

THE CRAZY OIK
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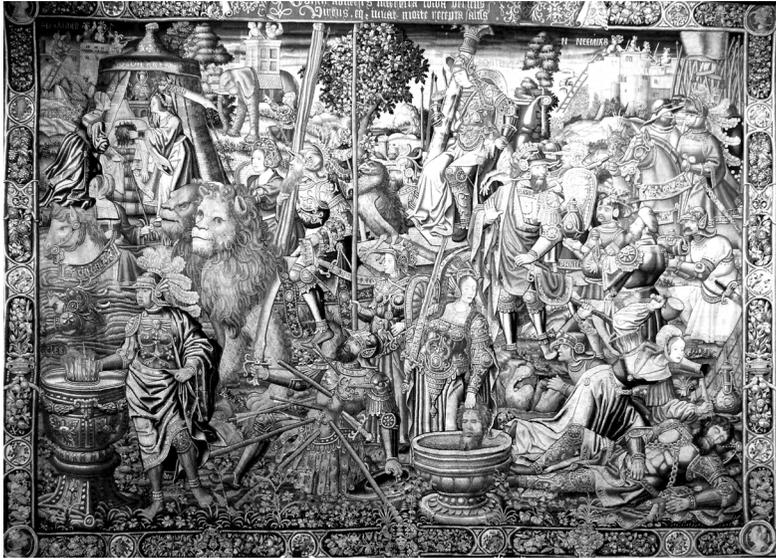
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Friday Evening W2 appeared in *the Transatlantic Review* No 9
Autumn 1965

Nothing to Write Home About is from Bob Wild's collection *Dogs of War*



Jael and Sisera

Room 2 - Medieval and Renaissance Art is a somewhat gloomy backwater of Liverpool's magnificent Walker Art Gallery. To get to it you have to pass various examples of old shite like Poussin's *Burying the Ashes of Phocian*, an early Rembrandt self portrait, Rubens' *Virgin and child with St Elizabeth*, several Veroneses and a Michaelangelo drawing. But once you're in that room you'll almost certainly be alone – and there's a bench in front of the masterpiece so you can gawp in comfort.

It is *The Triumph of Fortitude*, a Brussels tapestry of 1525. The thing that strikes you is how many of these icons of courage are women. Fortitudo is symbolically female and there's then there's Judith and Holofernes (top left), Chloelia, Cinope Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea another Queen of the Amazons and Thomyris Queen of the Massagetae (in the middle holding the head of Cyrus).

Top bitch must surely be Jael who is shown killing Sisera. Following a successful surprise attack by the Israelites in which 900 of his charioteers were defeated, Sisera escaped and sought refuge in the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. She gave him food and drink, but when he fell asleep, she drove a tent peg into his brain. (Judges 4:12-24).

On no account have a row with Jael if you're camping. "Yes dear, I quite agree. After that huge meal of baked beans it's only fair that I should sleep under a tree rather than share our double sleeping bag. Pity it's raining."

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EDITORIAL

A FRENCH OIK MASTERPIECE



The Ideal Palace

I want to live and die as a son of the country, to prove that there are geniuses and energetic men in my class also.

Ferdinand Cheval

An Italian professor of architecture, visiting Liverpool in the 1950s, asked “Where do you get all this black stone?” Later, confronted by the Albert Dock, he remarked “That’s what you get when you give a lot of money to someone with no imagination”. What would he have made of the Ideal Palace – an extravagant construct lashed up by a French oik with no money and too much imagination? Postman Cheval’s route was a 35 kilometre trek round his hometown of Hauterives just south of Lyon. One day he tripped over a stone which he thought weirdly interesting. He collected more stones and decided to build. For 33 years between 1879 and 1912 he worked alone and tirelessly on this mad project. The neighbours thought he was insane. He was the classic crazy oik – and, even rarer, a crazy oik architect.

The palace resembles Angkor Wat although Cheval could never have seen it, except perhaps on a stamp (Cambodia was a French colony). But it’s not Wat more What-not. Coincidentally the *Palais Idéal* was singled out for preservation by de Gaulle’s culture minister André Malraux in 1969. Malraux *had* seen Angkor Wat and was so impressed he pinched bits of it – but got caught. Breton and Picasso

were also fans. Today the site is a tourist hotspot getting millions of visitors.

Cheval's *mode d'emploi* seems to me essentially gothic. This surely is an oik characteristic – the piling up of interesting accretions without too much concern for the structure. Cathedrals are all much the same shape but it's the detail, particularly on the west front which stops you in your tracks. 'Gothic', and later 'Baroque', were originally terms of denigration implying a barbaric departure from classical perfection.

In literature too I'd put the two greatest novelists of the last hundred years – Proust and Joyce in the gothic camp. *Ulysses* may look well built but it's really a rag-bag of fascinating fragments (Lawrence called it old fag-ends and cabbage stumps) distributed almost arbitrarily in a handy set of pigeon holes. Likewise *a la recherche du temps perdu* just grew like knotweed with Proust gluing new bits into the text right up to his death till it quite burst the original plan. Neither were oiks but that mode suits the fanatical obsessive – ie your typical oik.

When I visited the palace a few weeks ago I was struck by how many of the punters seemed mentally defective – blank, long stares, twitching, hunching – I looked around for nurse Ratchett. A coach I suppose. I guess they felt endorsed. Yis, I thought, if the Crazy Oik ever had an AGM this'd be the place. The interior spaces are small and stygian and hold no more than six – perfect.

Ken Clay October 2010

FRIDAY EVENING — W.2.

John Royson

Across the winter tide at six o'clock. A gusher of office workers sprayed out of the tube station like crude oil being pumped through the orifice of a broken pipeline, pushing me into the roadway amongst the empty cigarette packets and clots of melting snow that were the gutter's Christmas decorations. By-passing a tumescent kerbside newspaper stand I rejoined the pavement via a zebra crossing. Audibly, slushy footsteps, rustling gift wrappers, and impatient taxi blarps mixed heterogeneously with damp exhaust fumes, were wafted over the wet macadam by fast moving traffic and flung against walls and shopfronts, bouncing like radio beams — reflected by rain-blotched concrete, hard glass, and enamelled advertising signs — back into the street, concentrating to a background noise that pressurised the brain.

Black winter city. Stone skeleton with daily transmuting flesh. Skin ripping itself from a putrid hand to support efficient capitalist hearts that throb with bilge which is recirculated back into the body, poisoning each limb to which the flesh returns.

An old man's body covered with scavenged rags bowed obsequiously from the gutter. Dirty water flowed round and onto his oddly matched shoes (laced with string); long hair and a beard radiated wildly from the shrivelled head, and on the cracked hand which he held out one and a half fingers were missing. He muttered to himself, slaving from the corner of his mouth, and nodded, agreeing with his own conversation. As I passed close by he tilted his head backwards, looking up into the sky with glazed venereal eyes and, pulling his wet lips into a bleeding-gum, broken-toothed leer, he jumped up and down in the slush like a delirious puppet, extending the deformed hand in an instinctive plea, forcing me to decide between the embarrassment of stopping to give him money and a vigilant conscience if I walked on. Motivated by fear of my own timidity (and an equal part of natural selfishness) I looked away towards the shop fronts, walked past him, and during the rest of the short journey was disturbed if my hand accidentally knocked against the cluster of silver coins in my pocket.

Passing the chain store chemist's I reciprocated a cold stare from the

FRIDAY EVENING W2

aluminium rimmed eyes of a shelf full of Japanese cameras, their prices branded in Day-Glo paint on rectangular foreheads and, straining to adjust the focal length of my own optical system, focussed at twice the distance into the shop interior, wondering which of the assorted women queuing at the dispensary counter waited for quinine, slippery elm, or mercury capsules; self styled abortionists quenching the city's uterine fires. And everywhere, people packed themselves together, every shop a macro-microcosm of the city — cramming in the delicatessen, a queue outside the bread shop, circulating in the supermarket, pressing to buy lies at the newsagent's, and bottlenecking at an A.B.C. confectionery where the door stupidly opens outwards into the slow lane of pedestrian traffic causing female eddy currents round a hairdresser's next door. The human saturation was especially deep since it was Friday night, when stockpiling for an indoor winter weekend began; two days of apparent isolation paradoxically spent within inches of the next door or upstairs recluse, separated by only the width of a peeling partition wall or ceiling.

