

THE CRAZY OIK
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Albert is from Tom Kilcourse's collection *The Human Circus*.

Actress is from Nigel Ford's collection *One Dog Barking*.

Front Cover – Picasso - *Dream* (1932)



The year 1927 could not have started more propitiously for Picasso. At six o'clock in the evening of January 8, while cruising the *grands boulevards* in search of *l'amour fou*, the forty-five-year-old artist came upon the *femme-enfant* of his dreams: an adolescent blonde with piercing, cobalt blue eyes and a precociously voluptuous body—big breasts, sturdy thighs, well-cushioned knees, and buttocks like the Callipygian Venus. Physically, the girl was the antithesis of skinny Olga and the boyish, flat-chested flapper look that was de rigueur in the 1920s. Marie-Therese Leontine Walter was seventeen and a half years old. For the next nine years or so, she would be Picasso's greatest love. Before her death in 1977 (fifty years after meeting Picasso), Marie-Therese, who was unusually truthful, allowed herself to be interviewed by Lydia Gasman in 1972 and Pierre Cabanne in 1977. Gasman was particularly successful in winning her confidence and persuading her to talk without constraint about the first meeting and the nature of her relationship with Picasso.³

Marie-Therese told Gasman that after shopping at the Galeries Lafayette for a *col Claudine*—a "Peter Pan collar"—and matching cuffs, she had been accosted by Picasso. His broad smile, beautiful red-and-black tie, wide gold ring off an expensive umbrella, and huge mesmeric eyes instantly disarmed her. She remembered him saying, "You have an interesting face. I would like to do a portrait of you. I feel we are going to do great things together." "I am Picasso," he announced. The name meant nothing to Marie-Therese, so he took her to a bookstore and showed her a book about him—in Chinese or Japanese, she thought. The fact that he was a painter touched her, "because my mother had had a great romance with a painter. It seemed as if the same story were about to begin all over again." Picasso's comment that she was beautiful gave Marie-Therese particular pleasure. Hitherto her family had teased her for having an ugly "Greek" nose instead of a cute little Parisian *retrousse* one.

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EDITORIAL

THE POWER OF PRINT

It's interesting that just after Picasso clapped eyes on the seventeen year old hornbag Marie Therèse Walter he didn't do a sketch of her like some oily spiv at the Place du Tertre *he took her to a bookstore and showed her a book about him*. In those innocent times that'd be the ultimate mark of celebrity. And perhaps even now when your average oik worships talentless nonentities like Jade Goody on TV and aspires to be on it themselves there's still a cachet attached to appearing in print, especially ink on paper which will last a thousand years unlike your Kindle edition which will be unreadable in five. So, humble oik contributors, consider yourself among a potentially immortal elite. You've got what Stendhal called a ticket in the lottery. And if you do bump into a modern Marie Therèse just whip out an Oik with your piece in it – you never know.

Picasso continued to attract hornbags throughout his career although it's unlikely any of them were impressed by cubism or heads with two eyes on the same side. It's difficult to image what those girls saw in that pop-eyed, slap-headed, midget multi-millionaire, although a closer look at the feature at the top of Marie's head in Picasso's ravishing *Dream* may give us a clue about what was really on her mind.

Difficulties with girls is one of our recurring themes . It was the title of one of Kingsley Amis's novels. Indeed all his novels could have been called that just as all Dostoievski could be *Crime and Punishment* and all Flaubert could be *A Sentimental Education*. Ken Champion touches on this topic in *George* while Kayti Doolittle's story *No Man's Woman* might be, *mutatis mutandis*, *Difficulties With Blokes*.

Elsewhere Tanner and S. Kadison give us two takes on education with *Maths Lesson* and *Let's Kill the Teacher*. Two more complementary stories describe ageing oik shipwrecks: Kenn Taylor's *Lime Street* and Tom Kilcourse's *Albert*. We welcome Kenn's scouse injection, a worthy accompaniment to Tanner's

hilarious vignettes from what can seem like another planet - Liverpool. Tom Kilcourse is a classic Manc, even though he now lives in France. Well who can blame him. Today's paper puts the UK bottom of a list of best places to live while France is at the top.

Brett Wilson and Dave Birtwistle write characteristically crazy accounts everyday madness. Nigel Ford gives us the final episode of his weird portrayal of a Swedish road repair gang. Scandinavia is what happens when you give a small peasant community a huge area of land and a vast amount of money. Oscar quipped that the USA had gone from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilisation. The Scandies seem to have been always civilized but also slightly mad which is why they treat booze like the work of the devil and go apeshit in the pub as soon as they land anywhere south. No doubt I'm stereotyping from ignorance – but Nigel isn't; he spends most of his time there and speaks the language, even translates it if you want anything in that line.

Ray Blyde's autobiography finishes with chapter 15 of *My Life in Print* – not so much finishes as peters out – Ray himself, we are happy to report, is far from petering out. Maybe he'll take up his pen once more and fill in the remaining sixty years.

Ken Clay October 2011

NO MAN'S WOMAN

Kayti Doolittle

The surprise vacation was a charming gesture; however, my boyfriend didn't account for luggage.

"It's only two days," he said, frustrated. My huge bag was black and looked pregnant as if it were about to pop at the zipper.

"I don't know where we're going." I tugged the heavy bag out onto the driveway. "I had to pack for every contingency." Along with a number of other items I had shoved in the bag last minute, the suitcase held a white coat two string bikinis, a teal silky skirt a black dress I had borrowed (without asking) from my sister, tall black boots, and every pair of heels I owned. I packed all my favorite heels in their designated shoe bags to protect them during travel. Maybe this was too much.

"I forgot my toothbrush." I realized as I was doing a mental inventory of my overstuffed suitcase.

"Don't worry I'll buy you one." Alexander embraced me; kissed me, and then grabbed the handle, pulling my luggage to the trunk of his car.

"What did you tell your parents?" He opened the door for me. Boys my age definitely didn't do that.

"Um. Springfield?" I giggled nervously. Hoping the conversation would change. I slipped into the passenger seat.

"You should have told them the truth," he said and shut my door, walking over to get into the driver's side.

"It will just be easier this way." I smiled at him. "I really want to know where we are going."

Alexander looked at me.

"I suppose it won't be a surprise much longer so I might as well tell you. He paused, looked at me, and smiled. "We're going to San Diego."

I faked a smile, but the truth was I hardly cared. Any minute my dad could come home from work and catch me with my older boyfriend in a car with a suitcase and plane tickets. I pointed at the clock in his

Jaguar. The clock wasn't digital like most cars, it looked more like the face of a grandfather clock. I had a hard time reading it.

"Well we better get going then." I took his hand hoping he wouldn't see mine trembling.

As we drove out of the cul-de-sac, my house began to grow smaller in the mirror. I had lived in that house for all nineteen years of my life. The shutters had not changed colour since I was child. It was July, The Rhododendron bush was in full bloom, the pink flowers bright and open. It only bloomed for one month of every year, so even on the first week, flowers would start to fall and lay open and exposed on the walk to the front door. My dog, a white American Eskimo, had run out of his doggie door and was sitting on our hilly driveway. He always watched people coming and going, and he never left his spot at the top of the driveway because he was confined by his electric fence. Max's big brown eyes watched me drive away.

*

Why hadn't this plane taken off yet? It was beginning to feel like an eternity since I boarded the plane. Alexander kissed my neck, moving up to my lips, my nose, and my forehead, leaving little moist spots on my skin. My thrift store purse lay in a ball on the floor under the seat, my phone peeking out of one of the openings. I was a horrible liar, so I was dreading the next conversation with my parents where I claimed I was at the sorority house instead 1,334 miles away on a beach. Alexander's hands were large, and his skin felt like tissue paper. Our fingers began to look like an intertwined nest of appendages. I liked my hands feeling contained by someone else's. I liked my face feeling drenched with kisses. And I liked the trip. My dad was the only man that had ever put me at the centre of his universe; now this man that barely knew me thought I was irresistible and so instantly important. He thought all of my flaws were amusing. According to movies, that's love, right?

A mother across the aisle kept glancing at us while she held her little pigtailed daughter playing with her matted blonde Barbie. The mother looked at me as if I had just stolen someone's husband. I couldn't blame her. I know I would have watched us. My brown hair was in a high ponytail, and I wore the plastic pink gas station sunglasses Alexander had purchased for me when we first met four weeks ago. With my holey black gaucho pants, and my cheap black

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tank top with the inscription, "No man's woman," I looked like I could have been skipping 4th hour Algebra. Meanwhile, Alexander sat in the aisle seat wearing his Lacrosse light blue shirt and his pressed jeans, a shiny Movado watch adorning his wrist. Specks of grey had started to form on the sides of his hair. I was just waiting for someone to refer to him as my young father. The woman kept looking until I crossed my arms to hide the message on my shirt. I was going through a phase of wearing aggressive statements that resembled some aspect of strength I myself was not yet capable of—but she didn't know that.

The blue Southwest seats felt small. Were those chairs reclined? I didn't remember planes feeling so confined. All I could hear was the crying baby in front of me and the little girl across the aisle banging her Barbie's head around. The plane smelled like one big jar of baby food.

I had always been so careful. My self-control and restrictions had always defined me. I was the girl that wrapped my words up in pretty little ribbon-covered packages. After all, I had always learned if you don't have anything nice to say you shouldn't say it at all. I was the girl who was staying a virgin until marriage. I was the girl who diligently followed the "shoulds" and excessive to-do lists and never did anything intentionally to disappoint my parents. Now me, my self-control, and an older man were sitting on a plane-awaiting take off.

*

Only a few months prior to this romantic getaway, my chastity belt and I made our first visit to the "female doctor". I was scared because I had no idea what kind of pain would be inflicted. Most of my friends had been going since they were fifteen or sixteen-without their mothers. I was eighteen, and had always been plagued by terrible monthly cramps, so my mom insisted it was time to get my first check up. She sat in the waiting room as I replayed the stories that my friends had told me of the metal piece that opens up your "downstairs". My lower region had never been breached.

The doctor was not what I'd expected. Her lips were painted a coral colour. Her blonde hair was short and pinned up on one side with a plastic purple clip that looked as though it was meant for a five-year-

old little girl. She looked like a kewpie doll, her eyes big, blue, unchanging; her eyelashes perfectly combed, sectioned off and black.

As directed. I put my legs up on the stirrups; the stirrups had socks covering the mechanics of the cold metal structure. The socks were soft and striped with purples and pinks. I leaned back holding the thin two-piece gown closed and the doctor laughed.

“Just so you know that piece you are wearing on top is meant for the bottom part of your body. Such a small little waist you have to be able to wear it like that.” She giggled at my mistake. I felt stupid. I had tried it on the top and then the bottom; it didn't seem to make much of a difference. It was thin material with gaping holes that allowed for my body to be pried and prodded; wearing it didn't make me feel any less naked.

"You know I had a German girl once that wouldn't wear any of the gowns at all," she laughed. "I guess that's what they are used to."

Was this my doctor? Was she telling me about other patients? Did she think that all Germans were naked exhibitionists? And most importantly would she later tell patients about me: the girl who couldn't even put a gown on properly?

I lay on the table holding the top on with my right hand so I would not flash the doctor. I looked up at the ceiling. There was a massive illustration covering one ceiling panel of dolphins swimming in the ocean. I felt an enormous cold pressure between my legs. A manufactured gel substance seeped out as she pushed the metal rod inside me. I stared at the sea creatures, holding my breath as the doctor peered into my baby maker. The illustration looked like a computerized version of Lisa Frank images. I was working on a BFA; school found a way to invade all my thoughts. Art had always been a place I could lose myself. And as a little girl I had loved Lisa Frank. Up above me the colours were bright and saturated, there was no competition between the objects in the picture because they were all created almost like separate little pieces of art, each one just as important as the next. Everything was clear and concise, all the colours the same intensity, making everything appear to be on the same plane causing the image to look flat and one dimensional. The doctor's hands were inside me, manually spreading female stuff I didn't even know the names of. The breath trapped in my mouth was

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stale and hot.

"You have a beautiful cervix." my doctor said not looking up, her face still staring at my downstairs. I was not sure if she was talking to my vagina or me. And what was a cervix after all? I felt my teeth clench. The pressure stopped and I felt the cold foreign piece pull out. "You look good. You can go ahead and get dressed and I will be back in to ask you a few questions. At that point we can also bring your mother in to discuss options for your cramps if you feel comfortable with that"

That was a relief. I didn't have to stare at the dolphins anymore. Everything looks good, my cervix is beautiful and I am not the Virgin Mary holding some miraculous baby in a uterus plagued with Chlamydia. I hastily undid the linen garb and put my school clothes back on.

I sat on the plastic paper of the table of violation; the stirrups had been retracted back into their place, with only the tip of the socks sticking out to show their hiding spot. I put my fingers under the paper and wondered how much of it they used in a day let alone in a year. The doctor knocked on the door announcing her second entrance. She glided in the front door; her small limbs moved, flexible and Gumby-like.

She sat down in her swivel chair staring at a chart and papers. I did my best to catch a peek at the scribbled writing.

"Are you sexually active?" She said staring at scrawled notes that ran over into a chart.

"No," I said and proudly indicated by my t-shirt that read, 'You don't have to have sex to be sexy.' "Thank you Jenny McCartney." The word sex was hot pink and shiny like my lipstick. I wore my virginity like it was a girl's scout badge.

My unyielding views on sex were bequeathed to me by my mother. Once I hit thirteen, in lieu of a sex talk, my mom put a stack of books about abortion in my laundry basket, strategically positioned on a heap of sweet-smelling towels. I would have to carry the basket full of clean laundry and Catholic ideologies up to the privacy of my bedroom. I opened the first page of the small book, only to find a little note from my mother. "If you ever get pregnant, you will be sent to a convent. Just something to think about. I am so proud of you. Love mom.."

I set the book down, grateful that I no longer took a lunch box to school.

The doctor looked up, all of sudden serious. "What if you have a boyfriend that wants to have sex?"

"Well, if he really loves me he will respect the way I feel." I threw the words at her, but her solid facial expression caused my words to bounce right off. I didn't sound like I meant it; it sounded more like I was on stage fighting to be Miss Missouri. The doctor looked inquisitive, the conversation had pulled her out of her routine set of questions; she even put her pen down.

"That is very true, don't forget that."

I wondered how many people she had slept with in her day; how and who she had lost her virginity to. I wondered how often she had confused virgins coming into her office. Was she usually seeing pregnant 15-year-old girls? Or girls that had bacteria growing inside them from being too trusting? What about girls that claimed a man would not love them unless they had sex...

Summoned, my mother entered the room, smelling as she always did, like Michael Kors perfume. If life were a cartoon, when my mother walked from place to place, a trail of white flowers would spring up behind her. My mother walked in and sat sweetly in a stationary chair that was positioned right by the door. Her hands were folded on her lap. I imagine she was always the perfect student in high school, attentive and eager to please. Her eyes naturally batted because her eyelashes were so long. I was surprised her lashes didn't weigh down her eyelids.

"Sarah was saying her cramps have been getting pretty bad and that she is menstruating for a week or longer. The pill can be used for more than a method of birth control and although Sarah isn't having sex this could be used to benefit her in other ways. Birth control helps acne, cramps, and it could even shorten her period." The doctor was speaking to my mother. She sounded like one of those horrible commercials where all the young attractive girls are at dinner drinking cosmos talking about their wonderful birth control, I waited for a list of side effects.

My mother listened intently to the doctor as she showed her different samples of birth control pills. I felt like I was watching a private conversation I was not meant to see.

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"Does it make you gain weight?" I finally blurted out. All my friends said it made them gain weight. And for me, that was exactly what I wanted. My frame still resembled that of a fourteen year old, my chest sunken, my stomach flat, my arms horribly thin. My elbows were the biggest part of my arm. I always wanted to have breasts and look like a Victoria's Secret model, curvy bouncy, but instead I resembled an athletic boy with child bearing hips. Secretly, I hoped birth control would give me boobs.

My question broke up the showcasing of pills between my mother and the doctor. The doctor's attention turned towards me as if all of sudden my 96 lbs. could be an issue.

"She has been having a hard time gaining weight," my mother smiled. She may have been an attentive student, smelling sweet, smiling with her green eyes that matched my own, but she didn't take shit from anyone when it had to do with her children. She had a brilliant way of saying fuck you with a smile on her face.

"Wow what a problem," The doctor smirked writing notes down on her paper. I wondered if she had sensed the momma bear coming to her cub's rescue.

My mother's facial muscles relaxed as she retreated, realizing she wouldn't have to defend my insecurity. "I always tell her she better hope this 'problem' continues." My mother shook her head." Her father is the same way. Eats Wendy's all day, doesn't gain a pound."

I lifted my arm; my elbows were massive. I felt like a puppy that had not grown into my paws, as my large long hand fell with gravity, not completely supported by my tiny wrist.

"This brand here will be good for her cramps and could potentially lead to some weight gain. It just all depends on how your body reacts to the hormones," she said, handing over the birth control samples to my mother. "She's got a good head on her shoulders." The doctor made eye contact with my mother, then looked at me. I felt naked all over again.

"Thank you, she's always been mature for her age." My mother beamed, touching my arm for a brief second.

I hated that phrase as well, but I always got it... You are wise beyond your years, you are an old soul. I might have been those things to a degree. But I was about 10% mature for my age, and 90% actor. I

was good at mimicking the conversations of the mature. I could intellectually understand what I was saying, but I had no basis for context or application. The act fooled everyone except my father. He would always look at me with a half joking smile, "Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Sarah."

My face was flushed and red. The only thing I remembered from the flight was the landing. And of course the kissing. The woman across the aisle had been distracted mid-flight by her daughter's hunger for what smelled like vanilla yogurt, but as I stood up to exit the plane, Alexander's hand coaxing me, falling below my waist; I again felt her eyes. She reminded me of my own mother, and I wondered what Mom would think of what I was doing. I forced my mind back on autopilot. I tried to just think about each next step as I walked down the blue aisle.

"I forgot how long it takes for checked bags." After a few minutes of waiting, Alexander had grabbed my massive bag from the revolving baggage claim and rolled the portable closet outside to grab a cab.

"I never said I was practical." My voice was small, my guilt of over-packing growing. The non-stop flight had only taken a few hours. Here it was only mid-afternoon. The San Diego breeze flowing by the palm trees brought me out of my robotic mode. I had never seen so many colours of cabs.

"I thought cabs only came in yellow," I said, amazed.

"They have other coloured cabs at home too. You are just not used to taking them." Alexander smiled at me then turned to wave down a light blue cab. The cab pulled up to the corner and Alexander heaved my bag into the trunk. I slid in on the warm dirty leather. The cab driver smelled unbathed and sweaty. I wondered if he was at the beginning or end of his shift. The red numbers of the meter steadily ticked as we drove away from the airport. I rolled my window down trying to get some air. The city didn't look as green as I thought it would. The green looked muddied from lack of rain. All the homes had ceramic orange tile roofs and were painted pale colours. Even with the window down, I could smell a whiff of cleaner trying to cover up the lingering human odours. I was starting to feel car sick, or maybe even have second thoughts. I felt like a fish caught by the tabby cat, gasping for air, fluttering in search of the familiar feel of water.

