like everybody else in the street but my father refused to let his own creation be scrapped, and so like everything else he wanted to save it was dismantled and stored in the potting shed. It must have been this which gave him the inspiration for a project which was both a spectacular construction and a masterpiece of conservation and material re-cycling. First he moved out all the boxes of mouldy newspapers and magazines which had fused into a sodden pulp with damp. They were stuffed systematically into the so-called spare car which had rusted away to a derelict body shell.

"That's for ballast" he said. "It'll help keep it steady" Then he built a new electronic unit from the television, adding more loudspeakers and tuning dials which were all mounted in what was left of the old sideboard-cum-bookcase. He put old pieces of lino and carpet down on the floor and persuaded my mother to let him have one of our old kitchen chairs. She was glad of something which was obviously going to keep him out of her way.

"I've guessed!" I said excitedly, by now a young know-it-all. "A radio ham. You're going to talk to people all over the world!" He smiled at me in a way which at first suggested he was pleased or proud of me, but then became sort of glassy eyed.

"Right son! But not this world ..."

What I had not foreseen was the assembly of Dexion struts and old

car parts which he bolted like a giant crane to the top of the car. Then on top of that he mounted an enormous metal dish he had beaten together out of the body panels and wings. The neighbours complained and even reported him to the council, but he ignored them all and it stayed there visible all over the estate, dominating the skyline, towering above the rooftops - his own radio telescope!

That was when he really did go into retirement, for we hardly saw him from then on. He improvised a little desk in the shed and spent days on end watching for blips on the oscilloscope, listening to a sound he picked up in the earphones which sounded to me like somebody frying chips, and making notes and tabulations of all he heard.

"It's the stars talking" he said. "Do you realise that some of these messages were sent out before Plato was a lad?" Reception was clearer at night, so he rigged up a bunk in there and slept through the day. My mother left a packet of sandwiches for him outside the back door before she locked up at night. It was as if he was slipping into another realm, as if our everyday world wasn't the right place for him. And of course the logical outcome of all this might have been expected. A couple of years later during a bitterly cold winter spell we got up one morning to find that the packet of sandwiches hadn't been touched.

Now the problem is that with my mother getting married again we don't know what to do with all this equipment. I feel somehow responsible for it, and certainly it's the only material inheritance I'll get from him. But I don't know how any of it works. It isn't in my line at all. I've just enrolled on a course to study sociology.

THE CRAZY OIK ISSUE 1



HAND ME DOWN LOVE

Tom Kilcourse

Are all policemen that stupid, or is this sergeant a special case? He either doesn't understand, or won't understand. If I've told him once, I've said it a dozen times... 'Look Bozo, it's clearly a case of mistaken identity'. But no, he asks me again what I've got against Arthur Murgatroyd. What was my motive for the attack? I tell him, I have nothing against Arthur Murgatroyd. I've never met him before, so what could I possibly have against him? I'm a rational, intelligent man. I went to grammar school, for God's sake! Why would such a person have a grudge against a total stranger? It was a case of mistaken identity. Murgatroyd, if that's his real name, just happens to look like Johnny Dankworth. He has the same sneaky look. OK, so he doesn't look so sneaky in the police photograph, with the bandage round his head, but he looked very sneaky when I saw him coming out of Woolworths.

I'm beginning to think that this sergeant has something against me, personal like. He doesn't look too bright to me. The sort of bloke who may well take a dislike to strangers. Perhaps it's my beard. A lot of policemen don't like people with beards. Why else would he try so hard to make me feel guilty? He keeps going on about Murgatroyd being an old man. I'm an old man, dammit! Seventy next year! And there's another thing. If he hasn't got it in for me, why does the sergeant keep referring to my walking stick as a weapon? I'm old. I use the thing to help me walk, stupid! It's heavy, but it isn't a weapon. If Murgatroyd hadn't been such a wimp he'd have stayed on his feet, instead of taking a dive. Sneaky bastard!

And as for the accusation that I acted impulsively, that is particularly stupid. Impulsive! I've waited for over forty years to get the swine, Dankworth that is, not Murgatroyd. As I keep saying, it was a case of mistaken identity. When I saw him come through those doors, I could have sworn it was Dankworth and I thought, 'matey, now's your chance', and hit him. But it wasn't impulsive. I'd wanted to do that for all those years, ever since Cleo and I fell in love. All those years in which Dankworth had come between us, keeping her from

following her heart and joining me in Wigan. I understand his position, Dankworth's that is: after all, I'm a married man myself, and I wouldn't want my missus to fall in love with someone else. But I wouldn't behave in the sneaky way that Dankworth did, moving heaven and earth to make sure that Cleo never came to perform in Wigan, or even in St. Helens. The nearest she ever came was Manchester, and then he sneaked her out by a side-door after the concert. He must have been eaten up with jealousy, having watched her making eyes at me all the time she was on stage. There were several hundred people there that night, but she saw only me.