I side-stepped to avoid a standpipe which had pushed its way out of the pavement, unfurling itself like an iron flower: water dripping biliously from the brass mouth of the faucet had frozen into a long glistening cone of vomit. On my left, a row of modern, modular-built shops, each with its vulgarly foursquare window. I was exposed to a linear synopsis of current fashion and consumer trends — leather clothes, transistorised pocket radios, automatic laundry, cartridged fountain pen refills, dagger shaped shoes, and was that a friend of mine who just passed? I looked over my shoulder — to see him doing the same, two shops away. I stopped. We stared inquiringly at each other through the peristaltic crowd, each unsure of the other's identity: standing like two posts hammered into the sand, waves breaking and rushing around us. Because of the distance between us and my mild astigmatism I was unable to recognise any detail on the horn-rimmed mahogany head that sporadically flashed into sight amongst the flickering contrast of predominantly Caucasian faces. After we had both looked away, hesitated, and looked round again (vacillating until the situation threatened to become ridiculous) he made the necessary decision and began to walk towards me. We converged outside a Greek cafe.

Immediately I realised that he was a complete stranger but for the sake of embarrassment maintained my own part in the fountain of nervous small-talk that he switched on and played over us. Showing

no lack of composure he began to direct a series of subtly disguised questions designed to reveal the nature of my private life. He looked straight at my face, transmitting warm bonhomie with an almost fixed smile, his gold capped teeth reflecting a harsh neon light in the cafe window. I was sceptical of his intentions, particularly since he made repeated confessions of his feeling of alienation as a foreigner in the city. When he began to flatter me with remarks exaggerating the attractiveness of my appearance I concluded that he was homosexual. Although in no way repulsed by his character or the predictable suggestions that he subsequently made I feared that given encouragement he might form an immediate attachment, restricting my personal freedom during the next few hours. Fortunately, during the conversation we had uncovered the coincidence of our separate tenancies in the same block of flats. Using this to my advantage I promised to look out for him during the next week and, before he could propose a definite rendezvous, extended my arm, exchanged a firm handshake, and left him.

My destination was a local Chinese restaurant. The weekly pay night luxury of a cooked meal, eaten from the comfort of a padded leather seat, and served by jocular waiters who surreptitiously practised prestidigitation whilst taking the order. Plastic slat blinds at the window functioned osmotically, furnishing a neon shaded prospect of rhythmical Nigerian torsos and Italian breasts, allowing their owners to identify, through the horizontal portcullis, the eyes of a lascivious diner who, masticating crisp noodles and fried pork, observed their attractive movements until they passed beyond the fretted screen of his vision.

A blind man on the zebra crossing had momentarily stopped the traffic. Swerving between chromium-plated fenders I crossed to the other (less crowded) side of the street. A corridor of yellow light spread from the windows of a department store, burnishing the pallored faces of pedestrians and late shoppers who grappled with candy-striped supermarket bags full of cellophane skinned food. In the slender shelter of an ornate Victorian street lamp, its three gas-burning globes like pumpkins impaled on a trident, I paused and lit a cigarette. A prostitute in strapless high heeled shoes marked time cautiously in the floodlit portico entrance to the store, shivering down to her emaciated calves in a tasteless summer-weight suit. She tiredly maintained a hang-dog vigilance against her uniformed enemy, two of whom (disguised as wet groundsheets) watched her

FRIDAY EVENING W2

from the dry-cleaner's doorway opposite, straining to charge her with the Christian law against exchanging a sexual service for the Queen's banknotes. Her desperately importuning client would be turned away, told to ignore his colossal lust, and expected to feel only paternal affection for loitering pneumatic schoolgirls who had changed into tights in the subway lavatory on their way home. Walking close to the store windows, one of my profiles was lightly grilled by closely pitched spot lamps, the other chilled with gusts of cold wind. I assessed the articles for sale — cheaply produced, over-priced junk. The only window which caused me to stop was one which displayed a new range of women's night dresses. Translucent nylon shifts hung loosely from nectarine shoulders, sensuously evoking scented regions underneath the folds, close to a skin as palpable as foam rubber. The realistic models were arranged in sexually provocative stances: placed with their slim legs suggestively set apart, or a pubis thrust forward almost pregnantly, inviting me to go closer and bury my face in her delicately curtained groin. At the end of the block a blast of frozen air battered against my exposed skin, making me gasp as if an ammonia cylinder had been let off into my face. The intersection was jammed with conflicting traffic.

A news vendeuse guarded her decorated orange box outside the frosted windows of an Edwardian saloon bar, cascading a handful of threepenny bits inside the sagging pouch of her Rexine apron like a masturbating marsupial. I bought a paper from her, glanced at the atomic headline, then posted it into the deep slitted pocket of my overcoat. Premonitory flakes of snow began to swirl in the street, blown into isolated vortices by an aggressive wind. With a gloved hand I stroked off the swiftly condensing hoar from my eyelashes, flicked my cigarette butt into the gutter, then pushed on the door that opened into a welcomed oriental warmth.

PAMPERS AND LEOTARDS

Marie Feargrieve

Reene looked at the swell of her stomach in the tight velvet jog bottoms. Having got over her disastrous liaison with Ismail and her nightmarish stay in Turkey with his family, she was on the lookout for some fun.

“Hell Ada look at this jelly belly”, she prodded the mound of flesh watching her fingers disappear into the wobbling fat.

“You have piled on the pounds Reene”. Ada wasn’t exactly in the pink either. She had found her granddaughter after twenty odd years, only to find that she was married to her grandson. She decided not to dwell on it. “Marshmallows come to mind.”

“Cheeky sod. You’re not behind the door. Hardly a twig yourself are you?”

“Don’t get touchy. We both need to get our fat arses in shape. Men are thin enough on the ground at the moment without us carrying all this lard around!”

“Yep for sure girl, action is needed”. Reene bent her elbow to down the last dregs of stout from her glass. “Pass the pork scratchings Ada”.

Two weeks later the two of them queued to join the aerobics class in the room above the labour club.

“God almighty, plenty of queer shapes here. That woman’s got no arse at all. More like a skinned rat on a crash diet”.

“Shurrup Ada, I’m nearly peeing myself.” Reene was trying hard to stifle a great swell of laughter gurgling up somewhere between chest and throat. They were soon stood in a row of women of all shapes, sizes and ages, towards the back of the room. A thirty something female stood at the front in lycra tights and a white tee shirt.

“Right ladies let’s get started. Only do what you can manage and if it hurts then stop at once. Any bad backs or hearts?” Nobody raised their hands so Mandy put on the music.

“We will start with a box step. Two steps forward, left right. Two steps back, right left. In time please. Listen to the music.”

PAMPERS AND LEOTARDS

Ada went left instead of right and vice versa as did Reene. They bumped into each other like dodgems at the fair. The pace was fast. After five minutes they were sweating. Hearts pounding, they felt distinctly ropey.

“You’ll get a second wind soon”, said Mandy smiling, walking between the rows inspecting her new recruits. Was she smiling with them or at them?

“The only wind I’m getting is the fart kind” said Reene.

“Your arse is playing a military tattoo. Can’t you hold it in?” wheezed Ada.

“Hold it in?! I’ll bloody explode like a barrage balloon.”

“Quiet ladies, save your breath.”

Mandy eyed the two women. A couple of beached whales had washed up on her shore. Oh well. She doubted they would last to the end of the hour! “Take two minutes”, she said, after thirty minutes of torture.

Ada and Reene wilted slowly, then collapsed onto the wooden floor. They were rarely taciturn, but neither felt the inclination to speak. The woman next to them, a reasonably fit looking sixty year old, eyed them pityingly.

“Do you smoke? I’ve never smoked. Don’t drink much either now. The odd sherry at Xmas maybe. And I’ve been veggie for the past ten years. I’ve exercised regularly all my life. This is just a gentle walk in the park for me.”

“Tell me then love” gasped Reene, “Why do you look as miserable as sin and as dried up as an old prune? Life’s for living you know! Quality not quantity. Bet you gave up sex too ten years ago didn’t you? Or are you still offering but nobody’s taking? Sod off you preaching cow.”

The woman recoiled at this verbal smack in the mouth. She got up and moved her lean frame forward a few rows, looking back at them with a shocked expression.

“Well done Reene. She’s got a face like a slapped arse now. What she needs is a good piece of red meat. You know what I mean? Bloody veggie.”

They rocked around holding their sides. God, it did you good to laugh and put that bint in her place at the same time. Forty minutes

later walking home, they decided they sure as hell wouldn't be going back.

“You know Ada we don't need that whingeing crew. We could start our own class up for women around our age. Make it fun though. Let's give it a go”.

They had a few simple posters printed:

EXERCISE FUN
FOR LADIES WITH TUMS
THE BIGGER THE BETTER
THE SERIOUSLY UNFIT WELCOME
VEGETARIANS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN

They put one up in The Dog and Ferret, one in the chippy, another in the launderette and local newsagent. They booked the back room of the pub for a fortnight later on the Thursday night.

Half seven saw Reene and Ada decked out in pink leggings, black tops and white trainers.