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"Could you stop at the next liquor store?" Alexander spoke up, pulling out a money clip filled with bills. The driver nodded.

"It's only noon."

Alexander patted my thigh. "We're on vacation, baby." He smiled.

I was starving. The inside of my belly was burning. I had even grabbed extra bags of Southwest peanuts. But I was afraid to say anything, to ruin his perfect vacation.

The cab pulled up to a questionable building. Alexander jumped out as quickly as the cab stopped and disappeared behind the bar-covered door. I grabbed my wallet from my purse and started thumbing through it making sure I had in fact brought my fake id. I looked at it. The girl was twenty-eight and blonde. Our smiles might have been similar, but that was about it. I had her address, date of birth, and her horoscope memorized, but I replayed them slowly in my mind just to be on the safe side. Alexander came out carrying plastic bags full of bottles. I quickly shoved the fake id into my wallet and back into my purse. Alexander slid in next to me and I could feel the coolness of the previously refrigerated booze. He pulled two Miller Lites from a twelve-pack and twisted the tops off, handing one to me. The beer would calm my nerves, but at my size, without food, I would be drunk off a half a beer.

So I drank very slowly.

"Were staying at the Majestic in La Jolla." He leaned forward to the cab driver. "To our first vacation." He raised his beer to meet mine. We clinked the bottles and drank as the cab driver took us to the greener side of San Diego.

"I'm going to work out real quick." Alexander said as he unloaded the bags of booze into the small refrigerator. "I got us stuff for Jaeger bombs," he lifted the bottle of Jagermeister into the air as if he had just hunted, killed, and brought home our dinner. "Thought we could go to the zoo or the beach or something afterwards."

"I would love to go to the zoo." The thought of the zoo made me excited and I almost forgot that now at two o'clock the only calories that I had consumed all day were from a beer and some peanuts.

"Ok we can decide when I get back." He kissed me on my lips. I moved to sit at the desk by the window. The window was massive, dressed with white sheer curtains. I pulled the curtains back to look

at the view of the ocean. Alexander grabbed his gym bag and walked to the door.

"Make sure you lock this behind me," he said as the heavy wooden door closed.

The minute he'd left, I grabbed another little bag of airline peanuts from my purse. I stuck my long awkward fingers inside pulling at each small little salt covered golden nugget. I reached in, peanut after peanut until all I felt was teeny granules of salt at the bottom of the foil bag. I brought my fingers out and licked each one, my mouth salivating, insatiable, wanting more. I did this with all three of the bags that I'd managed to beg from the airline attendant. My fingers were red from the digging.

Only then did I have the strength to look around. The room was perfect; it looked like something out of a magazine. There was one large king bed with a spotless white comforter. I always imagined comforters being the dirtiest part of the hotel room, so I thought it was a brave decorating move. The headboard was wrapped in a pale leather. The brown and blue decorative pillows that were sprinkled over the comforter were probably worth more than all the clothes in my suitcase. The pillows looked puffy and full. One pillow looked like three. I had to touch them. I moved from the desk over to the bed. I touched the pillows with the tips of my fingers instantly realizing I was leaving a trail of salt from the peanuts. I tried to wipe the rest of the salt from my hands on my pants. I took each pillow by the corner attempting to shake out the salt. That part was easy, it was the repositioning the pillows back to their original perfect position that was hard.

I walked back to the desk to keep myself from messing up anything else. The top of the desk was covered with expensive restaurant suggestions. I had recently given up an eight-year stint as a vegetarian. The meals advertised on the heavy card stock made my hungry tummy turn. That was when I remembered I still hadn't locked the door. I threw away the peanut evidence into the metal trashcan and moved to the door. I slid the chain through the metal piece connected to the door until the chain looked like a semi circle smile. Locked. The room was all mine. I peered into the bathroom that was as big as my room in college. There was a massive Jacuzzi tub that could have fit a small family, and two sinks, one higher, for the male, and one lower, for I suppose the female.

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I moved back across the fluffy carpet to the massive desk and sat down. This would probably be a good time as any to call my parents; I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I felt like the little kid on the trampoline playing a game of break the egg. I was the egg, sitting Indian style holding onto my toes, one person jumping within a few feet of me and I would break. I lifted my phone from my purse. No phone calls from my parents. I had heard nothing from Alexander. It had been over an hour.

I sat glued to the desk chair. My huge bag on the other corner of the room remained zipped and unopened. I knew I should let someone know where I was... That would be the responsible thing to do. Plus maybe it could cure this guilt sitting in my chest. I dialed my sister's cell. Dana was the one who had introduced us: she was dating Alexander's friend and business partner. Dana didn't pick up. I felt a moment of relief.

"Dana it's me. Don't tell mom and dad, they think I am in Springfield, but really I came out to San Diego. I'm with Alexander..." The door to our room opened and was stopped by the chain. "Call you later," I quickly ended the call.

It was now about 4:00 in the afternoon. I unlocked the door, and he grabbed me, holding me in the doorway. I could feel his sweat soaking into my shirt.

"How was your workout?" I was hoping that he would say that it had sparked his appetite.

"Great. Kind of tired, we should take a nap."

My stomach lurched forward. "No zoo?"

"It's vacation; we should really relax, plus I just love being next to you." He was taking off his shirt and his gym shorts, moving over to the perfectly white, clean bed.

"Plus I've made dinner reservations for seven. So we can nap, take a shower and then go eat. We can decide tonight if we want to stay another day; in that case we could make it to the zoo." He threw the comforter back and crawled under the sheets, patting the spot next to him.

I did love sleeping beside all six feet three inches of him. I loved how he scooped me up and held me.

"Okay, but if we stay another day we're going to the zoo." I said

playfully as I inched in next to him. The sheets were soft and silky. Alexander grabbed at my pants as if saying these need to be removed. "Just my pants," I pulled up the comforter and slipped them off.

His big hands grabbed my face, holding it as he kissed me. These kisses weren't like on the plane. There was a sense of urgency in the pressure of his lips. His teeth grazed my lower lip pulling it into his mouth. Alexander's tongue was thin and pressed down into my throat. His hands grasped at my breasts. I wondered if he would think the Victoria Secret's Push Up Miracle Bra was a fraud of some sort. His hands moved down my stomach. I pulled his hands up back up towards my face. I stopped kissing him and tried to push my face into his neck and snuggle.

"It's nap time." I said softly. I pulled the white comforter up since it had slipped down.

"I will try to be good, but you make it so hard." He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my forehead. "I am really happy you're here with me." Alexander kissed my cheeks. He tucked the comforter around me like my mom used to do when I was a little girl. We both were avoiding the sex and age conversation. He had not asked me about my sexual experience or lack thereof and I had avoided asking him his age. I figured if age didn't matter, then why did I need to know? I closed my eyes knowing that I would not be able to sleep. His body grew heavier and his breathing slowed. I opened my eyes. I stared at the grey hairs mixed in with his dark brown thick hair. I suppose now I understood what salt and pepper meant. I watched him breathe as his mouth opened slightly. His face looked youthful still, even though time was starting to erode a few small creases where his smile fell. I closed my eyes and snuggled in deeper to his neck trying to forget my hunger.

Somehow I had fallen asleep. I woke up to Alexander standing over me handing me a Jaeger bomb in a glass.

"Really?" I reached for my pants.

"You love Jaeger bombs don't you?"

"I do, but before dinner?"

"On vacation we can drink whenever we want." He handed me the glass as he stood in his black boxer briefs. He was tall and lean and

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his body was chiselled from hours spent at the gym. Could his body be a whole decade older than mine? His other hand gripped his Jaeger bomb. His drink looked to have a little less than mine. Maybe he'd already had a sip.

"Thank you for the trip." I said trying to forget about the age. I raised my glass to my lips and let the thick brown liquid trickle down my throat.

To prepare for dinner, I pulled my hair out of the ponytail and straightened my long bangs. I slipped into a silky knee-length teal skirt, a black tank top, and some of my favourite teal heels. I swung my almost empty beaded thrift store purse around my shoulder, quickly looking to make sure I had my fake id.

All we had to do was walk across the street to a Sushi restaurant. The restaurant was as fancy as the hotel. I felt out of place. The waiter didn't ask for my id: it could have been liquid courage that made me seem older. Alexander ordered me a Miller Lite. We finished our sushi; my stomach felt full and relieved. The booze had temporarily dulled my anxiety.

"Tell me something about yourself that you're embarrassed about." Alexander said as he peered over his beer.

"Embarrassed about?"

"Yeah something you do, or something about you most people don't know."

I wasn't sure what kind of answer he was looking for-was afraid to admit a strange random intricacy only to be left with him staring blankly at me. I pulled at my Miller Lite's silvery wrapper.

"I will go first." He paused for a long second. "I have to clip my nose hairs." He said pointing towards his large nostrils. I wanted to giggle. I had seen those clippers before. My parents used them. And I remembered them from infomercials. I had a few more years before nose hairs and stretch marks. I wasn't sure if I had an answer like that...

"I will have to think on that one." I looked down at my plate. The waiter brought over two more Miller Lites.

"Thanks man." Alexander and I made eye contact and waited for the waiter to disappear. "So your sister's in her early twenties and she's still a virgin? That cannot be true." I thought I was going to choke on

my cold beer. I had always admired my sister's perseverance.

"She is absolutely still a virgin."

"How do you know?"

"I know my sister, that is how I know."

"Hmm. Well I happen to know you and your sister are nothing alike."

My sister was no wallflower or stranger to confrontation; I attempted to make peace or keep it. Dana was adamant about her values and her personal views and those were unbendable. I was still borrowing others personal views, unsure of how they really fit in my life. She liked shiny sparkly things; I liked old, vintage, mismatched things. She was an unaltered timeless beauty, full of self-confidence; I was awkward, searching for confidence through hair dye, haircuts, and trends. My sister never apologized for any of the above. I tried never to get to the point of having to apologize.

I raised my beer to take a long swig and buy time. My brain was full of warm fuzz buzzing inside.

"She and I are night and day. But we both come from the same parents and share the same values."

Alexander motioned towards the waiter. "We'll take two Jaeger bombs when you get a chance."

"Alexander..."

"What? I just want to make you happy." His lips were small in comparison to his larger nose and big brown eyes. He smiled, his small lips pulling up at the corners. His smirk reminded me of a child's mischievous grin. "What do Dana's boyfriends think about her wanting to save it?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not her boyfriends." I tried to joke. Alexander was not smiling. Alexander sat across from me with both of his hands on the table, staring at directly at me. I started to play with the tablecloth. "They all must love her because they all stayed with her without sex."

The waiter brought over our shots: two glasses filled with Red Bull and two small shot glasses filled with the fragrant liquorish smell of Jaeger.

"Could you bring me another glass? This one is dirty." Alexander

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pushed the glass over to the waiter with his index finger. The waiter quickly snatched up the glass. It looked fine to me. Not even a fingerprint on it.

"I am sorry sir. I will get you another one right away."

"That would be good." Alexander turned towards me and clutched my hand. "Now where were we, babe?"

I felt embarrassed and slightly annoyed. I never sent back anything. I had friends who worked in kitchens; I knew it was a surefire way to get my food or drink returned doctored in some unwanted fashion. What could have been so wrong with that glass? Alexander squeezed my hand. The candle on the table flickered leaving dancing shadows on the white tablecloth.

"Sarah, in real adult relationships people have sex. There is nothing wrong with sex. It is something adults do to connect. There is a level of intimacy that you cannot reach without sex. And I am afraid this is something you just can't understand until you experience it for yourself." He patted my hand as the waiter brought him a clean glass.

"Sorry again about that sir. Let me know if you need anything else." He placed the glass on the table and dove quickly back into the sea of dimly lit tables.

"Okay, get your shot ready. We need to cheers to something." I pulled the glass of Red Bull next to the shot of Jaeger. I picked up the chilled shot glass. The thick smell of the liquor invaded my nose. I lowered the shot, dropping it into the glass of Red Bull. The now mixed liquid slightly spilled over the sides leaving a few drops on the white tablecloth. For a brief second I wondered how the restaurant kept their tablecloths so bright and stain free, protected from booze and soy sauce. I heard Alexander's glass clink and knew he had his shot ready. He raised his glass and I raised mine.

"To our relationship, may this just be the beginning." We clinked glasses and tipped our heads back. I closed my eyes and let the sweet syrupy mixture wash away my worries.

"I want to make this special," Alexander said as he pulled out some candles from a Yankee Candle bag. They were navy votive candles with a musky male deodorant smell—the packaging said *Midsummer's Night Dream* and I briefly wondered to myself if he'd bought them for the scent or for the name. They flickered on the

nightstand and seemed very quickly to melt down onto the mahogany wood. In a drunk hazy blur I remembered kissing passionately in the elevator and losing some if not most of my clothes by the time he had pulled me onto the big, white pristine bed.

The white sheets were strewn, twisted and wrapped, on the floor now. I lay naked underneath him, my mind feeling numb. Alexander had a condom in his hand and was taking it out of the wrapper. I had never held a condom before, and I certainly had no idea how to put it on. I put my hands by my sides hoping he would not ask me to. Lit from one side by the flickering candles, he stroked himself while holding the condom. I didn't think it looked romantic. I couldn't imagine that inside me. I'd always wondered if he was well endowed. I had only seen one other person's you know. Alexander's looked big to me. Too big. He leaned down and kissed me softly like I was breakable.

"I love you, Sarah, I really do." Alexander started kissing down my neck. I lay there motionless, feeling all my air was trapped in my throat. He sat back up and looked me in the eye.

"Are you ready?" I hesitated. My body felt heavy. I wondered if anyone was ever ready. I nodded my head up and down.

With his hand on his shaft he slowly started to inch himself inside of me. I figured maybe this would be something he would watch, but he didn't. His stare was consuming as he shifted his pelvis bringing the pressure deeper and deeper inside of me. I didn't hurt as bad as I had heard it would. I just felt like my whole body was being filled up, the pressure building. The tension made me feel like all the seams of my body could split.

"Am I hurting you?" He said this as his body began to move faster, the motion feeling sharper.

I shook my head. I wasn't hurt. It just didn't feel good either. The sharp pain began to feel hard as he thrust into my body. Alexander's facial muscles began to twist and contort. Looking up at him, from this angle, with the glowing candles, I noticed the heavy lines that had ran like trenches alongside the corners of his eyes. I held onto his back, his skin felt malleable. I closed my eyes tightly. Alexander moved in and out of me quickly, and my head began to beat against the leather headboard. He gasped and slowed and within a matter of two minutes the whole process was over. He laid on me heavy and

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sweaty. He pulled himself out of me. The feeling of being uncomfortably full was gone, and I immediately felt drained and empty. I am not even sure what had been emptied. I clung to Alexander as he rolled over. He kissed my forehead and pulled me into his chest.

"I love making love to you," Alexander said as he looked up at the ceiling. I didn't know how to respond. It didn't feel like making love. It felt like a mechanical quick movement that had brought pleasure to only one party. Did making love make you feel this empty?

"I am going to go smoke." Alexander rolled out of the white bed revealing a scattering of small red spots. Alexander didn't react to these, and feeling embarrassed I rolled over onto them to cover them up.

"Really?" I felt desperate for him to be next to me. I wanted to attach myself to his chest and walk where he walked.

"I'll be right back." He said as he put on his pants and walked out of the door.

I laid back in the perfectly white bed on the red spots wanting to understand my feelings, wanting to understand what had just happened, but all I could do was stare at the white flat ceiling wishing for bright blue dolphins to swim across.

Oiku: Tough Guy. (Dave Birtwistle)

He worked out in the gym every day. Weights, press-ups, cycle, rowing machine, parallel bars, punch bag. His muscles bulged and his torso gleamed. He took enhancers, vitamin supplements, steroids and herbal extracts. He made Charles Atlas look like a road map for kiddywinks. When he tensed, his stomach was so hard if you hit him you'd break your hand. He'd do a nine mile run then come home and eat a two pound steak and six eggs with a gallon of tap-water. To relax, he'd turn on the telly and watch re-runs of Hardy Drew and the Nancy Boys.

TANNER

A RUMBLE AND A PATTERN

Round about 2 a.m. ish
and I go out into the garden for a quiet smoke
and to watch the moon deflate,
but I can hear everything coming from the main road
a couple of houses across our block,
and it seems there's quite a gang over there,
they're chanting 'ASBO TIL WE DIE !'
and I heard a SMASH of the dull plastic variety,
must've just been a bus stop window then,
not anyone's property really,
and they cheered at this, 'YEAAAAH!' and then,
and this is what set the alarm off in my head,
I heard gunshots, four or five
accompanied by some Yank-style whooping and hollering,
maybe just blanks or maybe just a toy gun,
but still they echoed off the early morn
and I heard cars revving like mad,
skidding and screeching,
must've been racing them
and a couple of hours later
it was a bit lighter
and just about the only sound I hadn't heard
was a police siren, which,
to be fair,
would have irritated me too.

All this is why solitude is the only possible
god.

GEORGE

Ken Champion

There is, of course, no beginning; attempts to find one being merely arbitrary. The aetiology would involve too many variables; the infinite regresses of their permutations neither known nor knowable.

Just after an amicable divorce and several years after finishing a degree in sociology at a sixties plate glass University, Mark Talbot began lecturing at various colleges in and around East London.

Immediately after graduating he'd been invited to take seminars in an annexe of a local poly-soon-to-be-university. This had been his old junior school. Sitting in the main hall and looking up at the oriole window of the headmaster's office was a disquieting experience, as had been the voices of schoolboy friends and foes he thought he could hear swirling around the staircases when, as an ineffectual monitor and telling the noise makers to be quiet, he'd be answered with, 'You ain't nuffin' Talbot.' 'ere, 'e's tryin' to tell us wot to do.' 'Teacher's pet, an' 'e.' And looking out of a first floor window thinking he could see the girls doing handstands against the carpentry shop wall, skirts falling over their faces and knowingly showing their knickers.

One of the colleges was in Hoveing, Essex, where he had a one year full time contract which included a Friday evening class for mature students. Most of the people sitting in the classroom - he saw it proprietarily as his - were indigenous working class pupils and recently arrived Africans, all wanting to get to Higher Education..

Yolande, as usual, came in late, swinging her hips in a yellow and green Cameroonian football shirt - this being a world cup year - and yet again, Prudence, one of the older women, was frowning at him while his eyes unavoidably followed her sister African to her seat. Matronly Prudence had transferred from a day class because, as she'd whispered tearfully to him in an empty staffroom, one of the female students had called her, unjustifiably, a 'prostitute'; an unintentional irony and the ultimate African slur.

At the end of the first month he was finishing theory with a quick round up of post modern meta-narrative - implying, self stultifyingly, that there is no such thing as a meta-narrative - when he noticed Elaine raising her hand at the back. She self consciously put it down

as he looked at her.