Love blossomed when Cleo first sang for me. 'Teach me Tonight' it was, and boy, did she mean it! That smoky voice of hers just dripped sweetness all over me, luring me. I knew that she meant me, even though it was a long-playing record. That's where she's so clever, so much brighter than that dumb husband of hers, but not sneaky. It wasn't sneaky. She had to be devious to some extent, knowing that he was watching her all the time. That's why she got in touch with me through that record, but there was no mistaking the message. Without wishing to be indelicate, I knew right away that she had the hots for me. That first time, my wife was listening too, so I had to pretend not to notice what Cleo was saying. I acted very cool, like. Betty didn't even notice: she was busy ironing at the time.

After that first time though, I took more care, listening when Betty was out shopping or something, so that I could respond and let Cleo know that I felt as she did. I knew that she'd got the message when I heard her sing 'He Needs Me'. Then came, 'I'll Remember April', it was April when she first sang for me. Though Dankworth kept us apart by various sneaky devices, we kept in touch: Betty never suspected anything. She did complain once that the cabinet was filling up with Cleo Laine records, but I put her off the scent by buying some Sinatra discs. I think Betty had a secret crush on him, God knows why, so that kept her quiet. So, love continued to bloom in our living-room, but as time passed I began to feel a little frustrated. Spiritual contact is fine, but Dankworth was preventing it from becoming anything more, and I know it was getting through to Cleo as well. That's what made her tell me that it's 'Too Late Now' and that I was 'Unforgettable'. All very well, but what red-blooded

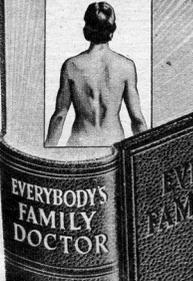
HAND ME DOWN LOVE

man wants to be just a memory. So, I resolved to get Dankworth, if I could. Impulsive? I've waited patiently for years.

Maybe Cleo's right though. Perhaps it is 'Too Late Now'. She hasn't been in touch for some while, and I reckon that time has come between us. I don't blame her really; I'm no longer the man I was. I'm getting on a bit, and not too clever on my feet, and it's quite understandable that a gorgeous young creature like Cleo should have second thoughts about our relationship. Still, I'm fit enough to have dropped that Dankworth-Murgatroyd bloke. That'll teach the bastard.

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NOTIONAL HEALTH

Steve Howarth

I've always known I'd got cancer of the balls. There's never been any pain, of course, but that's part of the disease, isn't it? It's latent. It lies dormant for years on end, then suddenly engulfs you with all its malevolence. I must have been about thirteen when I first discovered this fact. My tentative, exploring fingers traced the shape of my testicles and to my horror I discovered they were not completely round! They were more of an oval shape. They must be malformed! I must be a freak! It must be the incipient stages of some dreaded disease!

I've never discussed it with anyone, but I have borne this knowledge stoically over the last twenty years and as time has passed I've become increasingly thankful that I have achieved almost half my allotted span without being cut off in my prime.

I know why I must be susceptible to serious illnesses, it must be my upbringing. I was brought up in a household where the most malignant ailments lurked in every corner ready to strike down the foolhardy or the incautious. Lurid details of every disease were discussed in hushed tones. Signs and symptoms of every affliction were mulled over with knowing nods and unfinished sentences. Pneumonia was the inevitable result of going out too soon after a hot bath. Cancer of the brain in young girls was caused by the excessive use of peroxide on their hair. Poliomyelitis lurked in the sand-pit in the local park and diseases that were so horrible they didn't even have a name were picked up in public conveniences. One of the main topics of conversation among my relatives was childbirth and its attendant rigours. The blues of the birth. It was discussed with religious fervour, its agonies, its stigmata and its aura, of creation.

All this medical knowledge and Hippocratic education had a profound effect on a growing boy. I was familiar at a very early age with the 'thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to', I became aware of all the things that could upset the delicate mechanisms of the human body. Doctors were shadowy figures in this milieu. They seemed to lurch from patient to patient in a nimbus of whisky and embrocation. Their diagnoses were always open to debate. Didn't that old bugger Fielding, half-drunk, prescribe Alka-Seltzer for my uncle

Arthur who was in the final stages of peritonitis caused by a burst ulcer?

No. Doctors were bad lots. There must be something wrong with a profession that could use leeches so extensively.