“We look like the bloody Roly Polys” shrieked Reene.

“You don't look *that* good”, laughed Fred the barman.

“Cheeky bleeder. Bring us a pint at half time and no leering at the tits and bums on the bounce in here”.

“God I'd have to be desperate!” retorted Fred.

“You are desperate you perv. You eyeball anything in a skirt. Sad sod” said Ada.

“Come in me lovelies”, boomed Reene, “Don't be shy. You're among friends here and hey look at the size of my bum. You lot are stick insects next to me”.

This sent a draught of ease wafting over the crowd. Faces relaxed and coats came off.

“Right now. No bloody boring aerobics here. We're going to put some music on and follow what we do.”

Strains of 'Let's twist again' filled the room and Ada and Reene, legs planted three feet apart, twisted and contorted, stretching their waists

PAMPERS AND LEOTARDS

this way and that. They even threw in a bit of belly dancing somewhere in-between for good measure. The women loved it. It brought back memories of the fifties and sixties, doing this very dance in the dance halls when they really did have twenty two inch waists.

“Bloody fantastic that”, said big Edna on the way out, “Good on yer. Keep it going. I’ll be back next week fer sure”.

She wafted out on a scent of sweat and gin, beaming and swaying into the night.

“Success or what Reene?”

“Yep it went great.”

“Bloody aerobics and piloters or whatever you call it, eat yer bloody heart out.”

They counted up the cash and headed for the pub, gasping for their nightly quota of Guinness.

After six weeks as expected, the class had lost no weight and were the same shape as the back end of a Routemaster bus and were certainly no fitter! They were one and all still hooked on a diet of grease, booze and fags. What they *had* gained was a massive slice of self esteem and *joie de vivre*. They all got on well apart from Serena, a huge Afro Caribbean woman and Alicija an equally gigantic Pole. Every week it was the clash of the titans.

“Get yer bleedin size nines of me foot”, roared Alicija, shoving Serena hard in the back and sending her sprawling.

“You are a bad ass mother. Out of my way!” Serena stood hands on hips.

“Now now you two. Cut it out” said Ada spotting the trouble and stopping the music. Serena had grabbed Alicija’s hair, a fat black fist planted either side of her head. She was shaking her like a Jack Russell with a rat.

“Bitch, bitch” screamed Alicija kicking hard between Serena’s fat wobbly thighs. By now they had each other round the waist and with fat butts in the air were pushing and shoving in a mighty tug of war. Ada and Reene grabbed each of them from behind tugging on their joggers and exposing one large white rump and an equally large black one, encased in huge knickers. The combatants were kicking, scratching and grabbing lumps of flesh and hair and skin to the

shouted encouragement of a by now thoroughly aroused crowd. The clothing lay on the dusty floor.

“Hey Ade what does this remind you of?” said Reene.

“A bloody cat fight.”

“No look again.”

Ada looked and smiled slowly, nodding at Reene. The class were now laying bets on the outcome of the battle.

“I put a fiver on Serena pulverising that useless cow in five minutes” said big Edna.

“Give over Alicija’s got her on the ropes now”, said Jackie. “Come on girl. Put the boot in!”

“Right girls come on. Put yer brass where yer mouth is”, said Reene, going round the class, “Who yer putting yer money on?”

“It’s a bloody good Sumo match is this” Ada’s eyes glinted at the mounting pile of cash.

“Better than a bloody exercise class.”

Hanks of hair, sweat and blood, oaths and cusses filled the room. The victor was Alicija. Serena had got too winded and tired. She lay vanquished, glistening, oily and black.

“Great fight “, bellowed big Edna, leading a round of applause.

“Hell’s bloody bells Reene” said Ada “Its female sumo wrestling from now on.

Get me Pampers on the blower. How do you look in a nappy?”

“Better than in a bloody leotard, that’s for sure”.

So in the grey northern streets of Manchester, female sumo bouts became the norm, surpassing line dancing in popularity. But the thrifty nature of these northern lasses never waned. They couldn’t discard their cowboy gear so it was nappies on the arses and Stetsons on the heads.

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From the Hachette Almanac 1937

THE GREEN SOCK

Ken Clay

It was like a scene change in the theatre – act one was a domestic interior - act two a fornicatorium. This happened most Thursdays. He went into the bathroom and removed a pack of cotton wool from the top of the cistern. Then he took the smaller toothbrush from a mug and a loofah from the edge of the bath. These he put in a bin-bag and stowed it in the back of a kitchen unit. In the bedroom he cleared a dressing table of bottles (moisturiser, skin-cleanser, hair conditioner etc) picked up a blouse from the back of a chair, then searched under the right-hand pillow and screwed up a crumpled, peach-coloured paper handkerchief. To these he added two back issues of *Cosmopolitan* from a bedside cabinet and locked the lot in a wardrobe drawer. He turned for a last scan and was jolted by a bright green ankle sock pulled over the brass bed post. It glowed like a territorial marker flag. He stuffed it in his pocket. Finally, the living room. He removed a silver-framed ten by eight of a fine-featured woman of forty, a small, decorated Greek vase and a box of expensive chocolates. These were stashed under the stairs behind the gasmeter. That'd be about it.

The candles were on the table, Miles Davis was on the stereo and the bolognese was on the stove by the time Sandra turned up. She was about twenty, slightly overweight, but firm and well-shaped, with a spiky mane of blonde hair. She draped a crinkly, black plastic mac - not dissimilar to a bin-bag with sleeves - over the banister.

‘And what’s my Ronnie got for me tonight?’ she asked putting her arms round his neck.

‘Hot meat!’ said Ron working the hand without the wooden spoon up inside her loose woolly jumper. ‘Oooh! I do feel a big soft thing!’

‘So do I!’ she said, giggling, pushing a thigh between his legs. She ran noisily up the stairs revealing to his upturned gaze two diamond patterned black stockings attached to a suspender belt. They were what she sold in the high-class store in town. Ron remembered when tights were considered sexy. He dodged briefly into the kitchen and then followed her up.

An hour later, glowing in the candlelight, they ate and discussed literature. James Joyce, for Ron, was a touchstone of quality. If you didn’t respond to his magical prose you were incapable of the aes-

THE GREEN SOCK

thetic frisson. The notion had come from his brother. Such sensitivity couldn't be taught or acquired; it could only be developed, in private with the text. This thought convinced him that Eng Lit Crit was bogus.

She wanted to do English at the university and he promised to do something about getting her in. Meantime he'd given her Joyce but she came back with irreverent assertions about *Ulysses'* lack of narrative pressure, wilful obscurity and ramshackle structure. It was, apparently, much inferior to Thomas Hardy. Ron listened. Twenty years ago he'd have kicked her arse off the premises for such blasphemies. Now it was the arse on the premises he felt most privileged to have, the intellectual contribution was of no consequence. He could even stretch himself to believe, fleetingly, there might be something in it, that aesthetic values were socially determined and that the twenty odd year gap between their ages was the problem.

'The bit that really did impress me though' she said, pausing to suck up an oily red slither with an indentation of cheeks that got him quite excited, 'was that last section where Molly Bloom just goes rambling on about getting bonked. It's brilliant! How come he understood women so well?'

'Stream of consciousness. Its just a trick - the power of technique. It's probably not true though. I guess it's what men like to think women think about. His wife stated categorically that he knew nothing about women. Do you think about getting bonked before you go to sleep?'

'Not normally'

'There you are then.' She swigged greedily at the wine before replying:

'But that's probably because I usually am getting bonked.' He tried to look wounded.

'How you toy with my emotions Sandra! Am I no more to you than an ephemeral screw?'

'Course not Ron luv. But you don't want me to turn into a nun do you?'

'Oh I don't know? Do they buy underwear at your place?'

'I have to fill in the time when I'm not seeing you - and it's then that I'm surrounded by temptation - especially in the disco at weekends. It'll be different when I'm living here with you, after all the obstacles have been got rid of. Then I'll be as monogamous as you are now.'

Do you know yet whether your loony brother will have to come and live with you?’

‘I’m seeing his psychiatrist next week, but manic-depressive paranoid schizophrenia can be a drawn out business.’

‘No chance of him staying with his mum I suppose?’

‘Not now she’s developed Alzheimer’s.’

‘Is that when you get big horrible scabs all over your body?’

‘No Sandra, that’s psoriasis. Alzheimer’s begins with nominal aphasia, that’s when you forget the names of things, and this could be particularly aggravating for Ralph’s present complex because he might imagine he’s being deliberately obstructed. He might say, for instance, where have you put the second draft of my historical novel mother dear? and she’ll reply, racking her diseased cortex, Oh its in the thingy. The thingy? Ralph will ask, edgy like - and then she’ll get exasperated and say Course stupid! The Whatsit! Naturally there’s a danger Ralph will finish up beating her brains out with the poker believing she’s in cahoots with the authorities. That’s just the first stage of Alzheimer’s. You catch it from teapots apparently.’ Sandra had stopped eating during this exposition. Now she looked suspicious.