‘Why is post modernism such a small part of the syllabus?’

‘I’ve just given you one reason. Why d’you ask?’

‘Well, I wondered if you favoured Marxism, because post modernism would invalidate that and - ’

‘Thus if I were, you thought I might be getting my own back?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Well, any proponent of an established, overarching sociological theory, including right wing ones, would dislike a scattered string of opinion and conjecture that emphasises an individualistic subjectivity and denies social class and....do you know any Marxists then, Elaine?’

It was only the second time he had spoken to her in class, the first being to call the register on starting day. She was rather mournful looking, sad, tall, with a model’s shoulders and something quietly deliberate about her.

‘Well, my ...guardian is.’ She looked briefly awkward and shy. There was a little pause in the class and he carried on in his often proselytising manner. When they’d finished, he briefly answered someone’s question about an essay he had set then left the room. Elaine was just in front of him, awkwardly putting on her coat. On impulse he pulled the collar up at the back for her. She smiled a little shyly and said thanks. He guessed she was about thirty four, the same age as himself.

‘It’s going pretty well isn’t it.’ she said

‘The evening class?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you come far?’

‘About eight miles or so. I live just down the road really, but I’m staying with a friend tonight.’

They walked in silence through the main doors.

‘I tell him what you’re teaching. He’s...suspicious.’

‘What of?’

‘Well, being a Marxist, he - ‘

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‘Your guardian?’ He smiled at her.

‘Yes. He’ll be happy about your demolition job on post modernism, though.’

It was her slight, friendly awkwardness - and her wide smile with those slightly protruding front teeth - that tipped the words out; ‘Maybe I could meet him sometime.’ He was walking through the car park with her.

‘Maybe,’ she said with a dull pragmatism, and as she got into her car added, ‘Oh, did you know that Annie, the dark haired lady who sits next to me, is a niece of Gramsci?’ She smiled and drove out the college grounds. He’d mentioned the uncle in class, but nothing more than the name, aware of how little historical knowledge he had of Italian political activists.

She didn’t turn up the next week, but the week after as they reached her car at the far end of the car park he asked her if she fancied a drink one evening. ‘Yes,’ she said simply, as if she’d been expecting him to ask

He met her in a pub near the college a few nights afterwards. She was little different from her student role he thought, as if her ability to express, the glints in her eyes were dulled by a reluctantly enforced stoicism. She told him she had a ten year old son whose father had left them both years ago. They then talked generally, her saying that the class had gelled well, had a good camaraderie, that she was enjoying the subject, but wouldn’t tell him why she had become someone’s ward. She did tell him that it had occurred when she was sixteen and that George, her guardian, was now eighty. Mark calculated that he was about sixty when he entered her life. He was a ‘well known communist’ she said with a seeming indifference, but quiet pride.

He’d left Oxford, she said, half way through his degree to join a merchant ship that was gun-running for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war. He was eventually torpedoed. All this delivered, again, with a matter of fact casualness as if, somehow, everything that she’d experienced had happened *to* her, unavoidable, outside of her own volition; she looked out at a world she expected would treat her dispassionately and a little unkindly.

A month after this they slept together at her flat on the top floor of a converted ex-council house. For a while they saw some films, went

to alternative comedy venues - small rooms above pubs, working men's clubs - the occasional restaurant, a play, and then, after the last evening class of term, she suggested they pay a quick visit to the farmhouse. 'Just to meet George,' she said, 'we won't stay.'

Elaine drove. He sat silently next to her, a little unsure of how he should feel, as if he was about to meet the father of his 'intended,' about to ask George's permission for her hand, to seek his approval of him, of his abilities as a teacher, of his knowledge of, and perhaps even commitment to, Marx or Marxism and to test his knowledge of political history, political ideas; a sort of box-ticking exercise. Would he, Mark wondered, want to know what he knew of the Second Spanish Republic, whether he favoured anarchism or Trotsky, what knowledge he had of the Basques, Colonel Beorlegui, of the siege of Madrid. The generic answer would have been, very little.

He wasn't in love with George's 'daughter.' There was a quiet practicality about her that he liked, she was pale, leggy, with a gauche artlessness; she had an honesty, a consistency, and was, he felt, beginning to fall in love with him. He didn't want to hurt her, but sensed she knew this.

They walked towards the house through a small, lit, apple orchard, the lights under the symmetrically planted trees making them look like enchanted fans, the dark bulk of the building looming in the background. There was a porch lamp above a narrow door at the side of the black painted barn-like house. She put her key in the lock, reminding him of the neighbours in his childhood terrace street who would 'let themselves in,' nearly all, it seemed, having keys to each others houses.

He felt George was some sort of absolute certainty in Elaine's life; there was a shut off implacability, a fatalistic acceptance when Mark thought of her in relation to George - as if he was a symbol of some authoritative atheistic deity.

As they entered, George was looking down at them from a balcony. He was tall with long grey hair, leaning slightly forward, fingers casually curled on the wooden handrail in front of him. He looked from Mark to Elaine, nodded, turned and walked towards the top of the narrow staircase. Mark looked quickly around: grey-blue walls, high pitched cream ceiling with oak joists, the doors of the rooms off the balcony in the same dark, polished wood as the handrail all the

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way around the four sided gallery, beneath which weren't turned spindles or metal rods, but wooden carvings from the Karma Sutra of women being penetrated by men in a variety of acquiescent positions. One of these was a female with puffed cheeks kneeling behind a priapic male figure and holding one end of a straw to her lips, the other just behind his testicles. He wondered detachedly if this was the origin of 'blow job.'

George came down the last step and walked towards him, deep set eyes, hair swept back from a lined, tanned face, a full, trimmed moustache, and dressed in dark grey almost completely. An ideologue, and a seemingly rich one, thought Mark.

They shook hands, a tiny smile in George's eyes, a casual, but almost formal grip. 'Come through,' he said. Mark followed him into a large kitchen, noted the eclectic mix of the new and old: two small windows with leaded panes, a slatted blind, a long kitchen range, oak table, modern blender and coffee grinder, copper kettle and an incongruous thirties cloud-back chair.

'Do you want a drink?' He had a rather curt, deep, voice. There was the sound of a flushing cistern, quick, light feet, and a boy of about ten with blue eyes and wide, thin-lipped mouth was looking up at him. Elaine, who was filling the kettle, without looking round, said, 'Richard, this is Mark, my friend.' Richard nodded at him then threw his arms around George's thigh and squeezed. George lightly touched the child's hair.

'Elaine tells me she's enjoying her subject, and the class are too it would seem.'

'They do seem keen, though it's a little difficult to get one or two away from god and to politicise them. I shouldn't be doing that, of course, but detachment's difficult.'

George grinned, 'It wouldn't matter much if you rammed Marx down their throats would it? The system can take it, can it not? Bourgeois accommodationism I believe it's called.'

Mark was feeling challenged, though knew what had been said was correct. He told George that though he'd once been called an auto-didactic secular preacher, he was more interested in the analysis of class society than revolutionary Marxism. George frowned slightly, forced a grin and asked again if he wanted a drink. Mark told him he was driving and George then, with surprising nimbleness, picked

Richard up, dropped him over a shoulder and said, ‘Well, I’m gonna put this little toe rag to bed, and then I have things to do. Hope to see you again.’ He said this without looking at anyone and went out the room. Mark expected Elaine to follow him so she could say good night to her son, but she handed him a coffee and after a few silent minutes beckoned him to follow her as she started walking back through the apple trees as if, somehow, she wasn’t allowed to tuck Richard in when George was putting him to bed. She drove them back in silence to the college car park.

‘That was...interesting,’ Mark said, ‘You going back there now?’

‘No, the flat.’ She drove away.

They went back a few weeks later - again in the evening - for Elaine to pick something up. George was away at a council meeting. Mark hadn’t known he was a councillor. While she was upstairs he wandered around, looked in the large through-lounge with its oriental rugs, sixties three piece suite, Art Deco cocktail cabinet and coffee table - a half drunk cup of coffee on a hardback copy of Debord’s *Society as Spectacle* on the latter - and a book-lined end wall. But he was taken by the paintings. There were vividly coloured scenes of street markets, fountains on a Madrid boulevard, and a stark black and white photo of a vertical half of a *pension*, the other half just chunks of rubble. There was also a crayon sketch hung in the centre of the wall of a girl in her late teens with large, dark eyes, impish grin, and an energy in her that made the rest of the room seem almost lifeless.

He walked up the stairs, along the balcony, stopped at an open door. Elaine was putting what looked like a skirt into a bag. She gave a hesitant smile as she came out the room and closed the door, but not before he’d seen a four poster bed complete with canopy and a nightshirt hanging from the dark headboard. As they went out he asked her if it was a painting that he could see at the back of the open garage.

‘I think it’s a Braque. I don’t know much about art.’

He went in and turned it round. He knew little of the artist’s work, but recognised the style immediately.

‘It’s an original,’ she said, ‘can we go, I’m getting cold.’

It was this almost dismissive casualness, a gentle flippancy that both

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simultaneously intrigued him and pushed him away.

One night at her flat he asked who the face in the sketch belonged to. She became immediately animated. 'Oh, that was Maria. She was lovely. George met her when he was in Spain, she was about sixteen then. It was the *paseos* he called them, executions, both sides were doing it. Her husband was a Republican and they shot him. They came after Maria too, and George hid her. He and a group of others lived in the hills and she stayed with them. She used to come over and stay at the farm, every other year really, and George would sometimes go to her in Spain. She died last year. He was very upset and so was I. She had a little boy, but he died when he was two. She loved Richard. She used to get so excited around him. She would grip his hands and swing him around, and shout, *Ricardo, 'eres un chico encantador y tu papa es magnifico!*' She was lovely.' He asked what it meant. 'Doesn't matter,' she said, 'I miss her.'

Towards the end of the academic year - they'd seen much less of each other, though he wasn't sure why, but she was an ever-present in class - a full time job came up at the college. The evening Access class was the only sociology teaching he had, the rest of his timetable consisting of Communications. This job entailed mostly his subject. The opening had arisen because a lecturer had been sacked. He, David, was a little younger than Mark, short, stocky, ginger haired and quietly intense. He didn't know him that well, he was relatively new there, but liked him. He always seemed to be surrounded by young females both in class and the staff room. They were obviously fond of him and Mark felt there was a political - and politicising - element in their relationship.

The word was that he was an 'anarchist,' a 'trouble maker,' and that management had got rid of him by sending a lackey to keep tabs on him, He was seen going into his class ten minutes late. That, apparently, was all that was needed. Whilst feeling sorry for him and disliking management - in particular and in general - Mark needed the job and applied for it. Three of his fellow Communications lecturers said they would see the Vice Principal and suggest strongly that they wanted him on the staff.

He was surprised and disappointed when told he wouldn't be short-listed. He had a meeting with the Vice Principal and asked him why. 'I do not,' he was answered patronisingly, 'want a communist cell in the college.' Mark felt he was the sort of man who thought a

communist meant someone who shopped at the Co-op. He was rendered inarticulate, all he could think of saying was an almost choked, 'But, that's ridiculous,' before the Principal entered the room on 'urgent business' and he left.

He told Elaine. She seemed surprised. The next day she showed him a letter she had written to the Head of the college in which she talked of the difficulty of the subject, the teacher making it such a pleasure for the class and her amazement that a competent teacher of such an important discipline would not be at the college next year. 'I do not look forward,' she wrote, 'to having a teacher perhaps unqualified in sociological understanding and am thus thinking twice about continuing my studies.' It was gratifying, but Mark wanted her to continue. She'd been working as a temp at an IT recruitment firm for the last year and had an ambition to do a social work degree.

A few days afterwards she showed him a copy of the letter George had sent to the Chief Education Officer of the borough in his role as shadow chairman on Further Education for the County Council. 'Whilst I must stress that your selection standards are nothing of my business, apart from their bearing on my daughter's education, I must state that I am disagreeably surprised a to find her progress threatened.' It was signed George Mills, and had the Great Mitchams, East Ockden address.

He didn't see her over the two week Whitsun period - 'I have things to do at George's' - but was in the library preparing a letter to circulate around colleges and to see what teaching jobs, if any, were being offered, when he thought of the charcoal drawing. He wasn't far from the language section and took a book of Spanish-English back to his table. For someone whose knowledge of Spanish began and ended with *dos decafeinados con leche por favor*, it took him a while to find and interpret what Maria supposedly and ritualistically had said to Richard whenever she'd seen him. He could imagine her, then about seventy he supposed, but still vivacious and strong, swirling around the boy, dancing with him. It seemed obvious suddenly that she had been George's lover for many years. Mark didn't know why he had remembered her words, but he had. Apparently in English it was, 'You are a lovely boy and your daddy is magnificent!'

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And this was something else so obvious he'd missed it. It reminded him of when he'd stood on the observation floor of the Empire State at night a few years before and, looking at the Chrysler, the Woolworth building and Times Square, had wondered for a second why he couldn't see the Empire State. Richard's father was George.

He sat there thinking of him; someone who had risked his life for something he believed, had saved lives, been, perhaps, responsible for taking them. The nearest Mark had got to any sort of cause was walking half a mile around a university town with a CND banner and once, as an apprentice joiner, had been part of a building site go-slow. He felt admiration, respect, but then remembered what Elaine had said to him one evening a few weeks before; something else he had pushed away, deflected, sidelined. Lying on the bed she'd said casually, as he got dressed to go home, 'Oh, George wants us to do it in front of him 'cos he can't any more.' He hadn't replied.

And there was a memory of a glimpse of a crumpled nightshirt dropped in the corner of her bedroom when she'd first invited him into it. Was George, he thought, still sleeping with her, here and at the farm? There was another question: had Maria's child been George's too?

He'd grown fond of Elaine, but realised he'd felt somewhat dispirited when with her, experiences were somehow blunted, any sharing - of humour, situations, of giving emotionally - diluted, impoverished. He tried to categorize it as an interesting, but disappointing episode for he knew he wouldn't be seeing her again and intuitively felt she knew this, too. The only stimulus, other than in her bed, had been the teaching. He could give something to her then; she was intelligent, though carefully, methodically so, as if her intellect was in abeyance, and her identity, the sixteen year old self, had no real expression except through or with George.

He wanted to teach, encourage, preach - he had a picture of George nodding in approval as he thought this. Mark had met him just once, but could feel how Elaine had been influenced, invaded, taken over by him.

He had applied for some philosophy lecturing, wanting to deal with the empirical, *a posteriori* synthetic truths, people as Durkheimian *things*, to escape into a more intellectualised, understandable world.

He didn't see Elaine again, but did hear her voice. He'd just got home from a class at a college where he had a full time job, when the phone rang. It was Elaine telling him that George had died in Spain - for a moment he felt trapped in a ghost story in which he couldn't actually have met someone because they had died many years before. He remembered what she said almost verbatim. '...he hadn't been back there for a few years and wanted to meet up with Maria's younger brother who he'd helped to get to Catalonia. Apparently he was away on holiday, so George went on his own to the hills in Miranda de Ebro, near a monastery by the river, Our Lady of the Wheel it's called - I remember these places because he often told stories about them, Richard used to be fascinated. It was where he'd hid Maria....' She stopped speaking.

'Elaine?'

'It's okay. It seems he was walking around the bottom of a hill - a couple from the village were picnicking there and saw him. He kept stopping to look up, probably trying to find the caves they'd stayed in.' In answer to his unspoken question she said, 'I was his next of kin, so a policeman rang me from Madrid and told me all this. George was wearing his black cap, he wore it nearly every time he went out. He called it his 'comrades cap.' They found it near his body. He was climbing up a slope. Perhaps he didn't know the caves had been filled in. He slipped and slid down. Not far, but both his legs were broken.' A silence again. 'He was eighty two, you know.' I heard a whimper, and could feel the effort it took for her to stop it.

'When's the funeral, Elaine?'

'Oh, it's gone. I didn't know what to do. I thought he might want to be buried there, near Maria. I know where's she's buried, he told me. So...he's buried in the next grave to hers. I went over there, and Manuel and his wife were there. They were very kind'

'Why didn't you...?' He was about to ask, in a moment of childlike arrogance, why she hadn't told him before and perhaps asked him to go with her, but he didn't. He wondered if she felt that she had no right to bring George back and bury him; maybe in the churchyard near the farm

He told her he was sorry about George and, as he said it, felt regret at only seeing him the once, at not making efforts to get to know him, to see if he could have pierced that teak-like exterior, that hard,

GEORGE

selfish toughness he seemed to carry with him. He asked her what she was going to do.

‘I’m going to sell the farm.’ At least, she had that, he thought. ‘I shall move somewhere I suppose.’

He wanted to say, ‘Find something for yourself, Elaine, find what *you* want, convince yourself you can, you’re *allowed* to.’ Instead, he asked about Richard.

‘He’s okay. He’s sad, but he’s all right.’

She asked what he was doing, was he teaching. He mumbled something. She said,

‘Well, all the best then, Mark.’ and hung up.

Driving on the A13 he took a detour to drive past the farm house, which he hadn’t seen for a year. The orchard was no longer there, it was now a paved area with barbecue equipment scattered about, and where all the latticed windows had been were pvc mock Georgian glazing bars. The subtle carriage lamp on the side door had turned into a crass mock-up of an early Victorian lamp, and though the outside was still in East Anglian black, it had now been glossed. It looked rather cheap. The chimney stack, in its crumbling authenticity, was still there.

He didn’t stop. He had to get to work - finish off Marx’s theory of economic determinism. He felt that George, in a narrow eyed, cautious way, would be quite happy with that, even if conditionally.

He started driving back to the college. He was feeling empty, specious, he was missing George. He couldn’t understand this. He knew *of* him rather than knew him. Perhaps he had become, unknowingly, a talisman, perhaps a figure to be emulated, someone mature, solid, complete. But Mark instantly knew he couldn’t do this. He had to become whoever he was, was going to be. He drove a little faster, wanting to get back to the students. To the beginning.

INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Write
today for
**FREE
BOOK**

is a disturbance centre in subconsciousness generating negative impulses causing **self-consciousness, lack of confidence, nervousness, worry, weak will, unsociability, lack of enterprise, stammering, blushing, forgetfulness, "nerves," sleeplessness, etc.** To fight these forces directly is in vain—**ERADICATE THEM FOREVER** by reconstructing within yourself a powerful, positive, subconscious mind as revealed in remarkable **FREE** book which has transformed the lives of thousands, write today. All correspondence is confidential.

Of course it is possible that you haven't got a complex but are simply inferior. Perhaps your family couldn't afford to send you to a good school, you don't speak properly, you failed the entrance exam for King's College Cambridge or come from the north. If you are a simple oik proletarian then I'm afraid there's no hope. You should apply for a job as dustman or bus driver and if these opportunities are unavailable in your depressed area then there are only three final courses open to you.

1. Read the classics – there are many cheap copies in the shops and you'll soon find you can read your head off every day with Anna Karenina, War and Peace, Middlemarch, and even A la recherche du temps perdu. Soon you'll feel like writing your own books and there are many little magazines like The Crazy Oik more than happy to proclaim you a genius to its discriminating subscribers. You could win the Booker prize or even have your book made into a film by Steven Spielberg.