All my prejudices against the medical profession were recently confirmed on a visit to my local G.P. I'd hardly shut the door behind me when, pen poised, he'd written out a sick-note and prescribed a new antibiotic, recommended to him over a convivial lunch by a young medical rep, a former window-cleaner, who had been in the business all of three days.

He got rather sulky and petulant when I said I didn't think it would help as I was suffering from a brain tumour. Punctuated by his grunts, I proceeded to describe the symptoms but in a sudden paroxysm of activity he bundled me towards the door as I indignantly demanded a second opinion. They are all the same doctors. Let's face it, it's a pretty unnatural occupation anyway.

But there is no getting away from it, I am concerned about my health. I can feel, the thousand brain cells being destroyed each time I take a pint of Tetleys. I can hear my arteries hardening after every plate of egg and chips. I can see the ravages of time on my once, quite passable countenance and I can smell my lungs burning in the smoking compartment of any train.

I can't even stand people telling jokes or making light of death and disease. I still feel a cold shiver run down my spine when I recall that time a few years ago when I was having a lunch-time drink with Dennis, a friend from work. We bumped into an old school mate of mine Billy Reynolds. One drink led to another and Billy was regaling us with his latest string of jokes. As is usually the case in instances like this, his first joke was quite funny but the ensuing half-dozen were becoming less and less humorous. He finally told a singularly unfunny joke about a spastic kid. The last line was something about the kid buying an ice cream cornet and smashing it into his forehead. Some joke! I shall never forget it. In the silence that followed the joke, Dennis calmly leaned forward and in a steady voice, informed Billy that his five-year-old kid, Gary was spastic and never had the slightest difficulty eating ice-cream cornets. What a show-stopper!

As I said this incident left me with this legacy (Is that something to do with dying?) and I can't bear jokes about things like that. I'm not

NOTIONAL HEALTH

obsessed with my physical condition but I enjoy ill-health, as they say, and in here I have plenty of time on my hands to think about it. After all this recent scare, I have a morbid fear of contracting this strangely named 'Legionnaire's Disease' One of the symptoms of this disease no doubt, is that you start shitting sand. It was in my adolescence that most of my afflictions overtook me. Most of them, of course, were related to, or emanating from my private parts. First of all there was the problem of size. It was always difficult to make unobtrusive comparisons, but I realized quite early on that I was not overly endowed. It always seemed so important in male company. Certainly, in cold weather, my 'manliness' as they coyly refer to it in some novels, would disappear almost to nothing. I'd been told that when muscles were not used regularly, they atrophy and fade away. I panicked. My God! My muscle was fading away before I'd ever had the chance to exercise it in the first place.

My early sexual skirmishes, were conducted with all the sophistication of a demented rabbit. There was a parade of faceless partners and all these encounters ended in little or no satisfaction for either party. It was merely a case of 'hips that pass in the night'. An over developed propensity for breaking wind was another of my problems. Many a promising, tender, loving moment was destroyed completely by the odd, importune 'silent Killer'. In male company this proclivity was a source of boasting and self-aggrandisement, but it did not go down too well after an hour long struggle when you'd finally managed to get your hand on 'the flesh at the top of her stockings. A definite setback. As I've never been able to understand the reason why the poor fart has been the victim of, so much social opprobrium when the sneeze has achieved relative social acceptance. The humble fart is medically harmless whilst the sneeze is a social time-bomb, infecting all and sundry within a radius of six yards with a whole host of noxious diseases. It's a strange world isn't it? It is not only my physical health that has been fragile, recently my mental health has been giving me cause for concern. People in the street stare at me and I am convinced I am being followed. I know that in that room out there all the others are talking about me. I haven't heard any voices yet, but when I used to pray I used to speak to some-one who wasn't there. I suppose that is the same thing. They all hate me out there. I have this re-occurring dream in which I wake up in a mental hospital. I am trying desperately to get

the resident psychiatrist to read this book by a man called Laing, but he cannot tear himself away from the 'Sporting Life'. Every time I get too close to him he wields this gigantic syringe and plunges it deep into my chest. A real nightmare. Psychiatrists are a bad lot. I can never understand why these people who have cut their teeth on varicose veins and haemorrhoids should be let loose to prey on the mentally ill. Poor sods, don't they have enough problems.