‘Teapots?!’

‘Aluminium is implicated. Brain slices of Alzheimer’s victims show big deposits. Boiling soft water leaches it out of teapots.’ She brightened suddenly.

‘He might like my flatmate Angela. If he’s as dishy as you Ron she’ll go for him. He could move in with her when I move in here!’

‘Ralph is much older than me Sandra. The studious type. Even I, his brother, remain somewhat in ignorance about his proclivities. No doubt Angela is a healthy, young girl around your age with insatiable, not to say perverted, appetites who would demand extended and vigorous intercourse every night, not to mention lunchtimes and the odd bonk when there was a lull on TV. I fear it might be too much for poor old Ralph.’

‘Just how ancient is this decrepit old fart?’

‘Forty eight.’

‘God that’s old! My dad’s not forty eight! But then again, Paul Newman’s sixty. Let’s give it a try Ron. Get him round here and we’ll have a foursome with Angela - she likes brainy types.’

‘I’ll think about it - perhaps we could have a threesome so I can assess this young lady’s suitability.’

THE GREEN SOCK

While Ron loaded the dishwasher she flopped on the couch and fiddled with the video.

‘Get me a can of Stella Ron.’ she bellowed, ‘I might just get totally ratted.’

‘Beer after Hautes Cotes de Beaune Sandra?’ said Ron. ‘I’m sure this bears little resemblance to the home life of our own dear Queen.’

The opening chords of the Eastenders wafted into the kitchen. He returned with a chilled can and a glass of Armagnac.

‘No shortage of narrative and plot here I bet.’

‘And plenty of acute social observation too’ she added defensively.

‘D’you think so?’ He put his arm round her and she nuzzled into his side.

‘Course! Don’t you?’

‘You really believe that faggots, blacks, pakis, skinheads and straights all go cheerfully to the same boozier, swap matey cockney sparrer type observations and help each other out in times of need?’

‘It seems true.’

‘Technique; it’s a trick. Just look at that black geezer in the beret pretending he’s a hardened barfly. Its obvious he’s never thrown a dart before in his life.’

What was it about Sandra’s body which never failed to ignite his lust? Proportion, texture, tone, smell? Were these qualities independent of face, or were good looks an amplifier? Could it be analysed and codified and possibly made the subject of a monograph? Could he get a grant for it? What sort of kids would turn up for a course on it? These were the kind of things he thought about till the aerial view of the Thames appeared once more. When it suddenly glitched into a shot of Michael Ignatieff listening to Malcolm Bradbury he turned down the sound. Clothes got strewn around in the gloom. At one o’clock he took her home in his car. When he got back he reversed the earlier procedure. Act three - the fornicatorium becomes once more a domestic interior. He finally fell into bed half drunk.

The rigmarole on Friday evenings was less complicated. The jug was a present from Benidorm, one of those long spouted phallic objects in a wicker cage. The mug had a picture of Superman on it. They both went in a cupboard in the garage.

At six Erica turned up. She lugged a suitcase from the back of her Escort and let herself in with a key.

‘I’m fucking drained!’ she said, ‘Five C! Thick little bastards!’

'I'll get you a drink' said Ron, 'We'll eat out.' She loaded her things into the wardrobe.

'What have you been up to?' She took the blouse off the chair and put it on a hangar.

'My day's been a bit fraught too. The book I needed for my paper wasn't in the library and while I was in there I bumped into that boring old turd Birchall, in front of the Bs too. He insisted on inviting us over next weekend.'

'The meat-storage depot?! This weather?!'

'Yes, I pointedly asked if his boiler had been fixed and he said no but that he's got a pile of woollens from the Oxfam shop which he keeps in a chest in the dining room.'

'Is he clinically mad d'you think?'

'Not by the standards of the American Studies department. He's just very mean. He says Spears might go.'

'Well that sounds better. Speaking of loonies how's Ralph?'

'Disinclined to return to work. It could be a long job. Mother's getting a bit agitated, she'd feel better if he had a broken leg.'

'How long will he get paid?'

'Three months.'

'What does he do all day?'

'Well he reads the *Guardian* in bed till ten, then eats a large breakfast, goes for a long walk with his notebook, retires after lunch into the front room to write for three or four hours, and after tea he reads or listens to the radio.'

'Completely barmy obviously.'

'Not unlike the daily routine of Immanuel Kant.'

'Kant listened to the radio?'

They sat sipping Harvey Wallbangers while watching the news on Channel 4. Erica suddenly said, apropos of nothing:

'What happened to my green sock?' Her tone suggested there was more at stake than a sock.

'Sock?'

'I left it on the bedpost. Now it's not there.'

'Green sock?' She grew more menacing.

'Why would some fucker want to remove it from the bedroom?'

'Someone?'

'Some fucker! Like *you* maybe?'

'I've never seen a green sock.'

'So you've not moved it then?'

THE GREEN SOCK

‘Of course not.’

‘Then how come’ she said deliberately, producing the sock in her right hand, ‘I find the fucking thing under this cushion?’ Ron looked blank and then puzzled. ‘What the fuck is going on around here Ron?’

‘The cleaning woman!’ said Ron.

‘You haven’t got one. Mr. Harrison packed in six months ago with arthritis’.

‘It’s a new one. Started this week.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Eliot.’

‘George or T.S?’

‘You doubt her existence?’

‘Just look at the place! It’s a fucking shitheap, as usual. What the fuck’s this mythical Mrs Eliot been doing here on her vital first-impression-creating visit?’

‘Not much for starters. We just discussed terms and times. I showed her round the place.’

‘And she moved the sock while you weren’t looking?’

‘This is crazy! It’s paranoia! What’s so special about a green sock?’

For the restaurant Ron did no more than change his battered old trainers for a slightly less battered pair and put on a crumpled leather bomber jacket. Erica took more time. She emerged looking bur-nished and succulent with a mellow glow reminiscent of a perfect September afternoon. She’d given up on the sartorial education of Ron but still tried to endorse good behaviour when she saw it. The unpleasant sock seemed to have been forgotten.

‘Your hair looks very nice Ron. It has done for a few months now. It’s thoughtful of you to wash it for me when I come over at the weekend.’

‘I try to please’ he said.

‘Oh, and tell your Mrs. Eliot to give me ring. I could use a good cleaning lady myself.’

On Sunday there was a marking session in the morning with Ron working steadily through a pile of O.U. papers while Erica spattered red biro over fifth form essays. After a light lunch they usually went for what they called a lie down.

It was a long standing liaison in which both had become utterly familiar with the other's peculiarities. His interest in her body waxed and waned depending on whether or not he had another girlfriend in the background. When he did, as now, his passion increased; but when he was monogamous he became indifferent and mechanical. Even allowing for these fluctuations, however, the overall tendency was inevitably, entropically downwards.

He sometimes imagined Sandra when he was in bed with Erica, and, oddly, found himself imagining Erica when he was in bed with Sandra. Today he summoned up the unknown Angela. At other times he would find himself developing plots for his short stories or themes for new courses. It was less often now that a precipitous climax needed to be delayed by the be-whiskered, wrinkled face of Ho Chi Mhin or Harold Wilson in his Gannex.

He rolled on his back and said, as usual:

'Post coitum omne animale thirsty est.'

'Yes, a nice cool Macon Blanc would be welcome.'

'I'll nip out.' He got up and dressed. A few seconds later he was on his bike heading for the off licence. When he got back Erica was sitting in the study in his black swivel chair. There was an atmosphere.

'Just stuck it in the freezer for a few minutes. What are you doing in here?' Suddenly he noticed she was holding his green backed A4 journal.

'How did you get hold of that? The drawer was locked.'

'Locked drawers Ron! What a giveaway! I suspected something like this. I pulled out the drawer underneath and wangled my hand round the back.'

'It's an invasion of privacy!'

'And very interesting reading it is too.' She held up the volume and read *'My intense, insatiable desire for Sandra's beautiful body continues to increase and proliferate. Not only do I marvel at the texture and tone of her sumptuous young flesh, I also continue to be astonished by the variety and energy of her sexual callisthenics. I must agree with Spears that even the best preserved old leather cannot hope to compete...'*

'It's not what it seems.'

'I fucking knew there was something going on. And that fucking sock business drove me to get to the bottom of it. You two-timing arsehole! I'll turn a blind eye to the odd tart or the one-night floosie - but this!' she riffled the pages, 'has been going on for months! How

THE GREEN SOCK

could you do it? You've ruined a ten year relationship just because you can't keep your dick in your pants! A fucking twenty year old salesgirl from Kendal's! How long do you think that'll last? What can you possibly see in her apart from split beaver? I bet you don't talk to her about James Joyce afterwards!