2. If reading bores you or in the act your mouth moves then a literary career is not for you. You are in fact monstrously inferior. However you are one of God's unique creatures and as such can apply for the many benefits on offer by the govt. You can loll on the sofa eating Doritos while watching Jeremy Kyle and drinking lager from a can or ingesting one of the many hard drugs on offer in your apartment block. Should a fleeting spasm of commodity fetishism pass over you, as a result of the TV adverts, you can go out and rampage through the city centre pinching stuff – stuff that no right-minded punter would pay for anyway. The govt may protest and bang you up but you'll be out in a couple of months having made a worthy contribution to kick-starting the economy.

3. Write books on curing an inferiority complex and sell them in magazines read mostly by meatheads.

**BRITISH INSTITUTE OF
PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGY (J.P.5),
67 Highbury New Park, London, N.5**

Picture Show 1959

MESSAGES

Brett Wilson

His wife wants him to destroy the wasps' nest, hidden paper perfection no doubt, Chinese lantern tickling the dark somewhere under the eaves. She gets under his skin with her stinging complaints. On his day off he wants to drink beer, a couple of cans at least. He drains the first one, crushes down the smooth aluminium to at least one hard edge and back hands it into the waste bin. He heads for the garden shed, peers over the fence where Janine is out with the secateurs. He winks, grabs the ladders.

Janine is on top. Her hair drapes 360 degrees like a bird cage cover. The slap of her moist breasts on his chest sounds like wet tripe. Inside the cage the vacant eyes are coming to life under the flickering lids.

He's thirsty. He heads for the fridge.

"Don't forget the wasps' nest." His wife is putting on a coat.

"Oh yeah, the nest." He pulls the tab. The taste is metallic.

He wakes up in a sweat. He's sure he can see wasps on the ceiling. They form an octagon. They dance, making strange shapes. He thinks it's a message.

Janine looks at him from over the fence. Jake is away. He understands that. So many dead headed roses, uneaten peaches. The ladder is heavy as he schleps it around to the front. The sun is in his eyes. He sees a wasp coming in. Suddenly he hates them. They are invaders, little intricate machines, moving pieces, flying puzzle patterns, jagged warnings. He shakes the can.

He's heading for the fridge.

"Don't forget the wasps' nest." She watches him grab a can, puts her coat on out of habit, a signal, intent. *I'm doing something, I'm busy.* She can see him with a ladder in the rear view mirror. He holds it at an angle so that it terminates in mid air, like he is going to climb up to the sky, disappear in the clouds.

He wakes up. Wasps on the ceiling? Secret messages. He nudges his wife, she groans.

"There were wasps on the ceiling" he says over breakfast.

“I thought I saw some.”

He hears a click. Janine arrests the gyrations. Sound of the front door opening.

“It’s Jake.”

He stares at the sun as an insect traces a helical path, stops moving. The ladder jabs the air. The car moves away from the drive, grit flying upward, turns, a bright sheen strokes its length.

He slides out of the top sheet, pulls the curtains slightly to let a slit of light disturb. No wasps. He draws the shape on the damp window, eight curvaceous sides, like alien writing

She slides out of the damp top sheet. She’s tired and her hair is a mess. She lost two hair clips while they were humping. She checks her mobile phone.

“No message from Jake.”

“Should there be one?”

“There usually is. So I know what he’s up to”

She’s thirsty, heads for the kitchen, pours a glass from a plastic bottle filled with water in the fridge.

“Can I have a beer?”

“No. It may be noticed.”

Wasps. They could be in the attic. He falls asleep. He hears a click. *Oh God! Jake.* He looks at his wife who he can hardly make out in the dark. There’s just the deep pits of the eye sockets, the nose, the thin lips beneath, slightly parted.

Why is he crying? He needs another beer. His third. He’s supposed to go across to Janine. Close the back door. What man wouldn’t? The tab flips back.

He wakes with a start. There are shadows on the ceiling but it feels like the insects are dancing on his chest.

He places the ladder carefully and climbs the cool grey ribs to where he can see a small hole in the cracked paint of the eave.

ALBERT
Tom Kilcourse

Gerry Riley stopped in mid skip, so abruptly that he almost overbalanced and tumbled down the steps. He stood half-way down the flight, his eyes riveted on the man standing at the bottom. As soon as he saw that head he knew that he knew him from somewhere. The face was not a pretty sight, but memorable. Skull like, with grey, wrinkly skin, and looking decidedly unhealthy, even in the spring sunshine. Where, oh where had Gerry known this bloke? Then recognition hit him. Albert! Albert bloody Farrel, someone known thirty years ago on what now seemed like a different planet. Fancy seeing him in London, another economic migrant from the North no doubt. Well! Gerry remained motionless, barely aware of others rushing past him, his mind drifting through time. Other names crept back from somewhere deep in his head. Gotty, Mullins, Valentine, Crooksy. There were faces too when he closed his eyes, faces to which he could not put names. All part of the crowd. "Well, I'll be damned! Albert Farrel in London" he muttered. Suddenly, he remembered Albert's nickname 'The Champ'.

The two men last met down a very big hole, a thousand yards deep to be exact. Albert's skin was only slightly less wrinkled then and just as grey, though he was merely in his twenties. Of course, on that occasion, the colour of the skin was hardly discernible. Everyone was the same colour: black. A film of coal dust is a great leveller, especially when you're clothed only in a few rags. Gerry remembered their last meeting because it was on his final day in the pit. He had walked from number-five face to the trams, to find Albert already on a boggy with an empty seat next to him. Gerry plonked himself down and the two travelled together out to the pit bottom. Albert knew that his companion was leaving, and tried to dissuade him, arguing that he was making a big mistake. Albert saw a great future in British coal.

As Riley looked at him now, the events of those days played back in his head, not in tidy sequence like a film, but in bits. A jigsaw, with pieces falling into place and bringing other parts into focus. In his mind's eye he saw Mullins, the older man who was already down the pit when he and Albert were sprogs. He was the bloke who taught the youngsters how to masticate a short length of thin twist without

gagging on the juice. The trick was to roll the cud round the mouth, teasing it gently with the teeth, rather than clamping down on it. Mullins was Gerry's mentor in the art of baccy chewing, but he made a big mistake in trying to teach Albert. Delicacy of touch was not one of Albert's strong points. Instead of prodding the chew daintily round his mouth, the youth, destined to be known as 'champ', chomped hard on the succulent twist as if it had been a toffee. Consequently, the tobacco gave of its bounty in one great splurge, filling the capacious gob with bitter brown liquid. He swallowed a fair proportion. So, Albert ended his second week as a miner being stretched up, green in the gills and heaving his guts mightily over the side. The lads learned some time later that Albert's mum had turned up at the bath-house looking for their father figure. Apparently, 'the bald dwarf', as some called him, escaped by sneaking out across the yard and leaving via the vehicle entrance.

Most thought it was unfair of Albert's mum really, to blame Mullins. If her son made himself ill when learning to chew, that was entirely his own fault. Mullins was an excellent teacher, to those prepared to follow his instructions to the letter. Albert would not, or could not. It was the general opinion that Mrs. Farrel's pride and joy was a bit thick. Riley smiled as he recalled that the man now standing at the foot of the steps was the thickest bloke he had ever met, one of life's natural victims. If there was a practical joke to be played, Albert found himself at the sharp end of it. In the cruel environment of a coal mine, that meant a hell of a lot of sharp ends. Some jokes went over the top by anybody's standards, yet Gerry never saw Albert react with ill humour. Perhaps life would have been easier for him if he had. One day for instance, a group of the lads were in the pit canteen enjoying their end-of-shift get-together, when Albert ambled off to the loo. While he was away, a bloke called Smithy whipped out his false choppers and dropped them in Albert's mug of tea. Albert returned, and everyone watched him expectantly whenever he took a sip.

It was some while though before he had drunk enough to uncover Smith's tombstones, grinning at him from the bottom of the brew. The canteen echoed with gales of laughter as the 'champ' headed back towards the toilets, retching violently into his handkerchief. Gerry thought that if the trick had been played on some of the other people there, blokes who were wiping tears of mirth from their eyes,

ALBERT

Smithy would have been chewing through his arse thereafter. Albert just took it.

That was a one off, a Smith special, but the caper that made Albert memorable, was a collective effort. Someone, Gerry could not remember who, suggested that Albert should enter the preliminary heats of the annual Coal Board boxing tournament. A bit of a body-building fan, Albert possessed quite an impressive physique of which he was rather proud. It took little to persuade him that anyone with a body like his was a natural for the ring. A few words of flattery had Albert on his feet, bobbing and weaving between canteen tables, throwing straight lefts into space, while thumbing his right nostril with enough vigour to break a more delicate nose. The bait was taken.

Mullins appointed himself as Albert's manager, while Gotty became his trainer. Albert was delighted to have Gotty in his corner due to the latter's flattened nose. His 'trainer' looked every inch an ex-bruiser who had been hammered around a few rings in his time. The truth was more prosaic. Gotty fell off his motorbike as a youth, and had never stepped through the ropes in his life. Nevertheless, Albert was convinced that he had a real pro in his team, and nobody tried to disillusion him.

For the next few weeks everyone took to calling Albert 'champ', to his face at least. Less polite titles were used in his absence. It seemed that the whole pit got in on the joke, giving Farrel instant fame and recognition. Complete strangers refused to let him pay for his own tea in the canteen, and wherever he went round the mine people greeted him like an old mate. Albert lapped it up. Walking on air, his face alight with enthusiasm, he never failed to respond to a request to demonstrate his footwork. Many a shift-end was lightened by the sight of Albert shadow boxing his way round the tables.

Gotty and Mullins imposed a severe training regime. Underground, it was common to see Albert lying on his back, spread-eagled on the tunnel floor, while bags of stone-dust, used for fire prevention, were dropped from waist height onto his stomach. Each bag weighed fifty-six pounds. Convinced of the need to toughen up his stomach muscles, Albert grinned his way through this eye popping torture several times a week. He was working at the tippler station at the time, not far from the pit bottom, and streams of miners walking to or from the face were treated to the sight of the champ preparing for

the big day. When not being squashed by bags of stone-dust he was performing minor miracles of weight-lifting. Gotty found a spare mine-car axle, about three feet long and two inches thick, with a nine inch wheel at each end, the whole made of solid iron. These things were liftable, but they were not designed to be thrown above one's head repeatedly for a couple of minutes at a time. Whenever Albert flagged, Gotty would get a few more lifts out of him by praising his biceps, or expressing mock surprise at his strength.

Above ground, Albert followed an equally punishing routine. As well as complying with Gotty's views on diet, "No bloody Eccles cakes now", the champ took to running home instead of catching the pit bus. Every afternoon the double-decker would vibrate with cheers, and not a few jeers, as it passed the running figure half way along Briscoe Lane. What a tremendous pity that such commitment was to be utterly wasted.

The preliminary bout was held in Oldham, not too far for quite a few of the lads to travel. Some of them, Gerry included, went along as genuine supporters, trying to give a mate a boost, while others went for the laugh. There were signs that Mullins and Gotty, along with one or two others, had actually begun to believe in Albert's chances. If the champ himself nursed any doubts they must have been dispelled when he saw his opponent at the weigh-in. He was matched with a tall, skinny kid from Wigan who, for some reason, was nicknamed 'the windmill' by his supporters. On seeing this frail looking figure climb into the ring on the night, several of Albert's lot began to share Gotty's confidence. Someone cracked that Albert's opponent looked like a 'Woodbine with shoulders', he was so narrow. As 'the champ' stepped through the ropes Mullins was heard to whisper "Don't hit him too hard, son".

The reason for the nickname became apparent the moment the bell went. Lunging forward from his corner, 'the champ' ran straight into a maelstrom of flailing arms. With his limbs held fairly straight as he swung successive lefts and rights from the shoulder, Wigan did resemble a manic windmill. He seemed not to care where they landed, as long as it was somewhere on Farrel flesh. A fair number of them did, although as many missed. One or two of the lads thought that the kid actually had his eyes shut, and had Albert the sense to step back, the damage would have been limited. Unfortunately, 'the champ' was statuesque in the classic pose

ALBERT

undoubtedly adopted from some photograph of a real boxer.

For such a brutish looking man, Albert had surprisingly delicate ears. 'Shell like' would be an appropriate description. The left of these fine accoutrements took the first blow, square on. 'The champ' stopped short, a puzzled look on his face as the flared nostrils took a second shot. This had never happened when he was shadow boxing in the canteen. While he was reappraising his strategy another left whirled into his mouth, and a right struck his temple with enough force to decapitate a weaker man. He went down to that one. After taking the compulsory count, Albert rose to his feet and stuck his head into the windmill again. This happened twice more before the referee stopped the 'fight' to prevent further injury. Albert had not landed a single blow. Indeed, he had not thrown a punch, while the Wigan Woodbine must have had the most bruised knuckles in Lancashire.

The damage to Albert's head was superficial, the only real hurt being to his pride. The prank soon dropped out of pit conversation as the haulage gang broke up shortly afterwards, with most members moving to different faces. Smithy emigrated to Rhodesia to work in the copper mines, Mullins went to work on the surface while Gotty was sacked for going a practical joke too far. From what Gerry was told, Albert's 'trainer' was working on the 'Horizon' one night, a level about half way down the shaft, when he decided to liven up the shift by tipping a container of 'night soil' into the shaft, expecting it simply to lie in a stinking heap at the bottom to the discomfort of his mates working there. Unfortunately, Gotty took no account of the enormously strong downdraught in the shaft. The wind snatched the 'night soil', atomising it at once, so that on reaching the bottom it was no more than a fine spray which turned into the tunnel, painting its white walls brown for several yards. As luck would have it, the Night Overman was present when the spray arrived. Even the union could not save Gotty from that one.

So, within a few months of the lads' night-out in Oldham the gang had broken up, with only Valentine remaining at the tippler station. They saw each other occasionally in the canteen or on the pit bus, but each one gradually became members of different groups, tending to mix more with their new workmates. Sometimes, they found Albert sitting alone in the canteen, and joined him for old times' sake. He was glummer than the Albert of old. Apparently, most of the blokes on his face were married men who shot off home as soon

as the shift was over. They did not share the boisterousness of the haulage gang, or Gotty's penchant for piss-taking. 'The champ' missed both. Whenever he spotted one of the old crowd he was eager to buy the teas, and sit reminiscing about the old days.

That was all of thirty years ago, and now, here he was, in London. Suddenly aware that he had been standing for some minutes Gerry stepped forward and resumed his descent of the steps. Would Albert recognise him? The answer was clear. As the pallid face turned towards the approaching figure Farrel's eyes showed no flicker of surprise or curiosity. Albert apparently didn't know his old workmate from Adam. Almost as statuesque as he had been in the ring, he took the fiver with his left hand. Gerry declined the offered copy of 'The Big Issue' and hurried on along Euston Road towards his office, while resolving to use a different exit from the station in future. Had he troubled to glance back he might have caught Albert's stony eyes following his progress. 'The champ' was frowning, in irritation rather than puzzlement. Slipping the money into his pocket he decided to enquire later in the day about the possibility of having a different pitch, away from Euston.



**Mickey
Rooney**

Fast making a name for himself as the cinema screen's top gangster, Mickey Rooney has had a very varied career since he made his stage debut with his parents in variety at the age of eleven months. When he was four years old his Hollywood career began, he obtained his first film role as a midget. Later he gained world fame in the Andy Hardy series and last year Andy Hardy made a successful comeback as a family man. Recent films are *Operation Mad Ball*, *Baby Face Nelson*, *How to Rob a Bank* and *The Last Mile*. He was on ITV in *Wagon Train*.

Mickey also loves dogs and boasts that he recently enjoyed having a small part in *Lassie*.

BETTE BRAKA

LITTLE JOHN AND LONG TALL SALLY

Little John and Long Tall Sally,
What a pair!
She is incisive
He can be divisive.
Sally wallows in Celebrity
Showing how cheap and low
She can go.
He would be hoping to attain
The aristocratic plain,
With Cuban Heels
And Ministerial Seals.
A bit like Jack and Jill,
He could fall down
And lose the Crown,
And she may tumble after.
Bring on the next incumbent
Qualified to speak
In the House.
But this time –
With no spouse!!

Oiku: Allotment VII. (Dave Birtwistle)

It was too wet to go down to the plot so he did a bit of a recce on his neighbour's greenhouse. There he was feeding his giant squash. This lad had his eye on the Harrogate Heavy Vegetable Championships. With his binoculars he could read the large print on his growing-tips card. "If you overfeed vegetables artificially they get heart rot and burst out into gnurls. Giant veg however, don't need to be perfect, just big. Feed till it almost splits." He realised now where he got his obsession. His wife had a face like a burst tractor tyre.

THERE'S A TANNER Y'UGLY
OLD DRONGO AN FOR
CHRISSAKES QUIT THE
WARBLIN - WHO D'YOU THINK
YOU ARE - VERA LYNN?



During a stroll through the main street of a native village, this captain of A.I.F. stopped to give a small coin to an aged beggar woman. So grateful was that she insisted upon crooning a song of thanks for the especial benefit of the of

LIME STREET

Kenn Taylor

Leslie opened the dustpan-on-a-pole with a click of his finger and swept another pile of sweet wrappers, crisps and grit past the scarred, sticky plastic edge. Snapping it back closed he raised it up to the cart, casting an eye briefly on the lanky kid sat in the chair next to where he was working.

The kid had long, dark hair and patchy black stubble poking through his pale white skin. As Leslie watched him, he lent further forward on his elbows, sliding a little further off the arse-chilling perforated metal chair. He was clearly hungover, weary and keen to be right back wherever he came from.

Leslie shook the pan to empty it and, as he let go of the button with his thumb, it gave a satisfying click as it snapped back shut. As Leslie moved to clean under the next bench, the hungover lad lifted his arm casually up to look at his watch. Staring at it, his eyes began to widen and, without warning, he sized his backpack, leapt out of his seat and dashed towards the platform entrance.

From the moment the kid had leapt up though, his dash for the train ceased to be of any interest to Leslie. He was, as ever, focused on the floor, more specifically the large Styrofoam cup that had been knocked over as the lad grabbed his bag.

The plastic top had come off and its contents were now slowly emptying out across the deeply-scuffed Terrazzo tiles. The cup had tipped in an instant, but the thick, fizzy liquid poured out slowly, its viscous blackness overwhelming the fragmented yellow pattern of the tiles.

Leslie leaned silently on his brush as it the cup poured out. As all around him the station carried on oblivious, he squeezed his large baggy hand around the grey plastic handle, his sagging, worn skin briefly tightening, firm once more in anger. The old swallow tattoo that sat between his thumb and index finger also recovered its shape momentarily, though not its colour.

His eyes strained through his thick glasses and, for a moment, the old rage seemed to be overwhelming him. This offence, though small, was just another kick to an already broken pride. His throat cleared and his muscles tensed. 'How dare the little fucking cunt do that,' he thought.