I once visited Broadmoor, you know. It was a good few years ago just after they had had that enormous scandal. Do you remember it? They released that bloke who was doing a twenty year stretch for poisoning his wife and her lover. They released him somewhat prematurely in that he had only done eighteen years and six months of his sentence. He was only out thirty five minutes. The first thing he did when he got to Reading was to buy himself an axe at a Do-it-Yourself superstore. He then treated himself to a Big Mac and chips with all the relishes, and then, he went out and hacked to pieces two traffic wardens and an estate agent. At his trial, there were those in the jury who maintained that his very choice of victims proved that he was of sound mind. But it was all to no avail. With a certain sense of irony the judge sentenced him to thirty five years back in Broadmoor, a year for every minute of freedom. He didn't relish that.

Whilst I was in there, I met this interesting bloke. What was so remarkable about him was his magnificent physique. He was about six foot eight, built like a barn door. He really gave the lie to the 'mens sana in corpore sano' brigade. It turns out he'd been in the Navy for many years. He had had this 'friend', well you know what it's like in the Navy, 'Hello Sailor' and all that. His friend had been the jealous type and somewhere halfway to South America they had had a violent argument. The big fellow had whopped him over the head and stuffed his body out of the port-hole. The water was shark infested, and because there was no sign of any body or any real evidence, the big fellow had got away with it.

So far so good. Four years later, there was another friend and another violent argument. Being a creature of somewhat fixed habits, the big fellow whopped him on the head and stuffed his body out of the port-hole. He then went calmly to sleep. What he hadn't realized was that this time the ship was laid up in dock. ! The body- had fallen from the port-hole and was lying peacefully on the quayside to

NOTIONAL HEALTH

be discovered by two dockers as they arrived for their early morning shift. The big fellow got twenty years. So much for Broadmoor. Well you've got to laugh. Haven't you. I suppose it's fear.

These days I can't concentrate for long. I keep forgetting things. I seem to spend a lot of my time washing my hands. Sometimes it's as though I was standing outside myself, looking down on myself doing the strangest things. I think I'd better stop now. I'm beginning to get pains in the back of my hands and I need to consult my 'Medical Dictionary' to see if writer's cramp is terminal or not. Anyway it is 'LightsOut' and the resident psychiatrist has just put down his 'Sporting Life'.



IT WAS NOT VLADIMIR ILYITCH

Ernest Wild

It was not Vladimir Ilyitch. He was not the pale waxen corpse in the coffin under the fierce arc-lights. Krupushkya knew of a certainty as she stood along with the other high-ranking soviet dignitaries that Vladimir Ilyitch was not in that coffin. The solemn music only served to increase the sense of unreality, of theatricality even, as one of Lenin's colleagues stepped forward to stand by the open coffin of the dead leader and deliver the official eulogies. She felt as though she wanted to stop all this state-engineered official farce and shout out "Stop this nonsense! Stop this farce! Lenin is alive! He is not dead! You have officially killed him off for your own evil purposes! Lenin, my husband, lives, although I have no idea where he is!"

The military band played *The Internationale* with great feeling and she realised that she had been standing there in a sort of trance for some considerable time. She had heard not one word of the official tributes. She glanced at Stalin, that sly machinating Georgian. "Beware of Stalin: do not trust him!", Vladimir Ilyitch had often told her. Now she knew of a certainty that Stalin had engineered all this and was going to take over power and she, Krupushkaya, was powerless to prevent it. She felt tears come into her eyes but she knew that they were not the tears of mourning which the world would take them for. She knew them for what they were - the tears of impotent and utter frustration. She could do nothing but go along with this State charade.

Stalin stepped forward and began his eulogy. His thick Georgian accent was obvious and it was also obvious that Russian for him was a foreign language. She studied him again, this diminutive ex-seminarist from the Caucasus, this one-time Kulak, notorious Bolshevik bandit who had risen to power through his control of the party apparatus. He spoke with feeling of his first meeting with Vladimir Ilyitch when they were both in exile in Siberia and of how comrade Lenin and his wife comrade Krupushkaya, "wife and constant companion of our beloved leader", here he paused and gestured lovingly and almost protectively towards her, "became true

friends and started my own belief in the justness and inevitability of the communist revolution".

Krupushkaya's mind floated off again and she felt herself thinking back over the years. How she wished that she had had children: some living reminder of Vladimir Ilyitch. She shivered and suddenly realised that Stalin, for all his ruthlessness and cunning, would hardly dare to harm her physically. She would be locked away somewhere, probably in the Kremlin and brought out to serve Stalin's purposes at official functions and receptions for foreign dignitaries. She thought about this prospect for some moments more and then suddenly bitter salt tears, real tears of mourning this time, flooded her eyes and she broke down into uncontrollable sobs.