'But it's a fiction! Notes for a first person novel! Christ, what would a twenty year old see in me?'

'God Ron you're pathetic! I'm not even going to argue. I'm getting out of your house and out of your life. You're a cuntstruck basket-case as far as I am concerned! It's over. You can have as many fucking trollops as you like from now on and fuck yourself stupid. But just try and find one that will give you what I have! Just try!' She threw the book in his face and banged into the bedroom to pack her things. Half an hour later she was gone.

Ron read the journal again while drinking the Macon Blanc. 'Christ!' he thought, 'it's a good thing she never read more than the last half dozen pages!' Would there be a fourth act? He was pretty sure there would – she hadn't taken her silver framed photograph. Anyway, just to be on the safe side, he added "Chapter XVII" to the top of page one.

SANDRA PULLS IT OFF

Stefan Jaruzelski

Wislawas Escort Agency
Greek Street
Soho
London W1

Esteemed Editor Ken

I write to thank you for hospital during my recent visit and for instructive tour of tombs. I ask for George Formby CD in Soho HMV shop where uncultured lout larf at this request. When I ask for Beethoven Op 131 he larf even louder. However I take up your suggestion for reading of Oik classics and am much exercised by Sillitoe, Callow, Barstow, Hines, Common, Chaplin, Waterhouse etc. I try to absorb the Oik experience to engage your readers more authentically since they mostly old fart oiks themselves in search of lost time (as the master has written).

Since you mention lady readers and how few you have because of filth, smut and general obscenity and how you seek to enlarge the circles of your lady readers (but why this mission statement accompanied by a leer?) I must tell that Evangeline, one of Wislawas hard-hearted hos, did pick up one of my Oiks and after only a few minutes retched and threw down the volume as if it were a dog turd or toad. Hence I also acquaint myself with lady literature by reading many Molls and Baboons books. These are greatly prized by the resident hos who all aspire to escape Soho squalor on arm of rich git (or other proffered member).

You have in past praised my pasties. This remark much puzzled me since on my visit I was instructed to bring fish an chips from chipper. Only later, after consultation with fellow Soho plumber who has complete Proust in van do I realize you mean *pastiche*. You say my pastiches of WE Johns, Eastenders and Braddock author are top notch and much larfed at by readership (but not of course ladies who retch etc..) I therefore try to merge Oik plight of lady attached to monster while yearning for distant ideal of George Clooney hero (although I read that this lothario prefers the Vietnamese pot-bellied

SANDRA PULLS IT OFF

pig). The oik lout is redeemed and reformed after lady goes back to mum. A common trope much used by Dostoevski I believe.

I trust you will find space for this in next Oik and that lady readers will subscribe in large quantities and perhaps leave it open at the page so that recalcitrant spouses will take the hint.

Yrs

Stefan

Sandra Pulls It Off

Brian came home late from the pub and shouted loudly for his steak pie and chips. His gut bulged out of his tee shirt and his jeans were damp and smelled of lager. Sandra put down her Romance magazine and told him the dog had eaten it. He kicked the poor little Rottweiler and clipped Sandra round the ear shouting

"Stupid c**t".

"Who are you calling a clot?" she expostulated. Whereupon Brian threw her on the rug and had violent intercourse lasting twelve seconds.

"Nearly a record" burped Bri whose ambition was to do it in less time than it takes Usain Bolt to run 100 metres. He got up, adjusted his pants and vomited into the budgie's cage.

"I can see better now" he said rummaging under the TV "whattle it be then? Man Utd v West Ham or Car Wash III?" He settled into his chair

"Gerruzapizzaorabeanzontoastchuck" he pouted roguishly scratching his crotch. The phone rang and Sandra heard a female voice say:

"Is your Brian there? The toerag said he'd give us a lift home from the pub."

When he was replete Sandra dared to complain.

"You scruffy, c**t Bri! I've had enough! I'm going to me mum's!" "Whoeryoucallinacelt?" muttered Bri before falling asleep.

Sandra had been at her mum's only a week when there was a knock on the door. Outside was a slim, tanned bloke in a white shirt and tie who had just jumped off a new, blue, ten speed Harry Quinn racing bike.

"But where's your pants Bri?" she said when she recognised him.

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"Darling" he ejaculated "I've brung you these carnations coz its exactly 1000 days since we first met. And I thought you'd like this leather bound first edition of Madame Bovary with Flaubert's inscription to Sainte Beuve wot I bought in Paris after selling all me videos."

"Ooooh Bri!" she swooned.

"Whosthatdafte**tatthedoowivnokeksonSandra?!" said her mum.

"Hey Ma" said Bri "Cyst is not a nice thing to call a reformed son-in-law now is it?"

"It's you!?" she yelled incredulously.

"Cop for this ten kilo box of Milk Tray Mum" he said thrusting his half-naked body into the hall "An put this Chateau Meursault 1964 in the freezer for ten minutes thirty seconds - we'll have it with the lobster thermidor I did earlier an brought over on me bike".

Nine months later Rupert was born.



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WADER AND BADER

Nigel Ford

The sun glared through its sad blue flimsy at the tanned, cancer pitted skulls of two bald men who cavorted. The beach on which one man wriggled his toes was pure white.

The other man swam and splashed in the Ocean, which stretched unhindered to all points of the compass and glittered as if made of diamond chips from the great gem of the heavens.

"Hi there Wader!" shouted Bader, "Come on in, the water's fine."

"Please?"

"I said come on in, the water's fine."

"To you maybe. Me, I don't care to wallow and bask in my own shit!"

"The sand!" shouted Bader, "Those pure white particles in which you are wriggling your toes. That is your own shit, Wader. Not to mention the remains of your ancestors."

"What you got in there you creep, a hot-wired submarine?" wondered Wader.

"Please?" said Bader.

"What have you got hidden beneath the surface?" asked Wader, suspicious.

"Only me, my kind gentleman! Bollock-naked I promise," insisted Bader.

"You and your mechanical toys," Wader is lugubrious in his mistrust; there is a doleful slump to his shoulder line.

"If you come in now," said Bader, sensing that Wader's resistance was crumbling, "I will buy you an ice-cream."

Wader tentatively placed a foot in the water.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed and withdrew it swiftly.

The water beneath Bader's belly was contrarily blue, as if he was not bollock-naked, as if he was a liar! But there were no crabs to bite his toes in admonition.

The sea beyond Bader planed out into a sheet of turquoise metal while the sky hooped over their heads in ultra-marine, faded down to the horizon in burnished silver.

WADER AND BADER

There was an unplanetary stillness in the air as if Death had long vacated this dull and tranquil place and zoomed off into space in search of more worthy playmates.

"You are a coward Wader!" shouted Bader.

"You are a liar Bader," retorted Wader. "You are not at all bollock-naked. You are wearing awful blue glistening polyester bathing trunks. Over the top of which your horrible and disgusting white belly slops!"

"Why should we play this game of howling insults at each other?" shouted Bader, "What's the point?"

"What else is there?" wondered Wader.

"You could come in for a swim," said Bader. "The water's lovely I assure you."

"Don't believe in assurances," Wader said. "Look what happened last time! Anyway," continued Wader, "it doesn't look particularly appetizing does it?"

"Got my own segment," Bader said. "Join me!"

"What do you do," taunted Wader, "make fart bubbles in the interest of development?"

"You could borrow as many ice creams as you want," offered Bader, "Your credit's good. I'll send you a delayed invoice."

"At two points below," insisted Wader.

"You're a hard man to please Wader," said Bader, "but all right."

Wader wondered if there was life out there where Bader was. He was afraid of life. Life made him tremulous. Life was unpredictable and dangerous. Wader and his ancestors made a point of killing all the life they could find as they went along. Things were not one hundred percent satisfactory, but you could walk the streets of San Sebastian without treading on a lethal snake. Or those of Nairobi without being trampled to death by a myopic rhinoceros.

The future, thought Wader, seemed promising. A huge expanse of nothing at all, in which man could play God. What monsters, wondered Wader in a moment of weakness, will we create?

But then he pushed such disloyal thoughts from his mind. The world would be full of delightfully civilised creatures. With a perfect and

logical ecological balance.

“I want one free ice-cream,” said Wader, “to come in and wade a little. After which I want an option on 20 more at 2 points below.”

“Are you coming for a bathe Wader?” asked Bader. “Are you ever going to stop beating about the bush?”

“I have not agreed to bathing,” said Wader, “Wading only.”

“You’ve got brass balls Wader,” Bader said, “but all right.”