In the past, revenge would have been his immediate reaction, to feel the satisfaction of violence, power, and respect. He felt his blood heat up but, as quickly as it came, this energy faded. Deep down he knew the strength was no longer there, and his rage was replaced by a burning frustration that churned deep in his stomach. He was left with only a tense indignation, an impotence that scared him and cut deep into his guts.

He looked down at the spilt Coke again, put his brush and pan back on the trolley, and pulled out the mop. He grimaced once more and silently began to slosh it back and forward through the liquid. The form of the Coke spreading out further across the floor with the action of the mop before it began to be absorbed and turn its stringy, mulchy ends a darker shade of grey.

Around Leslie, the spin of the station concourse continued; people complained to exasperated attendants, dragged heavy bags with tired arms, munched enthusiastically on over-priced sandwiches, posed gurning for passport photos, slunk wearily off delayed trains, looked curiously at information panels and gazed in wonder at the Victorian marvel of the roof. Trains moved in to fill the platform gaps, and then moved out again across the country. A thousand, small, ordinary dramas occurred, and Leslie noticed not a second of it.

To Leslie, the station had no romance, no intrigue. Through all the people and the movement, he saw only litter and dirt and never ending work. Looking always downward, seeing only legs and shoes and, even then, noticing only the stains and the wear in them.

He pushed all of his weight onto the mop and pushed it with rare forces against the tiles. As it began to absorb the moisture, this extra little humiliation forced him to contemplate his lot in life.

The strong personality that had been formed through harsh times was now only a shadow of what it had been. The spirit remained, but it was now only a ghost in a slowly decaying frame.

He had been a big man, a man with a reputation. He may not have been a face as such, but he was someone who generated enough fear and respect to live as he wanted to live with relative ease. He was aided by the strong union power of the time, which enabled him to work the way he wanted. And of course, he was clever enough to let no woman tie him down.

Sharp in a suit, he was well known and liked in the pubs around

LIME STREET

Kensington and the clubs in town. Still living with his family then, he had money enough for his smart clothes, his motorbike and, later, a car.

The world changed on Leslie though. And, more fundamentally, he didn't realise that age always gets you in end, however quick or strong or smart you may be. First the speed goes, then the strength, then the wit, and then finally, the power. He ignored the first decline, but he began to come off worse in a few fights, the fear crept in, and slowly, he got used to the fact he was no longer the man he had once been.

In the new city, it was harder to pick and choose jobs, especially for an unskilled old man. Between spells on the social, he began to take worse employment and more shit from younger bosses. He walked out of a few jobs, and decked one employer. But he needed money for the bookies and the pub. So, he began to suppress the rage, till it died away.

While gambling debts curbed his free ways, a beer belly, sagging skin and thick glasses made him, even in a fluorescent vest, a ghost to all the attractive women who passed through the station everyday. No longer did they see the brooding power of a dangerous man. Instead they felt the slight indifference and suspicion of an old husk of something rotten.

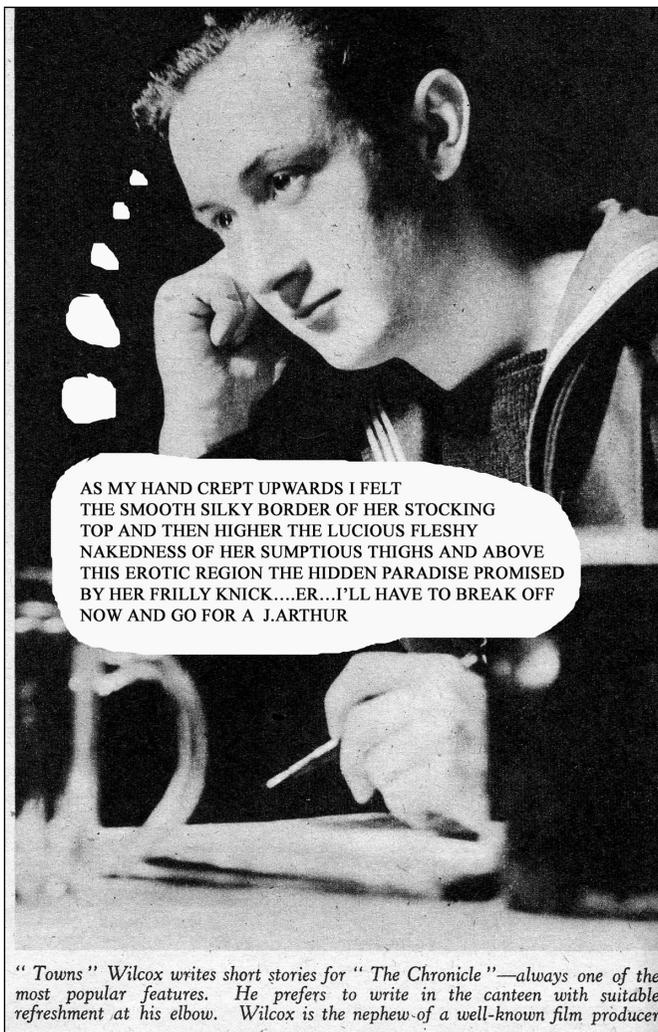
He knew he was powerless now, and felt deeply the emptiness that created inside of him. Respect was now something to hope for not fight for.

Still, he knew he had lived in his own way, which was more than most men achieve. And, though bitter that a 28 year old gobshite with a HND in Business Studies told him what to do every morning, in his head remained the desire in the eyes of all those women he had seduced, and the fear in the eyes of all those men he had threatened.

And, if it came to it, he knew he would still fight them to the finish. He had promised himself one thing as a young man; that he would keep his face up for as long as he could, even if it meant the end of him. It was the only way to live, without fear; snarling and scratching till your last breath.

Now though, it came to him. He sensed a blackness in the near distance. Even this indignity he could cope with, but soon, before the end, he would be totally dependent, frail, finally a victim to age

rather than a stronger opponent. But, he thought, don't dwell, and grimaced as he noticed a blonde girl drop a yellow polystyrene carton on the floor by the Burger King.



Illustrated 1942

LET'S KILL THE TEACHER

S. Kadison

We were sitting in the staff-room towards the end of break when Dransfield sighed heavily, closed the *Times* whose international pages he'd been scanning, got up with his usual refusal-to-be-hurried slowness, took his mug into the kitchen and hurried off to his class. We knew things were tough for him, being of the *old school*, nearing retirement, one of those teachers who grew up in the fifties, took learning seriously, knew his subject inside out, had read a thousand books to get his degree, and was dismayed that pupils in his classes replied "Whatever!" when he told them they'd missed off an accent or got a tense wrong. His mind and those of the young he tried to teach had been formed in contrary circumstances and the almost physical distaste he experienced at mental slovenliness was unknown to them. Every lesson drove him a little nearer despair. He'd become convinced our culture was declining so quickly, heading so gleefully towards suicide, the future would be dominated by minds capable of no more than three-minute concentration, bereft of a sense of posterity, locked into instant gratification. For those of us who were young, these seemed the musings of a sad old man who had chosen a career well below his capacities.

The first two lessons had gone badly. At nine, the year eights came into his room with their usual raucousness, showing-off and lax, indifference to his presence. The previous evening, while his wife slouched in front of some mindlessly glamorous American movie on Film 4, he'd produced six separate tasks which were now laid out on the six tables in piles of thirty. He'd been pleased with his work and had gone to bed hoping, like some naïve rookie, this time they would rise, appreciate his effort and respond to it with their own.

"Is it a test?" called Ashley Brimley.

"Test!" shouted Sam Hothersall. "I'm not doin' a test!"

"Why are we doin' a test?" screeched Jake Sturrock in a voice not yet broken.

"It isn't a test," said Dransfield, but no-one seemed to hear him.

As usual, he stood behind his desk waiting vainly for a reduction in noise that wasn't going to happen, and when, all the boys finally in the room, at last seated but no more attentive to him than a monarch to his flunkies, he raised his voice and called for quiet with one of his customary polite formulations:

“Can we settle down now, please?” or “Shall we make a start, gentlemen?”

There was a momentary dip in the racket, one or two pairs of eyes shot a glance at him as though he might be more than someone who had wandered in off the street and who was worthy of neither respect nor silence, but quickly the collective need to be lost in chaos, to be able to justify ignorance by claiming it as the class's norm, reasserted itself and only by shouting like a drunken football fan after a bad defeat could he bring some calm.

“Right, that's enough! I've been polite, now comes the nasty stuff. Either you shut up, this instant, or you're in detention.”

“Is it official, sir?”

“No, departmental.”

“When is it, sir?”

“Wednesday.”

“I can't do Wednesday I've got a football match.”

“If I put you in detention, you're doing detention.”

“I can't do Wednesday either, sir. I've got to go the Mosque.”

“You'll have to bring a note.”

“Can I bring a note, sir?”

“Can I?”

“Can we all bring a note, sir!”

“I've got to go to the Mosque, sir.”

“You're not a Muslim, Hooper.”

“I've had a conversion, sir.”

The noise, which had diminished for thirty seconds to a level which would have allowed him to deliver his lesson in a normal voice, had risen again to a birthday party hubbub, Ashley Griffin, a big, blond lad convinced he was going to be elevated into the stratosphere of

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super-rich celebrity if only he behaved in every context with the self-conscious, before-the-camera, false exaggerations of *Big Brother*, was on his feet in the middle of the room, and Gavin Barton, a wick, skinny little boy with a mop of curly hair which he shook compulsively as he practised the drumming which he was sure was going to turn him into a super-star, teenage rock sensation, was on all fours under the desk.

“Sit down, Ashley!”

“But he’s got me pencil-case!”

“Sit down even though he’s got your pencil-case.”

“Where’s me pencil-case?”

“I haven’t got it!” said Gavin emerging from under the table.

“Sit in your chair, Gavin,” said Dransfield.

“I was just getting’ me pen lid.”

“Sit in your chair.”

“Where’s me pencil-case!” called Gavin as he scanned his place.

“Well you took mine!” called Ashley.

“Sit down, both of you’!”

“But I don’t know where my pencil-case is!” called Ashley with the pathetic intonation of crisis.

“What do you want me to do,” retorted Dransfield, “call the FBI?”

The class, which apparently hadn’t been listening, erupted in an orgy of jeering as they always did if a teacher dared make a joke or employ a witticism which raised him or her above their level. There was nothing Dransfield could do but wait for the bedlam to subside and in those few seconds it came to him how sunk they were in this culture which would admit nothing better than itself, a distortion of the ideal of democracy and even of equality, it was a vicious dismissal of all values which existed beyond their narrow horizon, a reduction to immersion in the moment, rejection of transcendence, a mental return to the cradle where nothing could exceed their immediate needs; yet it wasn’t their needs these boys were attending to, on the contrary, they ignored them with all the studied cynicism of their wilful refusal to pay heed to him, it was their desires that overwhelmed them, desires engendered by a slick commercialism for

which there was no distinction to be made between a child and an adult - they were both consumers, and in fact, the child was a superior consumer because of its inability to see long-term advantage - and without such a distinction why should they acknowledge him, believe he might have something to offer, recognize his experience, respect his learning? These boys' heroes were tv stars, young, rich, loud-mouthed, overnight sensations, or multi-millionaire footballers flaunting their lavish lifestyles, or even criminals, if criminality had made them rich and notorious. Everything Dransfield represented they despised: the slow accumulation of skill and knowledge, the struggle to master content, the high value attributed to objectivity, steady, honest work for modest reward, a hierarchy of values and priorities, the recognition that our desires can trick us into folly, an unassuming demeanour, a high-minded striving against vulgarity; they were willing to get on with something, but only on their own terms and they feared whatever surpassed them, like savages whose animistic understanding makes them respond violently to whatever is different and therefore incomprehensible. They behaved as they had to, for their context controlled them; they had been sold i-pods and mobiles and PSPs and the virtual world these represented was more real to them than the flesh-and-blood world which was lurid and slow and demanded attention; they were middle-class boys whose homes made the school, even in its newest extensions, look shabby and cheap; their parents had lived the whole of their teenage and adult lives under the illusion that *there is no such thing as society* and had worshipped at the altar of property as a proof of worth so their children, required to prove themselves at every moment of their lives, lacked any secure sense of esteem and acted out like performing seals or trained dolphins; the political culture which had once provided a rough-and ready guide to the choices available in modern life was now so confused, most of them wouldn't have known whether conservatives stood for reforming capitalism out of existence or socialists for the supremacy of the Stock Exchange; some of them came from homes where there were more televisions than books and hardly any of them ever visited a library; many of them had never played a street game and certainly never invented their own rules or composed their own rhymes; all of them had televisions in their rooms and watched late night pornimagery of some kind; few improvised their own games of cricket or football

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on the local park because their parents worried about the danger, taking them instead to organised practises where they were driven to *perform* by ambitious, sideline would-be managers and coaches; they bought chocolate bars, sweets and crisps on the way to school and ate them before the first lesson; they thought the MacDonaldis big, yellow M the symbol of freedom; from the American series they watched they derived the idea that there is one mode of behaviour, one tone, one demeanour which is suitable for every place and time, for that is the expression of *you* and any deliberate, conscious restraint would be a denial of your very existence; they believed they had a right to whatever they desired to do or have and anything which curtailed that right, even for an instant, was unjust.

“Sit down, Ashley.”

“But where’s me pencil-case?”

“I’m going to count to five and if you aren’t in your seat I’m taking you to Mr Dyet.”

The boy sank reluctantly into his chair, resting his head on his folded arms.

“Sit up properly.”

“Where’s me pencil-case!” he exclaimed, raising his head, as affronted as John McEnroe on bad day.

“Gavin! Gavin! You sit down too.”

“Sir.”

Apparently compliant, the boy moved to his seat but just before sitting grabbed a pencil-case from the desk and hurled it across the room at which its owner, Jordan Batty jumped up:

“You bastard!”

“Watch your tongue, Jordan!”

But the boy was away after his belongings, the noise was becoming painful, Gavin grabbed another pencil-case, Ashley got briskly to his feet again and Dransfield, knowing there was nothing else for it, bellowed:

“Si’down at once! Count of five if you’re on your feet you get an official!”

The spectacle of a man as old as some of their grandfathers having to

bawl like a commodity trader in the midst of market meltdown made them smirk and quieten and watch him. He was their prey and they had him in their talons because, although they obeyed, they'd won by making him look ridiculous as they did to all teachers, if not by forcing them into this kind of howling, then by making them teach against their noise and unwillingness, forcing them to strain to entertain them, refusing to allow them their simple status as adult professionals which should have been enough to command their cooperation.

“Your behaviour is disgraceful...” Dransfield heard himself begin, launching into one of those petty homilies, full of anguished disbelief and stressing their inability to behave socially, to adapt to the context, to uphold their responsibility to take education seriously; and though this chastened them enough to permit him to explain what they had to do, within two minutes of them starting the work the noise was filling the space as inexorably as the waters of a burst river fill the cellars of the bankside houses. He went from table to table, urging each quartet to make progress.

“Come on, you've six minutes only to get this done then you move to the next table.”

The noise was awful but he decided to do no more than urge them to quiet as they were at least launched on some work and as he went around the room, verbally prodding them as a farmer prods cattle, he reflected that what he'd said wasn't true: they *were* behaving socially, they were simply adhering to a set of social rules which contradicted absolutely the ones he was trying to teach by; on the one hand, the system worked by coercion: they were required to be educated and that meant, for almost all parents, school, so the inordinate power of the State compelled them to be here and to follow the National Curriculum, to stick to the school's timetable, to wear a uniform, to do homework, to run the cross-country; on the other hand, the air was thick with the boomerang rhetoric of choice, diversity and personalisation, the glib falsehoods of politicians cynically making use of the system to keep themselves in power. Yet the falsehoods became policy and the ambitious had to follow it just as the parents, naively, imagined that there was no dislocation between the high-flown words of a Minister desperate for advantage and the daily reality of classrooms where teachers battled for enough order to get something done or gave up on education and sank to the

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level of entertainers, putting pupils in front of computer screens where they could play games with a little added, putatively educational content, showing them endless videos, or turning every aspect of learning into a game that flattered their childishness and never brought them up short against the hard demands of disinterested mental effort.

The chatter got badly in the way of their attention, but all the same, most of them were getting along with the work because he'd reduced it to the candy-floss simplicity the system demanded and as he went round seeing them selecting items of vocabulary and slotting them into passages of nursery-rhyme redundancy or asking one another the way to the railway station or the town hall in phrase-book French, he felt for the ten thousandth time that dreadful collapsing sense of playing his small part in the demolition of intelligence.

"Sir, what's the French for street?"

"Well, it's there, look."

"Where?"

"Look," and he pointed to the helpful list of vocabulary at the side of the worksheet.

"Oh, yeah."

There came the usual noise of a kerfuffle behind him and turning he found Jack Cronshaw sprawled across the desk, the worksheets on the floor like discarded bus tickets. A great jeer arose from the class and Cronshaw, relishing his fifteen seconds of limelight, kicked his legs and flailed his arms like a non-swimmer in a wild sea.

"Get back in your seat, Jack!"

The three boys at the table were giggling like giddy four-year-olds high on E numbers.

"He's swimming the channel!"

And Cronshaw agitated his limbs more ferociously, rocking the table and raising another loud jeer.

"Jack, get back in your seat!"

But the boy was enjoying himself, the class had broken down, no work was being done, what they were there for was forgotten, they'd tilted the little vessel of education in which they were used to being pandered to till it had capsized and were now frolicking in the waves,

excited as six-year-olds on an August holiday; why should they pay any attention to Dransfield, what did he represent? He belonged to a past they were ignorant of and disdained because everything in the past denied the bright future that was theirs.

“Jack! I’m going to count to ten then I’m going to take you off the desk. You’re risking injury behaving this way in the classroom.”

At this provocation the boy behaved as if a sudden surge of electricity had passed through his body, the two desks, pushed together to make one, came apart, books, pens and pencil-cases cascaded to the floor and at the end of his very short tether, Dransfield grabbed the boy by the collar and yanked him to his feet.

“You hit me!” Cronshaw exclaimed.

“No I didn’t.”

“I’ve got witnesses. That’s assault.”

“I wish you luck in your career as a barrister, lad. Now sit down.”

“I’ll get my dad.”

Around the room were cries of “Sue him, Jack!”, “Get him sacked!”, but Dransfield remained as calm as a man contemplating the roses in his garden.

“Good. I’ll be glad to talk to him. Now sit down.”

He pushed the tables together, picked up the belongings and went once more around the room.

“That’s six minutes. Change tables, Clockwise round the room, please.”

They stood up and grabbed their bags.

“Listen, there’s no need to take your bags. Leave them where they are. You’ll come back to where you started from. Leave your bags.”

“I’m not leavn’ mine, someone’ll nick me stuff.”

And that collective high-minded opinion meant thirty boys hoisted their bulging rucksacks onto their shoulders, began shoving and jostling like bumper cars on a bank holiday, moved in various directions, pushed the desks and chairs aside and, enjoying the low-key melee, refused to listen when Dransfield called:

“No, no! Clockwise. Go clockwise to the next desk. Come on! This

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is simple. Just go clockwise.”