Stalin paused in his eulogy and walked briskly over to where Krupushkaya stood behind the coffin with its supposed corpse of Lenin. He put his hand on her shoulder and led her away. She looked into his eyes and saw only compassion and composure. What a consummate actor Stalin was she thought. How he had schooled himself over the years to give no hint of his real, innermost feelings and how she wished that she had been able to peel away the masks of deception that covered his face and skull and lay bare the thoughts that lay in the depths of his psyche, his oriental, non-European psyche.

Stalin placed her in the care of two nurses and left her. Before she could do or say anything one of the nurses, the stronger, more serious looking of the two, rolled up the sleeve of the military-type tunic she wore and injected her with a hypodermic needle. As she lost consciousness she noticed two other nurses coming towards them pushing a medical trolley. Stalin had left nothing to chance!

When she came to she was in bed in Lenin's private apartment in the Kremlin. She was in her bed, the bed she had shared with Lenin. Again she wondered what had happened to Vladimir Ilyitch and where he was before slipping into unconsciousness.

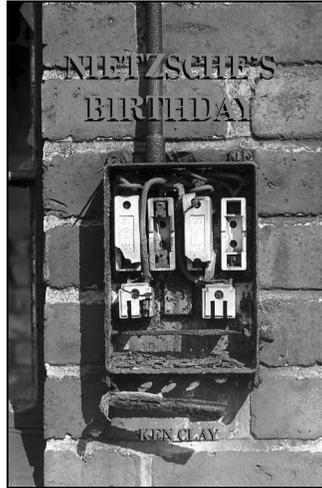
Some months later, as Krupushkaya had predicted, she was indeed brought out to attend an official function: the unveiling ceremony of a statue of Lenin. It had been erected in the Kremlin grounds near the wall opposite the first-floor window of Lenin's private office. Again there were official speeches and full military state ceremonial.

IT WAS NOT VLADIMIR ILYITCH

Kruprushkaya gazed at the statue. It was extremely life-like. It was her Vladimir Ilyitch in characteristic speech-making pose. She shivered with the realisation of just how life-like the figure on the plinth was. She kept her gaze on the eyes of the statue almost to the end of the ceremony. Then, almost unconsciously, without -wishing it, the idea that the statue was Lenin took hold in her mind. She suddenly knew of a truth that the body of Vladimir Ilyitch was in that statue. She looked at the eyes again and then at Stalin. He returned her stare but she somehow knew that he had realised that she knew that Lenin was not in the floodlit coffin in the new mausoleum in Red Square. She reeled over with the shock. Almost immediately a medical team emerged, placed her inert body on a stretcher and took it away.

The next day's editions of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* reported that the widow of comrade Lenin had been so overcome with emotion at the dedication ceremony of the new statue of him at the Kremlin wall that she had fainted.

THE CRAZY OIK COLLECTION



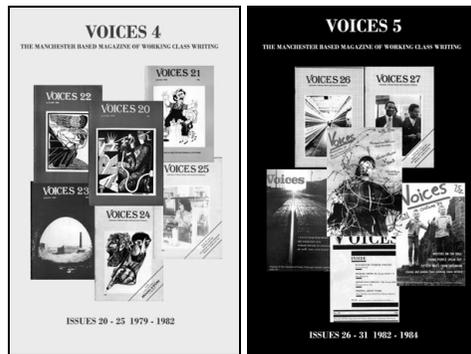
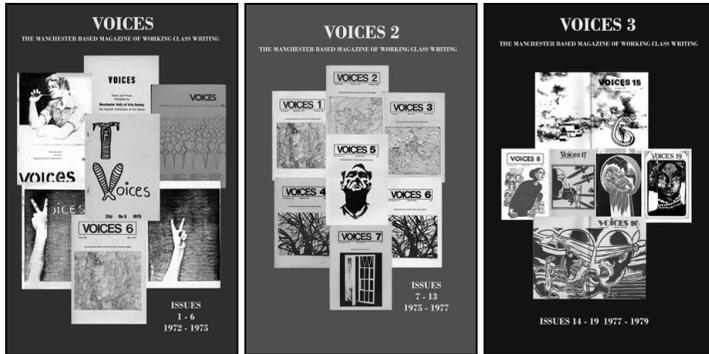
Nietzsche's Birthday – Ken Clay

When the title story appeared in *Voices* in 1977 people wrote in saying it was disgusting. Ken wondered whether to write back saying that was exactly how blokes in workshops spoke – but then decide he couldn't be arsed. This story probably ruined his chances of writing for the parish magazine.

Maybe the Communist Party of Great Britain thought it was libelled too but it collapsed before a complaint could be lodged.

Feminists will also find Ken's difficulties with girls hard to read – as will women of a nervous disposition. Well, lets not put too fine a point on it -if you are middle class, a woman or a prude best give this one a miss.

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