Wader felt good about having brass balls. The water, he felt, didn’t look too shitty perhaps really. The sun warmed agreeably. Although the top of his head he noticed, itched. As did the tips of his elbows these days.

The water was alternating layers of emerald and turquoise emphasized and sparkled by chips off the sky.

Wader did not care for bathing. It was not the fear of sharks nibbling off a leg. There had been none around for years.

Nor was the sea, as Bader had pointed out, any shittier than the land or the air. No, it was the total commitment to bathing at which Wader jibbed.

“After all,” called Bader, approaching cautiously as he might some timid wild animal. “We all live amongst small piles of excreta and huge mounds of dead bodies. Both animal and vegetable. Not to mention myriad mineral dung heaps. It is the rotting process or as we now say, the biodegradable process which is of vital importance. You and I Mr Wader between us could produce a unique solution to this problem.”

Initiative raises its hoary head admitted Wader to himself. Mentally he raised his arms palm out in horror and yelled go away, leave me alone! I love the smell of sun lotion. I don’t want to go in there and wash it all off.

“Come on in you fat cowardly slob,” called Bader. “Wader’s a yellow chicken jely-o,” he taunted.

Stung, Wader entered the water carefully. His hairy legs prickled. Perhaps it did not feel so slimy after all. And it certainly seemed to wash more easily around his legs than it had done in his childhood. He stood in water up to his knees. Not liking to think what stuff on the bottom of his toes were curling into.

WADER AND BADER

“We remember things as we want them to be Wader,” Bader said, as if he could read his mind. “But they never were and up until now they never are.”

“Is this business in the theoretical stages?” wondered Wader. He washed some water over his body. Turning the hairs on his chest and arms into mucky grey streaks. It was warm the water. Squeaky clean and clear. He splashed merrily about and had a time. “Or do you have some practical proof of your pudding?”

“Here is your ice-cream Wader,” said Bader, “and this you see is the sea which is not as dirtful as it used to be.”

“Nice and clean and dead,” Wader agreed as he took his ice-cream. “Ideal for windsurfing.”

“You eat that,” Bader said. “Enjoy and I’ll tell you all about the scheme of things.”

“But Bader,” Wader protested munching on the cornet. “I am no animal you know. I disappeared into my mind a long time ago.”

“That’s exactly it!” cried Bader in triumph. “You have hit the very spot. We shall have to go right over the top!”

“What spot you creep?” Wader asked, gaily splashing water over Bader.

“Man is not part of nature!” Bader cried, swimming off powerfully. “Man has always loathed nature. Man has always regarded nature as uncomfortable.”

“I see what you mean,” said Wader standing lonely in the shallows. “Flies and things.”

“Wasps and stings,” yelled Bader merrily. “Heffalumps and such. Snakes and tigers, things that suck.”

“Sharks and piranha and unmentionable horrors that go pop in the night,” Wader called. “Mosquitoes and bugs and other thugs.”

“Spooky forests with trolls. Dangerous monsters of the deep. Nasty mountains that get in the way. Man and nature in general strife,” Bader trumpeted.

“Praps they don’t like us much either,” Wader said now prepared to go liberal since Bader has voiced similar thoughts. “Praps we’re the biggest pests of all,” said Wader.

“Exactly what we are,” Bader said treading water and purring, “the biggest pests of all. And the thing is we can win! After all, what other animal can fly and swim and run and walk,” Bader brayed.

Wader whinnied:

“And there’s not an awful lot of them that talk.”

“No one’s going to miss them Wader,” Bader said, “those green freaks won’t be here. Long-live the three piece suit!”

“Nor for that matter,” Wader said thoughtfully, “is there much stiff competition in space.”

“Oh Lord!” Bader pealed, “behold the human race!”

“Over the top I see,” Wader stood stock still in the water and sucked at his thumb. He looked pensive. “Extermination.”

“Right on,” Bader said. “Extermination, genocide, liquidation, purification. Wipe the buggers out!”

“And let there be no more wilderness to go into,” Wader said.

“You’re a perceptive man Wader,” Bader said. “The planet becomes our garden. Filled with tame animals and cultivated plants.”

“Just think,” said Wader with a giggle. “I can sit on the grass without getting my bottom pinched.”

“Just a pinch and a punch for the first of the month,” said Bader laughing.

“We could abolish that too,” said Wader with a chortle. “But what about evolution. The balance of nature. All that?”

“That’s the beauty of such a plan,” Bader said turning onto his back and swimming lazily, facing the sky wearing a beatific expression. “If we abolish nature as such we won’t need a balance will we.”

“You mean if we provide our own nature instead,” Wader said, “then that will naturally balance itself?”

“Well put Wader,” Bader said. “Well put and well met.”

“Well I don’t know,” Wader said doubtfully. “If we do that what on Earth can we expect?”

“That’s the charm of this strategy old chap,” Bader said. “It creates its own laws and balances. Just like any other nature, it is to us completely unpredictable.”

Wader’s face cleared. “You mean we won’t have a clue what’s going on. Just like before?”

WADER AND BADER

“That’s it exactly old chap,” snickered Bader. “Our sublime ignorance will remain totally undisturbed.”

“In that case,” said Wader, all doubts swept away. “I’m with you all the way.”

“Life will become business class,” Bader said. “The snap of briefcase fasteners will be heard everywhere.”

“I shall have a black leather briefcase with a tender lining,” said Wader.

“Oh God it turns me on!” groaned Bader.

“The end of spontaneity!” Wader cried with glee. “Not a ferocious bug to blight my sight!”

“Bees without stings,” agreed Bader, “and absolutely no wasps or hornets.”

“Life,” Wader said dreamily and biting into his, “becomes a great big round of ice-cream cornets.”

OIKU

David Birstwistle

Not Fit for Man Nor Beast.

It was the worst he could remember. The wind came from the North East, howled down the chimneystack, found cracks in the doors and blew as an icy draught round his shoulders. He sat there in vests, sweater, fleece, a duvet round him and a hat over his ears. Outside the rain lashed in sheets and turned to sleet. There was a knock on the door. Baseball cap on back to front, pebbled glasses steaming and the rain dripping past his bicycle clips it was Darryl Dilnutt: "Before he died, did your uncle Ernest say owt about a set of drain rods?"



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AN ITALIAN JOURNEY

Ed Hernandez

Dear Audrey

We're movin slowly up thro Italy and right now we're in Naples. Met a sweet little ragazza called Sofia Scicolone who wants to be in films. She's a funny shaped kid who bulges out too much in all the wrong places. Ten years from now she'll be grotesque. I told her she ain't got no chance in the movies. I prefer girls like you Audrey with slim hips and a nice flat chest and most of my buddies here in the unit do too. We went down to the beach with her brother Benito. He's a really good lookin dude – reminds me of that statue in Florence. Anyhow when we git to the beach I say "How's about a bit o' wrastlin Benito?" an I strips down to my shorts. Course poor old Benito don't have no shorts being kinda poor an that. So I say "What the hell! Let's go Greek!" an soon were wrastlin nekkid on the sand. Later when he bent over to pick up a crab I grabbed him from behind. How he hollered! But talkin of pickin up crabs I have to tell you Audrey I got a dose of gonner... gonorheeo...the clap from a toilet seat. These Ities are nowhere near as clean as we are back in the US. I'm sure I'll be OK fer our wedding when I git back and ahm sure looking forward to our first night and the joys of connubial bliss – whatever they are.

Before we got to Naples we liberated San Giovanni Rotondo a big buildin full of monks. It was there I met Padre Pio. His cell was quite luxurious with a great wine rack and lots of biscuits and other edibles. After I'd bin in there a few minutes I found I was getting sympathetic vibes. "Hey Pio!" I said "Wanna wrastle fer a while while we're waitin fer room service?" Pio was a bit wary at first but finally agrees. "Jest don't touch ma stigmata" he says. I weren't too sure jest what that was. Every nation it seems has a different word for the old dong. "Stig what?" I say. Then he lifts up his cassock an shows me a hole in his side. "OK Pio – let's git to it!" So we wrastle fer a while. Old Pio was gittin kindda excited – said it was the best bout he'd had since Satan visited a week earlier. He certainly got the better of me but I pointed out he had an unfair advantage – the gloves. He said he couldn't take em off coz of the stigmata. Before I

THE CRAZY OIK ISSUE 7

left he gave me a list of cardinals who liked wrestlin and told me to look em up when we got to Rome – and maybe even the Pope'd be up fer a bout.