They relished their sullen, defiance like a tired two-year-old in the supermarket, milled and shoved in their bovine progress to their next task and when, finally, they were all seated again, Dransfield found they'd deliberately muddled the worksheets.

“Who's done this?” he said holding up a sheaf, and though he was on the verge of letting fly, he restrained himself, forced his voice away from stridency and his demeanour from tension. “Pathetic. It really is pathetic.”

Patiently, he went round the room resorting the papers till each table had its correct pile.

“Okay. Six minutes from now.”

“Sir, he's got me ruler!” Ashley was on his feet.

“Sit down.”

“But he's got me ruler!”

“Fine, but sit down.”

He went to the table knowing that he'd ask Gavin to give back the ruler and he'd say he didn't have it.

“Give him his ruler, Gavin.”

“What?” said the boy, spreading his arms, his fingers splayed, his mouth gaping like the Mersey Tunnel.

“Just give him the ruler, enough's enough.”

“I haven't got it!”

“Either give him the ruler or you'll have to leave the room.”

“But I haven't got it! Look! Can you see any ruler?”

Ashley lurched across the desk and grabbed Gavin's pen which he sent skidding across the floor.

“See that! Get it!” and Gavin was on his feet.

“Sit down, Gavin!”

Ashley jumped up and grabbed Gavin round the neck, the two of them toppling like an over-stacked pile of books, at which another great jeer soared at the boys wrestling on the floor.

“Get up the pair of you!”

As calmly as if he were lifting a baby from its cot, Dransfield separated the fighters who were now red-faced, over-excited, dishevelled and delighted at being the stars of the moment.

“You aren’t being filmed,” said Dransfield, “this isn’t *Big Brother*. Now sit down and calm down.”

“But where’s me ruler!” cried Ashley his arms spread like Christ on the cross.

Dransfield put his face close to Ashley’s and spoke very low:

“At the end of the lesson we’ll conduct a search and investigation and if your ruler doesn’t turn up, I’ll call for International Rescue immediately. Okay.”

In response to the teacher’s proximity to their classmate, hoping he might have been pushed far enough to make a mistake which could allow them to disperse through the school exaggerating grossly the story of Dransfield attacking a pupil, and listening intently, for the first time in the year, in case he might say something they could report to their parents, thrilling at the possibility of getting a teacher in serious trouble and possibly sacked, they had become utterly quiet and as attentive as infants in front of their first Punch and Judy. Dransfield stood back smiling and surveyed them.

“That’s very good. Now get on with the work.”

At once the racket exploded, they turned to one another and began chatting about their inconsequential obsessions paying flitting attention to the work and Dransfield, walking amongst them, wishing he could simply go out of the door and never return was struck by how precisely he could locate the time at which the behaviour of the pupils turned and from being mischievous but essentially biddable, they became malicious, conscious of their power, keen to assert their rights, and ready, at the slightest opportunity, to make accusations. The ancient recognition that children, being immature, can’t share adult rights nor assume adult responsibilities had been discarded and now, in schools, the absolute equality of the generations was asserted as a law. As his mind had done thousands of times, it quickly ran through the demented logic that had made this happen: visceral and irrational hatred of the public sector, fear of educated masses, a wayward belief that individual freedom isn’t socially guaranteed, a terror of organised labour, a compulsive need to control and manage every detail, the need to open up new markets by turning children

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into vigorous consumers, the emergence of a political elite detached from the population and determined to manipulate its way to power and stay there, the superstitious conviction that any putative knowledge or skill can be reduced to the numbers by which it's measured, and hovering above it all the preening egotism of the very rich who wanted the world made safe for themselves, whatever the cost in accumulating despair and misery. He recalled the precision of the change: September 1992, the introduction of OFSTED, a message to pupils and parents that it was open season on incompetent, feckless, left-wing, lazy, teachers.

"Six minutes! Move to the next task. Clockwise and don't take your bags."

But it was hopeless, the more they ignored and defied him, the more they loved themselves, like a child who discovers for the first time that its parents can be controverted without the sky falling in. His well-planned lesson descended into the chaos of paddling-pool time on the lawn in summer as these heedless, self-centred boys chatted, messed and frittered the hour away. He wrote some perfunctory homework on the board, told them to take their completed sheets with them and dismissed them on the bell. When they'd left, the room was littered like a nursery after paper pattern making and as he hurried to clear up, bending and reaching for the discarded work, some of it bearing crude emblems of male genitalia, his next class began to arrive. They slobbered in and threw down their bags. Dion Clovelly spread his arms and buzzed around the room:

"What are we doing today, sir!" he called

Miles Blashaw stood pouring coca-cola down his throat from a two-litre bottle like a kid taking a break from a playground football game.

"Put the bottle away, Miles."

"But I'm thirsty!"

"So am I but you don't see me getting a bottle of brown ale out of the cupboard, do you?"

"Have you got brown ale in there?" shouted Clovelly, spitting between the desks.

"Put the bottle away."

"I'm thirsty," said the boy, "it's my human right to drink."

“Not here and now it isn’t.”

“If he dies of thirst you’ve had it,” called Thomas Gold.

“If he dies of thirst they’ll bury him in a coca-cola bottle shaped coffin.”

“Did you hear that?” called Ryan Stanford. “He said he wants you to die of thirst!”

“Sue him, Miles!” called Gold.

Dransfield stood behind his desk and surveyed the noisy, disunified group, each boy in his own little bubble confirming that there is no such thing as society, and though he knew they weren’t to blame, were merely the unwitting victims of a debased culture, he despised them because finally they did have a choice, young as they were; they needed to choose against their culture. Raised in a time which proposed that the individual is made against society they exhibited a hypomanic sense of self-esteem, thrusting themselves into every situation as though they could define themselves from within. The irony was that this radical individuality was socially imposed and the originality they attached to their behaviour was in fact the most reduced conformism. Unable to address them as a class because of their noise, he went from table to table:

“Do you have your exercise book? Can you get it out, please? The date and title are on the board.”

It was as effective as herding lemmings from the cliff face. Reluctant, slow, uncooperative, loud, fiercely determined to do as little as possible and to sabotage the lesson, they refused to work as a group, wouldn’t raise any pace, relished Dransfield’s discomfiture. They were doing, he knew, the work of the politicians, the leader writers, the bureaucrats, the target-setters, the self-appointed experts, the glib commentators, systematically destroying intellectualism, debasing the value of learning, asserting the rights of reduced consumerism; they were customers and they couldn’t be wrong. He battled through the lesson. Clovelly threw a text-book through the open window.

“Come with me, please Dion.”

“Where’m I goin’?”

“I’ll have to put you in another room.”

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“Which room?”

“Just come with me and I’ll show you.”

“Do I need to bring my stuff?”

“Yes, please.”

Agonisingly slowly, the boy gathered his things, calling comments to his mates all the while as Dransfield stood by the door. Once his bag was packed, he deliberately picked it up awkwardly so its contents spilled on the floor. Another great jeer filled the room. Dransfield waited, his heart beginning to pound with anger and humiliation. Daily he was put through this and though he knew his sensibility was partly to blame, intellectual, liberal, thoughtful, questioning, these boys hooked on celebrity and electronic gizmos found him impossible to fathom, he despised the system that left him facing such classes and which told him their behaviour was the result of his uninteresting teaching. One of those liberals who had come into teaching out of idealism, convinced that voluntary compliance could replace coercion, he had witnessed the invasion of supermarket ideology, the arrival of the idiocy that outcome is all and process meaningless, the virus of blame according to which a Secretary of State bears no responsibility for failure and can even declare publicly that she wouldn’t touch some schools with a bargepole, the wretched notion that there is one kind of effective lesson only and if it doesn’t begin with a *starter* and end with a *plenary*, it’s a failure, the mind-destroying concept that boys do well at Eton and badly in Brixton because in so-called *failing* schools the teachers are no good, and above all the time-serving cynicism of self-exculpating politicians for whom the education system was nothing but a means to garner votes, to hang on to power for a little longer, to line their pockets, to win a place in the history books at any price, and of course, who did the bidding of the rich who saw the school system as an expensive white elephant and wanted it reduced to a training scheme to turn out obedient and mindless employees.

Two lessons done and Dransfield was already weary, frustrated, at the end of his tether. At half past three a group of us were in the staff-room chatting and laughing before going to the pub. We were young. We had grown up with the cynicism Dransfield hadn’t adjusted to, viewed idealism as a folly and didn’t care too much about the future, except our own. We saw him come in with his

briefcase, sit down and scan the paper as he ate a sandwich left over from his lunch. He cut a lonely figure and in a way we felt sorry for him, but at the same time we knew he belonged to the past: things had changed and he hadn't, he was out of step with his culture and secretly we despised him for his high-mindedness, his belief in principle. We had been trained to use our elbows, to look to the main chance. There may be such a thing as society, but we knew it was a jungle and we relished its cut-throatism. What did we have to do to get on, to have the big house, the fast car, the good-looking spouse? Just tell us and we'll do it. But Dransfield wouldn't. He insisted on values and principles and that was his downfall. He sat for a few minutes, dropped his crust in the bin, stood up and pulled on his coat and with his briefcase seeming to weigh inordinately went out to his car without speaking to anybody. We were glad to see him go. His presence disturbed us. He was out of place. We were the new world. Like the kids, we were consumers, we asserted ourselves, we wanted our place and Dransfield's resistance to the present bewildered us.

Soon after that he took the reduced pension, made a down-beat speech when his cheque was presented and disappeared. No-one has heard of him since.

Tired Wives

HERE'S WHAT DOCTORS ADVISE:

If you're too tired all the time, your system is probably filled up with dangerous poisons that keep organs from working as they should. Your system needs a thorough cleansing.

Yet doctors warn women that their delicate systems can be permanently injured by harsh injurious laxatives that seem to tear you apart. Instead, doctors say, take the way nature devised to cool your blood, and cleanse out accumulated poisons. Take 'California Syrup of Figs.' A delicious liquid, it contains the juices of whole sun-ripened figs. Quickly, yet gently, your system is cleansed. You feel wonderful, filled with new vibrant energy.

Be sure you get 'California Syrup of Figs' brand.

And would you believe it - some Londoners actually wear our product on their heads.

TANNER

MATHS LESSON

The fat fuck in front of me stole my pencil,
and I can't say I gave a toss,
I had no intention
of working out some pointless sums,
but he and his crew of spotty gerbils
start teasing me:
'Got yer pencil, Tanner!'
'I'm gonna burn it !'
'I'm gonna stick it up my bird's arse
and make yer suck it !'

And I'm just sitting there
not giving one,
so they throw it out the window.

'What yer gonna do now?'
'Yer gonna cry ?'
'Yeah Tanner, don't cry, heh heh !'

'Oh,' I moan
'fuck off you unoriginal cunts.'

The teacher jumps out of his seat.
'Oo's tha usin such foul language ?'
and guess who got detention ?

He couldn't have given it to them,
they might've hurt him, like.

CHRIST! I'M SHAKIN ANDS WIV
A COMMIE SAINT! BIT OF THE OLD
STUFF IS WHAT POLAND NEEDS RIGHT
NOW I RECKON. WONDER IF HE'LL
LEAVE ME HIS SET OF BREZHNEV SPEECHES?



LEC'S WELL IN WITH THE CHURCH. PRAPS
HE CAN PUT A WORD IN NEXT TIME HE PRAYS.
HOW'S IT GO NOW? HAIL MARY FULL OF GRACE
OUR GREAT LEADER IS WITH THEE...ER NO
THAT'S NOT QUITE RIGHT...HOPE THESE DARK
GLASSES GET ME PAST ST PETER.

Walesa visits ailing Jaruzelski in hospital

In a sign of reconciliation between once bitter foes, Lech Walesa, Poland's pro-democracy activist, has visited General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the communist leader who imprisoned him for 11 months, in hospital. Walesa visited the ailing 88-year-old Jaruzelski over the weekend, shaking hands with his former jailer who lay weakened in a Warsaw hospital with cancer and pneumonia. "Get well, general," Walesa said above a photograph of the meeting posted on his website. The daily tabloid Fakt carried the picture on its front page yesterday and declared it "historic".

"May you soon be with your beloved Josef Vissarionovich" added Lec "pity about your no-good nephew Stefan though, and his disgusting daughter Wislawa" Both now work in England – Stefan as a plumber/poet with many contributions to The Penniless Press and The Crazy Oik (both banned in Poland) while Wislawa runs an escort agency in Soho Putains Polonaise. The general twitched violently: "Lec, having now rejoined the holy mother church I wish to leave my one hundred million zloty* fortune to his holiness the Pope. To my nephew I bequeath my 24 volumed speeches of Brezhnev and my collection of pipe bending springs (the general was also a plumber before joining the army) to his depraved daughter I leave my blowlamp which she can use on her masochistic clients" Stefan declined to comment on his uncle's impending demise saying he was too busy replacing a ball cock in Denton.

* worth approx £235

AP Warsaw

THE VISITOR.

Dave Birtwistle

He drove over the small roundabout, up the hill in third gear and stopped at the crossroads. No traffic at all so he turned right into the stage of the journey he enjoyed most. The moors spread out before him, the sky opened up on all sides and his breathing slowed and became deeper. The cloud banks were stacked over the hills and although the day was dank the billowing pillows radiated a curious luminescent greyness which he'd only ever seen here above the Pennines. All about him a curling, rolling silver-grey flecked with blue and lichen green and a dancing glow like the northern lights or a faintly flickering will o' the wisp.

For a few minutes all thought of the working day and his home and family evaporated. There was just him inside this vast rolling space, miles of air swirling round a hump-backed landmass where moor-grass and dry-stone wall arced up to the sky and the clouds came down and bounced along this small country road. It was the closest he'd ever be to heaven.

He focused ahead. A mile or so away a few trees and a low building were silhouetted against the mistiness. The remaining hill-farms hereabouts were few and far between. The way they were built, squat and huddled, to brace against the elements fascinated him. He'd love to live in one, perhaps just for a year to see if he could handle the isolation. He'd passed two small farms earlier, close to the road but this one was set back up a narrow track across boggy fields where he'd seen clumps of marsh marigolds among the brown reed stalks earlier that spring. Now, as he approached, the grass was a deeper green and the reeds stood erect and the ragwort was beginning to flower like thin yellow broccoli stems.

At this point the landscape, the season and the light inside the cloud transformed his whole being. The working day ahead was on hold, his domestic life and chores way behind him. As he neared them, the farm buildings drew his whole attention and seemed to take on a life of their own. Two low storeys built out of thick slabs of millstone grit; they were designed to keep out the rain and the howling winds. But here, there were signs of careful modernisation and extension. The windows were elegant stone mullions and the doors heavy timber. The roof had been re-slatted, three dormer windows had been

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added and the paths turned into a spacious driveway and wide courtyard. At the back and to the side was a large recently built, L-shaped outbuilding. What added to his fascination was that he'd never seen a soul there and he passed it every working day. There was always one car parked on the drive in the same spot, a silver long-wheelbase 4X4. Who lived there and what they did teased his thoughts.

In seconds he was past. The road dipped and the 50 signs changed to 30. A couple of miles ahead lay the motorway. He was leaving the moortops and heading for the drabness of the city and the daily round of the mundane world. At this transitional moment he realised just how enchanted he'd become with the moors and the light on the hills and the haunting beauty created by his ancestors - quarrying the local millstone grit to make the wondrous dry-stone walls that seemed to climb these buckled mounds and rise up straight into the sky. The chunkiness of the same stone was partly what fascinated him about the farmhouse. It was close to the earth, braced against the winds of winter and the rain and sleet and it held an inner darkness, a sense of secrecy. The thickness of the walls seemed to keep out the light as well as the weather.

During the first few miles on the motorway the farmhouse continued to play on his imagination. The picture he retained in his mind was like the shadows made at dusk in a wood where each tree's special greenness turned darker and darker without becoming truly black. He'd become obsessed with it now. It haunted him. Who lived there? Who were they? What did they do? Why choose an old farmhouse out at the back of beyond and do it up? The land all around was claggy and damp, the soil acidic, not much grew there just the odd stunted, arthritic tree. There were no shops, no pubs, no neighbours.....By the time he reached work he had hatched a plan. It was still vague but he knew what he had to do.

After work that day he went round to Kevin's house. Kevin's wife was away and he was fending for himself. That meant the chip shop or the Chinese every night and having to walk the dog twice a day. Inspiration called.

"How about me giving you a break on Saturday?"

"A break?"

"Yes. I'll walk the dog. You have the day to yourself and I'll take it

out with me."

"Where to?"

"Up on the moors walking. Back by tea time. I'll give it a good run and tire it out. It won't want to walk far on Sunday."

And so with the pockets of his anorak full of dog biscuits and the dog in its basket on the back seat he set off for the moors. Where he was going was the sort of place where people only stopped if they broke down. There were no real stopping places. It was somewhere you only passed through. For him the dog was the perfect camouflage. If you snooped around on your own people were suspicious. If you snooped around in twos and threes they called the police. If you walked a dog you were part of the landscape and blended in. There was something about a man and his dog which gave off a sense of naturalness, rural homeliness, part of the natural order of things.

Back on the small muddy verge on the B-road half a mile before the isolated farm he parked up. It was 7.30am and the sky's immense greyness tumbled all about him. The air was filled with thick cloud and shrouded in silver light, opening up to illuminate spots he'd never seen before then closing up again. In the distance were the fells and the hills and the long anticline. He was on the rooftop of England just a man and his dog.

Secure on its lead he let the dog forage in the ditch. It squelched about among the cow parsley and the grasses in a sniffing frenzy. It seemed as excited as he was. The air was cool and fresh and there wasn't a soul about. Here he was, just off the map, in the middle of nowhere, feeling totally at home. He knew now that he wanted to live here and unravel the spirit of the place. Who needed bright lights and big cities or the beach and the crowds and all the noise? How artificial holidays seemed when you could live here and be surrounded by all this all of the time.

As the dog continued rooting and sniffing, out of the corner of his eye, up along the winding country road, he caught sight of a distant vehicle. He was almost at the farmhouse now and the verges had been trimmed like a garden lawn. He recognised the vehicle now as a small Post Office van, one that stopped off at the rural farms and cottages. He stood well back to let it pass. The van slowed and pulled up alongside him. The driver wound the window down and leant

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across.

"All right, mate?" Nobody said 'mate' round here. The driver was obviously local but trying to be a smart-arsed artificial cockney.

"Hey up, cock," the man replied. He didn't use 'cock' normally but he now felt part and parcel here and he wanted to emphasise this sense of belonging.

"Dost live round 'ere" asked the driver, reverting.

"Aye" he replied.

"Do us a favour. Save me a job and drop this packet off at farm. Yon cattle grid's a right bone shaker."

"No problem, cock," he replied. He couldn't believe it, it happened so naturally. The dog and then the parcel. His luck was in.

He surveyed the whole scene. The van disappeared and left him alone with the dog. He trod across the spongy grass and picked him up. He fished in his pocket for a biscuit and approached the five-bar gate. It was locked with a solid bar-bolt. He carefully negotiated the narrow stile and then trod precariously across the wide cattle grid which would have completely flummoxed the dog on its own.

As he balanced his way across the metal tubes like a tightrope walker he felt like he was moving into a no-man's land. Over on the other side he was surprised to find that the hard standing on the sweeping drive was block paving. It must have cost a small fortune. It felt open and exposed but anyone driving past on the road would hardly notice a thing.

Looking at the farmhouse now, from inside the perimeter he was struck by the size and solidity of the place. The barns were huge. You could keep several trucks in there. He put the dog down and gripped the packet tightly. The whole farmstead was bathed in yellow light. Surrounded by the rolling, upended moorland he felt as though he was in an open boat on a becalmed sea.

The windows were stone mullions and the nearer he got he could see that the individual stones were solid blocks of millstone grit. An elegant fortress! There was still no sign of life even though he must be visible from at least four of the windows. There must be someone in, the car's still here. For the first time he began to think he might have been foolhardy. They might resent intrusion. They might be of a violent tendency. There might be guards. Was it a 'safe house'? A

mini Bletchley Park? It really felt well out of the way now. A religious cult? A special-ops training base? A terrorist cell?

He looked back at the gate and the dry stone wall and wrapped the dog's lead tighter round his fist. He walked up to me solid, studded oak door and rang the bell. A curtain twitched. Just the faintest shuffle. He realised there was a CCTV camera in a recess on the wall. He pressed the buzzer again and held the parcel up to the camera lens and waved it. Louder sounds from inside the thick walls then an electronic whine and a scraping noise. Well oiled bolts slid back. A faint voice on an intercom: "Just a minute". And the door slowly opened.

Standing on the threshold was a middle-aged woman in a gingham pinafore and behind her a thin, gaunt man in overalls, both their faces grey and drawn. He offered the packet as explanation for the intrusion.

"The postman asked me to deliver this."

"He wants us to put a letterbox by the main gate so he doesn't need to come up to the house."

"We used to look forward to him calling. Now there's no-one," said the man.

"Would you like a cup of tea for your trouble?" asked the wife

He was taken aback by the surreal banality of it all.

"Well.....I.....Yes.....I....."

She led him down a hallway and into the kitchen. It was huge. There was a central island with stovetops and chopping boards and a wall with a bank of freezers and what must be dishwashers etc. The other wall hung with chains and hooks and antique clamps and what might be Victorian butchery saws and cleavers. She sat him down and filled a bowl with dog biscuits. The man put the kettle on. The two of them suddenly opened up.

"We don't really see anyone anymore you see...."

"We won the lottery.... .It was a nightmare.... .kidnapping...."

"Ransom demands.... .begging letters.... .all your neighbours...."

"All talking about you..... we had to get away from it....."

"But this is no better..... its purgatory..... nowhere to go...."

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"No one to speak to... ..no friends any more....."

As she handed him a cup and saucer and teaspoon he leant forward to take it with his right arm outstretched. The instant he touched it he felt something cold and metallic against his left wrist and then a click.

"But now we've got you," she went on. "You can be our special friend." At that instant, one single, bizarre thought went through his head:

"I wonder what they gave that dog to eat?"

Oiku: The boy done good. (JPS vi) by Gregory 'Fawlden. (Dave Birtwistle)

His full name was Jean-Paul Charles Grimshaw-Sartre. His mother was Albert Schweitzer's cousin and his granny looked like Ena Sharples without teeth. She often said 'Bien alors, j'aurai aller au fond de notre escalier' and he wondered whether there had been a possible Lancastrian connection which had given rise to his famous football metaphor. "Existence precedes essence," he thought as the *Stadium of Damp and Drizzle* drifted before his eyes. In years to come this genetic continuum would enable his grandson to fashion the dictum "Apart from Cantona the only other French philosopher to play for United was Mark Hughes."

Wood – (Paul Burgess)

What can you say about a plank of wood? You could say what variety of wood it is, whether it's teak, oak or mahogany. You could describe its texture, its grain or if it has a knot in it. Even define its chemistry at an atomic level. You could state its origin, where it came from, the country on this vast planet that I'll never visit or experience the culture of its people. But if my eyes could still see and my body was not decaying in this coffin, I would be staring at this plank of wood for eternity.

OBSERVATIONS

Marie Feargrieve

Still Life:

It was cold. Ruth hadn't put her slippers on. She looked down; she could feel crumbs under her toes. The kettle was soon humming; she took two mugs from the draining board and tossed a teabag into each. There was very little milk in the carton when she shook it. It would do. Sipping tea and eating toast, she planned the day.

"Jason, are you up? It's gone nine." Ruth stood at the bottom of the stairs and listened. After a few minutes the floorboards creaked overhead. Her son wasn't a morning person.

"Where are we going and to do what?"

"I'm not sure yet but it will be nice to spend a bit of time together."

"Whatever you want."

The car stopped. She took a picnic hamper out of the boot and spread the rug onto the grass. Jason slowly got out and threw a couple of towels onto the ground.

"The plunge pool looks just the same."

"I'm glad of that. I thought it may have changed somehow. Let's eat first."

Jason picked up a hard boiled egg and stuffed it whole into his mouth. Ruth watched but didn't say anything. She threw the crusts of a sandwich toward a couple of nearby ducks.

Jason walked to the other side of the car to pull on his swimming shorts. The still pond exploded as he jumped in. Water droplets splashed Ruth, pattering her hair and face, cold and refreshing. He trod water, whipping his head from side to side to look around at the river bank and trees overhead.

Ruth sat on the nibbled bank and dangled her feet into the dark, dappled depths.

"We used to come here with Dad."

"Yes. Every summer."

"It's still the same."

"It's us who has changed" said Ruth.

OBSERVATIONS

She kicked water at him. He looked at her and dived under the water. She saw his milky limbs gliding under the surface. He bobbed up, a glossy, glistening seal.

“I’m happy, here, today” she said.

“Yes.” He cupped his hands and threw a handful of clear river water over his head.

She lay back, the clouds scudded overhead. The sun blazed, huge and hot. A midge cloud bobbed and a dragonfly flew elegantly past.

They packed the bags into the boot and drank the last of the lemonade.

“I’ll drive” said Jason. She flicked at his hair with the back of her fingers. His brow was smooth and warm. The keys were dropped into his open palm.

“It’s been a good day. Take it slow, no rush to get home.”

Jason nodded. He put his arms around her. It was the briefest of hugs. Ruth smiled. Leaning back in the passenger seat, the engine revved. The hands on the wheel were the hands of a man. The hands of her son.

The sun sank on the mackerel horizon. The pool was ironed smooth, deep and constant, under the evening sky.

Heartbreak Productions:

We sat three feet apart. The day was chilly for August. The trees bowed and back flipped and shook earlier raindrops onto the ground around us. A picnic in the park with entertainment. Very British, very civilized. Small groups of family and friends spread their bounty onto tablecloths and blankets. A colourful patchwork on the dark green, dormant August grass.

“I hope it doesn’t rain” I said, turning to look at her.

“No” she said.

The players on the makeshift stage cleared their throats and a voice, projected “Welcome!”

I tucked my hands inside sleeves and hunched my jacket high around my neck. I turned to my left to look at her. She stared straight ahead. A mother and daughter on the grass in front of me laughed and

munched on apples and cheese straws. The daughter, my daughter's age. The mother stretched out and tucked a stray strand of hair behind the girl's ear. I looked away and re-focused on the capers taking place on the stage. Laughter swayed through the crowd. My face stretched a smile.

He had arrived clutching drinks and sat down in the gap between us. My hand unfurled from the warm burrow of my sleeve and moved to touch him. I remembered in time and checked my movement as her head swivelled. The muscle contracted, the hand retreated and trailed, a limp, purposeless limb, the fingers digging into the palm.

She on the left, me on the right. Together but divided. I will enjoy the day. It isn't hers or mine or his. The rain fell, the wind blew. The players carried on mouthing and gesticulating, exiting to left and right and costume changed with abandon. The interval was announced and he disappeared again.

I turned to speak. No words came. We locked eyes. I see no truth in hers. Does she see any in mine? He came back smiling. We both smiled. All was well with the world. Normality is everything isn't it?

We drove home, not in silence but not at ease either. I leave them on the drive. I walk to my car and turn to wave. He raises a hand in salute. I start the car and ease it into the road. I drive away, alone. He is alone. She is alone.

The house is cold, I turn on the heat. I'm holding the programme still, from the day's entertainment. It's damp and tearing along the folds. They were good, those actors. I unfold it and read *Heartbreak Productions*.

I pick up the phone. Maybe my daughter is in. I put it down again. I touch my hair and tuck it behind my ears. For a moment it is her hair and her ear. I exhale. A pause. I force myself to breathe in. I will speak to her tomorrow. I smile. Flesh of my flesh.

The Bikers Wedding:

The lake was still there, and the children's playground. I could see the bright blues and yellows and reds of the metal frames. The lake stretched beyond, a silver amoeba, ducks paddling its surface. This place held memories. A small, blonde boy, shouting and throwing

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twigs in the stream, kicking up snow in wintertime and riding the small ornamental train in summer, around the garden's perimeter.

I headed for the pavilion and the Edwardian bandstand. It was there, smarter looking, refurbished. It was Saturday, lots of people around, a buzz of sound. The sky was blue and spring in the air. I approached the pavilion. There was a large crowd of bikers. The mass of black leather shone sweatily in the weak sunshine. Grey hair, grey beards, black hair, black boots, shining metal machines. They were relaxed, smiling and talking, looking towards the bandstand. There were non biker people too, sat on benches and on the grass. All eyes on the bandstand. I perched on the end of a seat and waited. There were several people in the centre of the stand. They wore bright colours. Wedding colours. Bikers flanked the steps leading up to the circular, concrete arena, white flowers and flowing pink ribbons tied to the wrought iron railings. Pastels on hard iron. A wedding was imminent. A biker wedding in this very public place.

I looked at the faces in the crowd. Some sneered, some smiled. A voice behind me, quite close.

"I wouldn't like it. No privacy, no class. Bet she'll be in leathers. Look there's the bridesmaids."

A three wheel bike, handle bars held high, had pulled up. The biker stepped down and helped out three black gowned girls from the back seat. Stiff, coiffed hair, candyfloss flowers in bouquets, trooped up the steps to join the guests. Two teenage girls in front of me, snorted with derision, hands clasped over mouths. "Shut up" I wanted to say.

"She's here, here comes the bride." Heads turned to the right. Another huge three wheeler slid to a halt. A round of applause came from the bikers. The crowd joined in.

"She's in white". A surprised, indignant voice. There was a lull. The lull became a wait. A suited man got off the bike and waited while the bride gathered her dress. She stood. She was small and plump. The dress was huge, floating and fluffy, a frothy confection of fondant icing. Two huge bikers stepped forward to help her down. Something was wrong. She walked oddly. She hobbled.

"She's crippled. Probably a biking accident."

She made her way, painfully slowly up the steps, supported under each elbow, lemon flowers held stiffly in her hands. At the top, her

supporters stepped back. She was a tiny, snow white figure dwarfed by the lofty dimensions of the bandstand. She inched forward toward the centre where her biker groom stood. He held out a hand. She was nearly there. Applause and cheers ricocheted around. The spectacle was over. People began to drift away.

I walked along the esplanade. The comments kept coming.

“It’s vulgar. In the middle of a park. It wouldn’t be for me.”

“She had guts though. Especially on false legs.”

The sky clouded a little. I felt sad. I wished them well. Maybe they would return in the future and hear their own echoes. Mine came back to me now, temporarily interrupted. My small, blonde boy turned to look back at me, urging me on, with a small beckoning hand.

Oiku: Something out of Nothing. (Dave Birtwistle)

He was trying to get his mind round the numbers. The universe consists of billions and billions of stars and galaxies, but until 14 billion years ago, none of them existed. In a single moment everything we know was created. The hydrogen atoms in that glass of water were born moments after the big bang. What actually happened? Why a bang? Why not a whump or a whoosh? If he could answer that it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason. He would finally understand the mind of God. Then he realised – he’d left his sausages under the grill.

ACTRESS Part III

Nigel Ford

‘What lovely candles! How festive!’ Phyllis exclaimed.

‘Hello Phyllis darling,’ Irene said. ‘let me take those from you, Can I get you a cup of tea? The power’s off but I put the rest in a thermos. It should be hot.’ They look as if they’re going to crumple into dust some old people, but they are a lot tougher than you suppose, Irene thought. ‘I have to go and fetch the gravel. Will you be all right? I’ll be a while.’

‘I’ll be fine dear, don’t you mind me. This is a lovely cup of tea,’ Phyllis said, sipping. Touching, all these men out here, boys together, Irene thought young and old, rich and poor, all having a good time. This eternal rain and the dark. Where’s Dick? There he is, down a hole.

‘Seen Doc?’ Irene asked Dick.

‘I saw him get in the cab with Edwin,’ Dick said

Irene could see two heads in there but couldn’t make them hear her, the cab was too well insulated, and too high to thump on, so she chucked a lump of mud, splat, on the side window. Doc Jackson levered himself out. Down on the ground he stood in front of Irene, holding a curiously shaped piece of wood. It looked like a model bridge.

‘The power’s on the blink,’ Irene said.

‘Don’t look at me, not our fault, we’re being extremely careful,’ Doc said.

‘Whose else would it be?’ Irene asked

‘They could be testing, making adjustments at the power station,’ Doc said.

‘They usually send out a letter when they do that,’ Irene said.

‘What’s that?’

‘A buttress,’ Doc said. ‘We fit them into the trench to prevent the sides from slipping, to protect the existing cables when we fill it in and to provide a ladder for the ACTRESS cable.’

‘You sure you’re not the cause?’ Irene asked.

‘Definitely not, old girl’ Doc said, then lowered his voice. ‘Sorry if I made you late this morning.’

Irene's face softened for moment. 'Horny bugger,' she said. 'I'd better go and fetch that gravel. Phyllis has come, she's in the kitchen. She brought the sandwiches.'

'Good,' Doc said. 'We could all use some breakfast.'

I bet it is down to them though, Irene thought, what else could it be? Too much of a coincidence. Several yards short of the shorting cable, the JCB murmured and growled and shovelled earth into the trench. Shaken loose, a quantity of small grade grit and thick earth tumbled onto the exposed wire and bent it into the cavity that had formed beneath it. The freezer in the back kitchen of The Duck jerked and made a loud clicking noise that startled Phyllis enough to slop her tea. It hummed back to life. The lights came on, overshadowing the group of three candles placed in the centre of the big scrubbed pine table.

* * * * *

'What's your game eh? Are you on it? What do you think you're doing here?' Donkey jacket had stopped Irene before she'd got twenty yards down the lane.

'Doing my bit,' Irene said.

'A bit doing her bit,' donkey jacket said. 'Are you sure your footwear is suitable? Are those conducive to digging I wonder.'

'I could use a pair of wellies,' Irene said.

'I'm not a props master. I am here to inspect, not provide. I've told the others, you ought all to be wearing hardhats,' donkey jacket said.

'If you find me a pair of wellies,' Irene said, sticking out her chest. 'I could come round to your place this evening and return them.'

'No thank you,' donkey jacket said. 'If you can't find more suitable attire you should go home.'

'You've no right to speak to me like that,' Irene said.

'You're a safety hazard. I shall have you removed,' donkey jacket said.

'What seems to be the problem?' Dick had walked over to see what was up.

'Ah Dick, how timely,' donkey jacket said. 'I was explaining to this lady that she might want to take herself off to a more suitable

ACTRESS : PART III

environment or else wear clothing more suitable for this one.'

'This is a voluntary project. The same rules and regulations as for a more formal undertaking don't apply. No-one is liable,' Dick said. 'You're all liabilities in my opinion,' donkey jacket said.

'I'll go and fetch the gravel' Irene said. 'I don't want to cause any delays.'

'I represent the County Council,' donkey jacket said.

'ACTRESS has not been authorised by the Country Council...' Dick said.

'Exactly,' donkey jacket sounded triumphant. Irene had disappeared into the rain, into dark Mayhem Lane, in the direction of the High Street.

'...the project has been authorized by the municipality,' Dick finished.

'I'm going to report this now,' donkey jacket said. 'I expected better of you Dick. I'm disappointed.' He stalked off, his hardhat at a raucous angle. Dick watched him go and saw the lights of Irene's lorry blossom, pitching donkey jacket into sharp relief. The engine roared, then settled. The lights moved off.

* * * * *

Irene was at the yard. They were filling her up, the gravel pouring in, she felt as if she had a thousand eardrums.

'Where you spreading it today Irene?'

She gave the old goat a leer and shook her head, poked at her ear hole. The last time they met face to face he was with his missus in The Duck. Well-behaved and polite as you like. There was a bang on the side of the lorry.

'Pull yer knickers up Irene!'

She liked driving big vehicles. She drove back around to the Duck. She could use one of Phyllis' sandwiches.

* * * * *

In the back kitchen of the pub, around the table, the entire group working on the ACTRESS project sat eating their sandwiches and

drinking tea. Although the power was back, Phyllis had not put the lights on; the daylight was only just emerging. The candle light, she thought, was still nice and cosy. Someone rapped on the door.

Jackson peeked cautiously out of the bottom left-hand corner of the window.

‘It’s that that Council bloke in the donkey jacket again.’

‘Don’t let him in,’ Dick said.

‘Nobody let him in,’ Doc Jackson said.

‘Blow the candles out,’ Edwin said.

Irene looked at Edwin admiringly. ‘Smart!’ She got up and bent over the table and blew.

‘Are the sandwiches all right?’ Phyllis sounded tremulous.

‘They’re delicious darling,’ Irene said, ‘don’t you worry.’

The sandwiches stood in a ghostly pile in the centre of the table, a diminishing skyscraper of thick white slices. Looking at them, Phyllis hoped no-one would notice if she did not eat. Irene had forgotten to remove the crusts.

‘We have building permission from the Municipality,’ Dick said. At which point Edwin slapped the left breast of his jacket. His dentures gleamed.

‘The responsibility lies with the Municipality, not with us.’

‘It will only be a matter of time before the Municipality realise their administrative mistake and contact the County Council,’ Doc said.

‘Exactly,’ Dick said. ‘If the County Council refuse to recognise the Municipality’s decision...’

‘...knowing that lot they probably will,’ Edwin said.

‘Quite,’ Dick said.

‘In which case,’ Doc said, ‘they’ll put a stop to our activities double quick.’

The knocking on the door increased in volume and rapidity.

‘He’ll go away,’ Doc said. ‘What we have to do now is work very quickly and get the cable down and the trench filled ahead of schedule if possible. Once it’s done the Council probably won’t bother us anymore.’

‘A fait accompli,’ Irene said.

‘Well put,’ Doc said, sounding surprised.