On our way up the peninsular I'm out in front alone in a forested area when I come across this SS Captain – a haupsturm somethin or other. He was just wanderin about. I told him I thought his uniform looked real cute and he said so did mine. “How about a wrestle Kurt?” I said. “Yep” he replied “I was thinkin just the same thing maself” So we stripped down to our shorts – his was black – looked really cool. “Hey Kurt! How about we swap shorts before the bout?” “The hell with shorts!” says Kurt “Let's go Greek!” and so we did and wrestled nekkid on the forest floor. Kurt sometimes got carried away and at one point he lodged his Luger up my anus.

Later as we lay exhausted on the carpet of pine needles Kurt confessed that he wanted to desert an come to the US when all this was over. “San Francisco is just the place for you Kurt. I'll help you all I can – but first we got to get rid of that uniform” I kept the black shorts for mahself and the SS dagger – many of the guys have these as souvenirs – but the uniform had to go so I gave it to poor little Benito Scicolone and got Kurt togged up in Benito's outfit. Kurt then made a further confession that he'd been a bit mean to some Jewish folks back in Warsaw. “Don't you worry about that Kurt” I said “I never cared much for Yids maself after runnin into a few back in the LA garment district.” He went on to say that there was a whole lot of meanness goin on towards the Jews in Poland. Mostly by brutal Gestapo renegades and that the Fuhrer and Himmler didn't have anythin to do with it – didn't even know about it mostly. I told the Colonel that Kurt was an Itie partisan and spoke fluent Italian, English an German. The colonel made him battalion translator and asked if it'd be OK if he sat in my Jeep and bunked up in ma tent. “Yes Sir!!” I affirmed. So Audrey I'm figurin on bringin Kurt back to LA an havin him live with us just until he can git work. He's sure a great wrestler and I'm certain there'll be lots of openings for him up in San Fran.

Your ever lovin
Ed

BLUE MONDAY

Brett Wilson

It was a wet day in mid autumn, England. The wind had got up and seemed to lift the pile of sycamore leaves as if with an invisible thresher. Despite the dampness, they were being blown this way and that. All except one. It steadfastly hung on to the pile of grass where it was situated. No dance in time. No dalliance with the wind. It wasn't long before the current of air dropped and the skies turned a little more blue. Only then did the leaf shift, as if born on its own personal puff of wind. It floated higher and higher, perhaps on thermals known only to the honed senses of the gliding birds. Then after seeming to hover interminably over some suburban scene, it finally began its descent, flitting down in jagged arcs until it came to rest on the windscreen of a man on a mission. He was returning from the local council offices where he had managed to find some new information on his project. As he was nearing home the leaf had planted itself directly in his field of vision. Large it was too. He was fiddling with the radio at the time.

"Dammit!" he said and squirted some screen wash onto the windshield. It seemed to cement the leaf flat onto the screen, the wipers appearing ineffectual. He was veering a bit now and was hunched down looking under the leaf. Luckily he was nearly back at his flat. He drew up into the small car park at the rear, grabbed the plastic shopping bag full of documents, locked the car and then leaned over the bonnet. The leaf seemed to peel off without any difficulty. Only it now appeared to be stuck to his fingers. He held the bag of papers between his thighs while looking for his flat key with one hand, the other shaking furiously to dislodge the errant foliage. With a final whip, the leaf was gone and he was through the door.

He quickly emptied the bag on the small desk. Somewhere in those documents were the clues to his sister's location. He had been looking for her intermittently for three months and his search had led him south. The adoption agency had provided precious little data, but still it was enough. It was a small town. Perhaps they had stared at each other from the opposite seats of a local train? Perhaps she served him a coffee mocha in a café? He might find her tomorrow, or in a month. The documents would give him more clues and more names.

Then he could trace through the phone book until he found what he was looking for. A Malloy. A real Malloy.

It was time for a cup of tea and as he passed the mirror on the way to the kitchen, he noticed the leaf he thought he had disposed of earlier was clinging like a limpet to the back of his head. His paw smoothly removed it in one quick motion, but again he found himself unable to relieve his hand of his brown burden. The leaf seemed to be imbued with a property no inanimate object should possess: intent. A sticky brown fibrous intent. *Now I'm getting annoyed* he thought. Running under the tap. No. Flush down the loo. What on earth possessed him to try that? Removal with kitchen paper; result kitchen paper sticking to hand also. Holding onto floor with chin while removing both hands, like a bozo from that *Mission Impossible* film? Nooooooop. What about trapping an edge in a door jamb? Now that did seem like a goer.

Carefully placing a leaf tip in the jamb, closing the door and slowly withdrawing his hand finally produced a result: humiliating defeat for *Acer pseudoplatanus*. *Hip fucking hooray* he thought. Now he could go back to his searches.

It was early morning and he was faced with the teensiest dilemma. How to get out of the door.... *Well surely Mr brown and funky can't be spoiling for another fight* he thought? No sign of the chocolate chuffer. It was all going well. It wasn't until he made it half way to the car park that he noticed a familiar object attached to the back of his trouser leg, near his foot.

"Right!" he said, out load. An older lady who was returning from a shopping trip, always suspected the strange loner might be a schizophrenic. Now he was talking to himself. Hypothesis confirmed she thought!

He quickly gunned the engine and rocketed out of the car park, tyres squealing. "Let's see you get out of this one!" he said, looking down at the leaf, slightly manic. Within a minute he was racing down the duel carriageway at sixty mph, right leg out of the window, left leg on the accelerator. But the leaf only seemed to grapple harder. The slip road was approaching. "OK mi amigo, you wanna see the whites of my eyes?" He pressed down hard on the accelerator peddle, shot past an over laden van as the needle hit one hundred. The noise of the screaming engine and the wind through the open window was

BLUE MONDAY

now deafening. One twenty. One thirty. The leg shot up and out. The wind rammed his leg back hard, twisting his body around. The car swerved across three lanes as he thought about dying and never knowing his sister. He pulled the leg in. No leaf. Ha! He thought. He took the next exit and came to a stop at a light. He couldn't see the leaf stuck to the radio aerial at the back. A puff of wind came, scarcely enough to fill the wings of a fairy, and the leaf soared upwards.

It landed on a girder that was being lifted by a crane. It got blown to the edge. But instead of making the vertiginous fall back to earth some two hundred feet below, the edge for a second passed the skeletal buttress of the wall. The wind carried it further. It landed in a man's lunch box. He closed the lid. Later that day the man took the lift downwards and walked towards a large bin, where he intended to divest the box of the sandwich wrappers and a plastic cup. The box was opened. The leaf flew up. Free.

He had been scanning several documents for clues to his sister's whereabouts. It was time to take a break. He turned on the TV just in time to see a report about a girl who had been driving down the motorway in the wrong direction. It was a strange report. Apparently she had been plagued by some leaf. The girl in the report looked like the most beautiful angel he had ever seen. He rose out of his chair and hesitated for a few moments. Then he went to the computer to find the number of the TV station. He wanted to share his story. And he wanted to meet the girl.

Meanwhile near the airport, the leaf had got stuck to the tail of a pigeon. It was flying in all kinds of crazy circles in an attempt to dislodge it. Then, moments after succeeding in ditching the leaf it flew into an aircraft engine. The leaf sailed on. Not so good for pigeon. For the leaf, it was a very good day.

Our Alfie is in Egypt now. He's got himself a nice black girl servant. Just listen to this Gertie "I piles me kit in the courtyard and she blancos the webbin and polishes the buttons and cleans me boots. Then as she bends over and picks it all up I order her to take it up the house. I'm livin here like King Farouk and I shall expect the same consideration from you when I get back Beryl." Ooo he writes a lovely letter – you can almost hear his cockney twang. But the spelling – really! Look how he's written "house" A-R-S-E.



NOTHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT

Bob Wild

In 1939 with war in the offing employment picked up. My dad got a labouring job with Prestwich Council. It was the first regular job he'd had since the General Strike of 1926 when he'd been blacklisted out of the Bobbies for refusing to attack a dole queue. The job didn't last long. When war came and conscription started the younger men were drafted into the army leaving the older men to empty the bins, shift snow and mend the roads. My dad and his mates in the middle age-group were drafted into the Rescue Service, though one or two chose the Auxiliary Fire Service.

They kitted my dad out with an army type uniform. It was dark blue instead of khaki, with a beret rather than a forage cap. The shoulder flashes below the epaulettes said Rescue Service in yellow. The Greatcoat was the best overcoat my dad ever had.

My dad had to learn First Aid and how to tie knots. They gave him a St. John's Ambulance Book and a sheaf of papers with diagrams on. There were arrows all over the sheets showing how to tie the different knots. In the evening when he wasn't on nights and there was nothing much on the wireless my dad would sit for hours reading the First Aid book or practising knots on a broom handle wedged between the sideboard and the table.