ACTRESS : PART III

‘This must be kept orderly,’ Dick said. ‘There is no time to lose. If anyone else wants to express an opinion, please do so. And please speak out one at a time. Weigh your words carefully, we need to make a quick decision.’

He looked around.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ Phyllis said. Then raised her eyebrows.

No-one else spoke. Phyllis felt herself flush. She blessed the gloom. ‘Let’s get on with it,’ Dick said.

There were several slow, heavy thumps on the door.

‘He’s giving up,’ Doc said.

* * * * *

In Mayhem Lane donkey jacket watched the heads through the kitchen window as they bobbed and nodded and silently mouthed in the weak light. He felt he was unable to do anything more here. Time to move on. He turned his back and tramped up the lane towards the High Street. The JCB loomed at him through the curtain of drizzle. He heard a sharp cracking noise to his left, louder than a breaking twig. Curious, he stopped and turned to examine. He saw the spark in the shadow of the hole. He jumped down into the hole and bent over, tugging a penknife from his pocket. The street lamps that had been playing patterns on the slashing crystal rain went out. The freezer in the back kitchen of the pub fell silent.

* * * * *

The following day was bright and sunny as donkey jacket strolled down the now deserted Mayhem Lane. The trench had been filled in he saw. The cable laid. The grass would soon grow back. He smiled contentedly as he heard the local news. According to a Council spokesperson, in the course of their efforts to pinpoint the location of the fault in the power supply network the Mayhem Lane Maintenance Association project ACTRESS was to be investigated. Although many households had been without electricity for over twenty-four hours, they had every confidence that the situation would soon be back to normal.

Two minivans entered the lane, driving in fast from the direction of

the High Street. The vehicles stopped, one skidding on the mud covering a patch of the lane's surface. Their side doors screeched and slid open and discharged a total of some dozen men, dressed in high-visibility overalls and hardhats and carrying shovels and pick-axes.

A woman passing by donkey jacket in the opposite direction remarked that he looked pleased with himself. Smug, she thought.

A Chance to Win

JOHN WAYNE'S Cravat

EXCITING news for Star Souvenir collectors . . . this week PICTURE SHOW is offering the light brown scarf-cravat worn by that great screen favourite, John Wayne, in "The Barbarian and the Geisha" . . . and it could be yours for only a postcard ! The competition is easy to enter and there's nothing to pay.

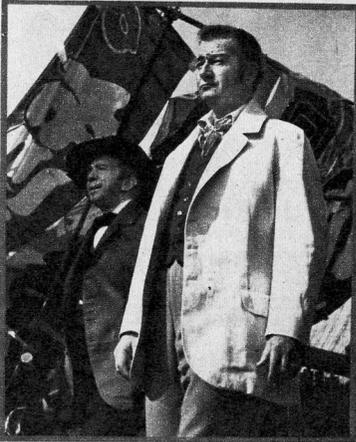
How to Enter : Simply make up a sentence of nine words about John Wayne to include all the letters in his name. Each word of the sentence must contain one of these "key" letters, remember, but they can be used in any order. Here is an example to show you how it's done :

JohN WaYne alWays givEs aN enjoyable,
hArd-Hitting perfOrmance.

This sentence must not be used as your entry, of course. Think up one of your own and write it clearly on a postcard. Add your full name and address, then post to :

**Star Souvenirs No. 371,
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to arrive not later than Friday, January 9th, the closing date.



Sam Jaffe and John Wayne in a scene from the 20th Century-Fox film, "The Barbarian and the Geisha." John Wayne is wearing the light brown scarf-cravat

John Wayne's cravat will be awarded to the sender of the best and most original entry received, and signed photographs of him sent to six runners-up. The Editor's decision is final !

EVERY NICE YOUNG HOMO ONANIST NANCYBOY WANKER'S
JERK-OFF ARSEHOLE

*Pliz send me cravat. I am immigrant from Puerto Rico who learn
Englis in Bronx but hop to sell to tru admirer. My fren help me rite
this.*

Picture Show 1959

COLIN AND DAVE DO THE BUSINESS

Brett Wilson

They say you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. Well, Dave was so stupid, he could not even fool some of the people some of the time. As for Colin, he regarded Dave as a genius. We need say no more about Colin.

One lunchtime, Dave was in the kitchen, trying to barbecue a homemade veggie-banger over a gas ring when the growler coughed out its guts like an exploding zeppelin. A five-foot jet of flame shot upward, propelling the veggie-banger in a vertical arc neatly ricocheting off the ceiling and landing on Dave's balding cranium with a splat.

"Can I help DH?" said Colin, peering over his newspaper (the Sun).

Dave let out a scream "Aaargh!!!" The veggie-banger was still sizzling and the colour of Dave's pate had begun to change to a deep vermilion. In a half skip, which seemed to twist his body into a pretzel shape, he bounded towards the sink and began to splash his head vigorously with water.

"There's a lot of steam in here." said Colin, eyebrows just slightly creased, a puzzled look on the rest of his face.

Dave sat down, holding a wet towel on his head with one hand. With the other he lifted up a copy of the Times. It was upside down. After some time Colin noticed this. "There's a rumour going around that you can't read."

"There's a rumour going around that you can read!"

Colin thought about this for a long time, but since he was getting absolutely nowhere with it he went back to his paper.

Dave put down The Times. "I think it's time we tidied the garden?"

There was a long pause.... "Why?"

Dave was completely stumped. Only yesterday someone had described the garden as the "Land that time forgot." But neither of them had understood the implication, and since they could not remember anything for more than twenty four hours anyway, there was only a slim chance that their wit might rescue the idea from the ravening jaws of premature senescence. Colin, who had an attention

span that lasted roughly as long as it takes a flea to jump from a dog's behind, had returned to his paper.

Dave was trying to think of what he could possibly put on his head to soothe the terrible burning sensation. "Manure." he said.

"Manure." said Colin. "I love manure. Where?"

"Out there." said Dave, pointing in the direction of the garden.

Colin was out of the door so rapidly that the leaves of his newspaper landed gracefully, cushioned by the vortex of retreating air. Dave quickly followed him.

After they had been walking for several seconds Colin asked "Do we have a map?" The house was no longer in sight. Ears of grass vied with Colin's mop of hair for dominance, while Dave's throbbing red pate bulldozed its way through bush and shrub like a prize truffle hunter.

"We need to find the mower." said Dave. "I think....that way." Head down to ankle level, bottom in the air, he swerved off to his left, followed by Colin. There was a dull thud.

Colin stopped. "What was that?"

There was a pause. Dave spoke slowly and quietly. "I've got my head stuck in the mower."

"Oh great. We've found the mower!"

"Never mind that!" said Dave, whose head was throbbing badly by now. "Just get me out!"

Now Colin, not known for his surgical precision, had manoeuvred a clumsy boot onto one of Dave's shoulders. "I think it's coming."

"Could you possibly remove it without ripping my ears off at the same time?"

It was some time later when they arrived at Withington surgery that Dave had to sit patiently for an hour with his unusual cranial adornment. A small boy sitting on the bench behind, waiting to have a splinter removed from a finger, kept asking his mother why that man had a lawn mower on his head.

"Shush dear." she would only say.

Colin suggested that they cover it with a large tarpaulin and a few cunningly slung ropes, but Dave only snarled. To make matters

COLIN AND DAVE DO THE BUSINESS

worse, they had to travel by bus and Dave had been made to pay extra for the lawnmower.

"Where does it say in your rules that you have to pay half fare for a lawnmower?" said Dave, exasperated.

"Section twenty, paragraph four, subsection 3B" said the driver, and he pulled out a well thumbed book from his lapel pocket. Colin watched with interest. "He's right you know!" he said.

"Just pay the man, will you?"

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, Colin was quietly wondering.... If you happened to get on the bus with a food processor up your arse, would have to pay for that too?

The specialist managed to remove it finally, and Dave was thankful for that, although it would take the rest of the day to get the WD40 out of his ears.

It wasn't long before they had both forgotten the incident, and with typically high spirits, contemplated their next foray into the garden. But before that, the weekend beckoned.

Every Saturday morning Colin and Dave would go on a walk through the village, not to do anything in particular, but just to break the tedium of the week-in week-out boredom and malaise of no useful work (since neither of them could master anything approaching a passable performance at a job interview). Strolling amiably down the high street, and just as Colin was about to say for the umpteenth time that he was hungry, and Dave was going to respond with a swift boot, Dave spotted something more worthy of his attentions.

"Look!" said Dave "A jumble sale."

About ten metres in front of them, a quite ludicrously large banner proclaimed the annual church jumble sale and fête. Unmissable.

"Where?" said Colin, looking directly at it, before being yanked away. Dave was marching purposefully towards the door, pulling Colin behind him, when he stopped dead in his tracks and pulled Colin to one side. He had spotted a posse of pensioners, a caboodle of ladies.

"Now look." he said, conspiratorially. "I've seen this situation before. If we don't get to the front of that group, we'll end up with nothing."

Colin's eyebrows kept going up and then down again as he failed lamentably to comprehend what Dave's fiendish plan might be.

"They're like a plague of locusts." continued Dave. "We'll be lucky if we come away with a couple of Dennis Wheatleys and a set of heated rollers." Dave scratched his bald scalp. Colin copied him in comradely fashion while wondering what Dave would do with a set of heated rollers.

"They're totally focused and completely ruthless. I bet they could demolish a row of healthy rugby backs if they had a mind to."

By now the ladies were lining up like the leading runners at the Grand National, each vying for a place near the front, separated from their booty by a line of tape and a rather officious beady eyed woman. The woman was scrutinising her pocket watch carefully, as if she was having trouble telling the time.

"We've got to act fast. Do what I do!" said Dave, vaulting towards the front of the crowd with murderous intent. Colin was about to say something, when he noticed that the action had moved on, and gamely decided to keep quiet and follow Dave's lead. Just then a whistle blew and the lady with the watch started to shout "I declare this...." but a bustle of jaunty pensioners had elbowed her out of the way and were speeding towards the first four stalls.

Dave had already managed to trip at least three people on his way to the bric-a-brac stall when he encountered a thicket of bodies four rows deep. But this did not deter him for a second. He deftly kneed two old ladies and then kidney punched a rather stout woman, dodging to the right as she fell to the left. Almost at his goal now, he pretended to reach above and forwards for some item and then ingeniously pulled back, throttling some poor creature until she started to "do the chicken".

WRITER'S NOTE: I would just like to point out that I have never witnessed nor taken part in conduct of this kind. "Do the chicken" incidentally, is the behaviour displayed by an individual who is so lacking in oxygen that their knees go all wobbly and they stagger off in a state of extreme vacancy and confusion. Now back to the story.

"Sorry about that." said Dave, moving greedily to the front of the crowd, as the now tangentially-bound pensioner lurched away.

Dave had reached his objective, and the crowd had closed ranks

COLIN AND DAVE DO THE BUSINESS

behind him, so the first Colin heard of the kerfuffle was a repeated clanking sound coming from the crowd. Just then the pack opened and Colin thought he caught sight of Dave being brained with a carriage clock by a red faced old lady with a large bosom. But then the crowd thickened once again and Colin thought he must have imagined it.

Around an hour later, when the furore was over and Colin had eaten his fill of oat flapjacks and coconut macaroons, he spotted Dave under the bric-a-brac stall drinking coffee. Colin walked up to the table and bent down to peer underneath.

"What are you doing under there?" Dave did not answer. He looked for a few seconds, blinked and went back to his coffee.

Later that afternoon, when they were on their way home (and Dave had recovered his good spirits), they happened to notice a football match being played in the park (which was pleasantly situated behind the gasometer). Observing that one team seemed to contain the most scrawny and motley bunch of individuals he had ever seen, Dave quickly offered his (and Colin's) services to the other (stronger) side. Just then, three surly looking men turned up and offered to join the first group.

"Ah, welcome!" said Dave to the apparent leader of the newcomers, and extended his hand. "What's your name?"

"Ah goes by the name of Dr Pain." he said, and took Dave's hand and squeezed it with enormous strength, sneering all the while. Dave turned his head to look at Colin who was standing nearby and tried to mouth the words "Dr Pain?" But despite a valiant attempt, no sound would come from his lips.

At the same time as Colin had begun to suspect that the side Dave had chosen might not be ambulatory for very much longer, Dave was trying to work out how to remove his paw from the fist that was slowly crushing all the little bones in his hand.

One of the opposing side shouted "OK. Let's start the game." and began punting the ball towards the centre circle. Dave was treated to an extra hard squeeze before his hand was released and "Dr Pain." ambled off towards his mates.

Now football is a game full of youthful spirits and best suited therefore to the young. But let me also say that it is suited to those of

youthful heart and naive enthusiasms. So it was that Dave (with youthful heart) kept performing fancy tricks with the ball (and losing it) every time it was passed to him, and Colin (with naive enthusiasm) continued running into space (leaving the defence wide open to attack) to receive the ball he never got. It was later in the game that Dave realised that a change of tactics was needed (to rectify the score of 13 - 0 against) and so had begun to knuckle down to a set of more aggressive and purposeful tactics. The three surly men, meanwhile, had been completely ineffectual as an attacking force, since a team game requires its members to be less neurotically disposed and also be able to kick a ball. However, they had managed to discourage most of the opposition attacks by the sheer magnitude of their belligerent presence.

It was when Dave received the ball near the halfway line that he determined to score or leave the park in shame. He bypassed most of the opposition midfield who had, for once, chased over to mark Colin who was frantically shouting for the ball and running in the wrong direction. Dave sidestepped the first surly man, pirouette by the second, and then, doing a very good impersonation of a football genius, dummied "Dr Pain" and kicked the ball into the top right hand corner of the net.

WRITER'S NOTE: I know what you are thinking. If Dave had been gifted with more presence of mind, he might have allowed "Dr Pain" to effect a successful tackle, instead of making him look like a three legged goat. Back to the story.

The action had continued now for a while, but there was a strange silence that had gripped the game, and everyone had noticed this, with the sole exception of Dave. He was so completely absorbed in his triumph that he did not realise the danger until a team-mate had passed him the ball gain. From the far left corner of the field he saw Dr Pain charging at him like a frenzied animal. He quickly passed the ball, in order to avoid the inevitable tackle, but to no avail. Pain just kept coming. Dave started to run very fast, off the pitch and towards the gasometer, his antagonist in hot pursuit. They say the chase went on all afternoon, until Dr Pain collapsed with exhaustion. But Dave kept on running and running.

MY LIFE IN PRINT
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Ray Blyde

Sed got a phone call from the hospital telling him that Elsie was ready to come home. They offered the loan of a wheelchair until such time as they could afford one of their own or with the continued physiotherapy they were able to help her walk again and so dispense with the wheelchair. Her speech was coming along nicely. She still had difficulty finishing a sentence. It was a bit like twenty questions. Sed could help her finish a sentence if he listened closely to what she was saying. Lloyd on the other hand rarely went to the hospital because of his fear of hospitals, so it would be interesting to see how he coped when she came home.

Sed managed to take the day off work to make all the necessary arrangements for her arrival. The hospital promised that she would be home by some time after ten o'clock, but it was nearer noon before the ambulance arrived. Sed thought she looked fitter than he had seen her for a long time, she had a rosy tinge to her complexion. He and Lloyd embraced her in turn.

"Welcome home mam!"

"Oh!" she said finally. "God bless us and save us." Lloyd put on his chef's hat and announced that he had made her a special meal. Her response was

"God bless us and save us."

"Is that all she can say?" hissed Lloyd.

"Well no, but if you'd gone to the hospital a bit more often you would have found out," responded Sed as they attempted to lift up the wheelchair over the front doorstep.

"No!" said Elsie. "I'll walk." They each supported an arm and gently eased her out of the wheelchair and watched spellbound as she walked through the doorway without a great deal of difficulty but for a slight limp no one would have thought that there was anything wrong with her. Lloyd folded up the wheelchair and placed it behind the front door. Elsie sat down and looked about her as if she was looking at the house for the first time.

"Cup of tea mam?" said Sed. She nodded her head.

"And what about an egg custard mam, I've made it specially for you," enthused Lloyd. The presentation on a tray with a napkin over his left forearm would have done justice to a five star hotel. Elsie refused the egg custard and shook her head disdainfully.

"Don't like it!" she said finally.

"But, it was your favourite," said a crestfallen Lloyd having gone to all the trouble of trying to make a good impression.

"Don't like it," she said again pushing the tray away from her.

"Ok," said Sed, "just have a cup of tea for now?" She ignored his offer and continued to look searchingly around the room. "What's up mam?" She shook her head,

"Nothing.. ..where's George?" Sed realised that her rehabilitation was going to take a little longer than he had anticipated. Sed sat on the arm of her chair and put his arm around her.

"Mam, dad's not here you know that, but we're going to do our best to look after you aren't we Lloyd?"

"We sure are mam, don't you worry." He sat on the other arm of the chair and they embraced each other. The tears welled up in her eyes as she held on to her boys. "Let's show her the bedroom, we've had it redecorated mam," said Lloyd enthusiastically. He lived in hopes that she would like it better than the egg custard.

"The stairs!" she said.

"The stairs mam, what about the stairs?" enquired Lloyd.

"I can't climb...the stairs"

"Don't let that worry you mam, we'll carry you up won't we Sed?" Before she could reply they both put an arm around her waist and the other arm under each thigh and whisked her at high speed up the wooden hill. The decor was a rich pink and the boys had polished the brass bedstead until they could see their faces in it. Elsie was noticeably stirred as she looked about her.

"Gwen washed the bedding mam," declared Sed.

"And I cleaned the carpet!" interjected Lloyd not to be left out. They both awaited her approval expectantly. She nodded, and a smile, the first one they'd seen for months illuminated her pale face.

"Its..lovely."

MY LIFE IN PRINT

"That photo of you and dad on the dressing table," said Lloyd, "we had it reframed because the old one was looking a bit tatty." She shook her head in disbelief as the tears stained her cheeks.

"You've changed...Lloyd.....for the better." Lloyd gave her a big hug.

"I was never really bad mam, misguided, but never bad." He winked at Sed, and Sed had to admit that his record since he came home was exemplary, he was like the pageboy who turned over a new leaf. He felt more optimistic about the family fortunes than he could remember.

As the days and weeks went by Elsie's recovery was nothing short of startling, she recovered the use of her limbs and soon dispensed with the wheelchair and was speaking as fluently as before the stroke. She resumed the responsibility for the household chores despite protests from the boys.

"I've got to do it sooner or later, it may as well be sooner!"

"Well," cautioned Sed. "Don't do too much too soon." She gazed at him with her grey eyes the whites of which where no longer rheumy, or as George used to say about her.

"She had clear eyes and money in the bank."

"We've had enough misery in this family, all that's going to change. I'm going out to do some shopping."

"Steady on mam, you can't go out on your own?"

"Why not?"

"Well, what if you have a fall?"

"Sed, don't be silly, I'll be perfectly all right," she assured him, removing her pinny and donning her hat and coat. "Let me take you on the motorbike?" She scorned the offer.

"I'm more likely to have an accident on that than on Shank's pony."

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