To impress his mates my dad learnt the First Aid book off by heart. When he'd learnt a page I had to hold the book whilst he recited it and tell him if he missed a word out. He used to shout at me sometimes for not looking at the book. He was more than a bit put out when he discovered that I'd learnt the page before he had. He always missed out "obliquely" when he recited the circulation of the blood. "The organs concerned in the circulation of the blood are the heart, arteries, capillaries and veins. The heart is a muscular organ which acts like a pump. Situated in the chest cavity, immediately above the diaphragm, it lies (obliquely) with one quarter of its bulk to the left and the remaining three quarters to the right of the middle line of the body". He didn't like it when I told him he'd got it wrong, again.

I used to hate having to stay in whilst he practised bandaging my foot, my leg or my head or carefully put my arm in a sling. I wanted to be out playing hide-and-seek or black rabbit. I was glad when Bert

Richards, one of his pals from the Rescue Service, asked my dad to teach him knots and bandaging. He brought young Bertie, his son, with him to practice on.

Bert was in trouble. Mr. Rogerson, the boss of the Rescue Service had said: "If you can't learn First Aid and how to tie knots you'll have to go back on the bins". Bert said to my dad: "That's the last thing I want Harry: they'll have me in the army in no time. Annie would never manage on her own".

Like many of the folk on Polefield Estate Bert and his family had been moved from Salford to Prestwich in a slum clearance. He lived with his wife, Annie and his two kids, Bertie and Irene, in Polefield Hall Road. My dad told me that as a boy Bert had attended "*The Ragged School*" in Salford. To keep out of mischief he'd joined Salford Boy's Cub and had taken up boxing. I'm not sure whether my dad said he was a fly weight or a bantam weight but he was one or the other. He definitely had a boxer's nose: no bone at all and a dark blue scar which matched the colour of his chin. Despite his small size he looked rock solid, total bone from the head down and a lean as a whippet. He kept himself fit and in pocket by walking everywhere. He told my dad he hadn't been on a bus or a tram for ten years. He used a skipping rope to exercise, night and morning. When not in uniform he wore an old, threadbare, pin stripe, dark blue suit, neatly pressed with an off-white, blue striped, flannel shirt without collar but with a front stud showing. When it was cold the flat cloth cap he wore had an off-white silk muffler to keep it company. My dad liked him. He said to my mam: "He's a good sort Bert: not bright but a good worker. Wouldn't let his mates down. He's a good union man".

Bert came to our house two evenings a week for about a month. My dad tried to teach him knots and how to do First Aid. He was no scholar, Bert. He couldn't remember the bones of the body. My dad bored us to death repeating them to him. "One parietal, one occipital, two temporal, one sphenoid, one ethmoid, two superior and one inferior maxilla . . . and at the root of the tongue is a "U" shaped bone called the oslingar or hyoid bone". Bert couldn't get his tongue round that one. "I don't think they gave me one of those buggers", he said. And he couldn't get the hang of making a Large sling or a St. John's sling either. The best he could manage was a Small Arm sling for a broken humerus. And when it came to knots he was hopeless: he

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didn't seem to know his left from his right. "All you've got to remember for a Reef knot Bert is left over right and under and right over left and under. Two lefts or two rights and you've got a Granny", my dad said. Young Bertie tried to keep his face straight. Come the next week Bert would have forgotten how to do it and as for a Clove Hitch or a Bowline and Bite my dad tried everything: "round the back of the tree", "mouse down the hole": he might just as well have tried to teach an elephant to play the piano with its toes. When it came to the proficiency test I think his mates must have done Bert's knots for him. I heard Annie Richards telling my mam he'd passed and that Mr. Rogerson had let him stay on in the Rescue.

As war intensified men were killed and new fronts opened in the Middle East and elsewhere. There was a shortage of manpower. Women went into munitions factories. The age of conscription was raised. More and more of my dad's mates were culled for the army from the Rescue Service and other reserved occupations. My dad, being thirty-six and quite valued, was kept on in the Rescue. Bert Richards was one of the first to go. Because he couldn't read or write, except his name, he was put in the Pioneer Corps—the pick and shovel brigade.

Annie Richards was more than a little upset when Bert went into the army. Despite not being bright Bert was a good husband. He put his wages on the table, didn't drink or gamble and kept the kids in line. He helped out when she was ill, which she frequently was. She would find it difficult to cope without him. Like Bert, Annie was a good sort but she was a poor specimen: more the size of a twelve year old girl than a woman. Round shouldered, hollow chested and asthmatic, she had a curvature of the spine which thrust her pale, sharp-featured, bespectacled face forward in an aggressively inquiring manner. Her dyed black hair was ginger and grey at the roots. She looked as old as my grandma but she told my mam she was only two years older than Bert.

Annie was in the habit of calling at our house for a gossip on a Wednesday after collecting Irene from school. Each week my mam asked had she heard anything from Bert and each week Annie said "no". At first she made excuses for him. "Give him a chance, he's only been gone a week" but after the fourth week and still no letter she said: "Just wait till the bugger comes home: he needn't think he's coming near me!" It was my mam's turn to make excuses for Bert.

"Perhaps they don't let them write till they're out of training. Maybe the letter's been censored. Perhaps they've sent him abroad. They won't want Jerry to know where they are you know!"

Annie was not consoled. "I bet he's got another woman", she said. "Don't talk so daft Annie. They don't let them out till they've finished their six weeks training", my mam told her. Annie wouldn't have it. "There's all those A.T.S. girls".

"Well Bert's not exactly an oil painting is he now!" my mam countered. Annie said nothing. She finished her tea abruptly and said:

"I'll have to be going".

As it happened it was Bert and not a letter, that arrived home. Bert's father died, suddenly, of a heart attack. Annie asked the Post Office to send a telegram and got the doctor to write to his C.O. Bert was given three days compassionate leave. He came round to see my dad before going to the funeral.

"How's it going then?" my dad asked him.

"Oh not so bad but it was bloody awful at first. Head shaved, drill, bull, kit inspections, square bashing, weapons training, digging latrines, fatigues. Running around like a blue arsed fly. Everyone taking the piss because of my nose and the skipping. It's all right now though. P.T.I's put on a boxing contest. I knocked bloody hell out of the lot of 'em. That shut the buggers up. We've got the assault course and the five mile bash when I get back and then posting. God knows where we'll end up. I wouldn't be surprised if it's somewhere in the Middle East."

Bert finished his cup of tea, then went quiet and started fiddling with his cup, running his finger slowly round the rim and staring into it. He seemed reluctant to get up to go to his father's funeral. When eventually he did stand up he said to my dad:

"I've been getting some stick off Annie, Harry. I wonder if you could help me out?"

"Of course I will Bert. What is it you want?"

"I wondered if you could write a few letters for me Harry, so I can post one home now and again. It's so long since I did any writing I've forgotten how. I wasn't much good in the first place. I missed a lot of schooling as a kid and it's no use asking the blokes in our outfit. Most of 'em are worse than me. It would help me out a lot Harry if you would. Even just a couple".

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"You mean to Annie?"

"Aye, I'll call back after the funeral".

Bert's metal-studded army boots sounded weary as he walked up the path after the funeral. He knocked on the back door and came in without waiting to be asked. He was wearing a diamond shaped black patch on the left arm of his tunic mid way between the shoulder and the elbow. His eyes looked red and sore. My mam was out so my dad brewed him a cup of tea. He told my dad the funeral had been at a church in Salford not far from his mother's house. His mother had been in a club for years saving up for it.

"She did my dad proud" Bert said. They'd had a shiny black coach-hearse pulled by a pair of black horses decked out with black harness and plumes and a coffin with silver handles: that was the tradition in Salford. There'd been cold ham sandwiches in his mother's parlour afterwards. She'd managed to get a big tin of boiled ham, off the ration, through a neighbour whose husband worked on the docks. "It cost her an arm and a leg but she had to have it".

Bert said that despite it being wet there were a lot of people there, neighbours as well as family. He'd overheard a friend of his mother's saying his mam should have had his dad cremated and done something useful with the ashes. She'd said:

"I had a big hour-glass egg-timer made for my husband's dust. He never did any work when he was alive: the bugger can do a bit now he's dead!" When I told our Ernie this, later, he said she'd made it up. He'd heard a comic tell that story on the wireless.

When Bert had finished telling my dad about the funeral and they'd swapped a tale or two about the Army and the Rescue Service my dad produced a writing pad and took his pen off the mantelpiece.

"Now then Bert, what do you want me to say?"

"Oh, I'll leave it to you Harry. I'm no good at that kind of thing".

My dad thought for a moment and then started to write. Bert looked on.

My dad wasn't used to writing letters but his hand-writing was good. He had found a fountain pen in the street which he kept on the mantelpiece out of our reach. At night, when he'd finished reading the *Evening Chronicle*, he used to write his name repeatedly in the page margins and fill in the blank spaces of the advertisements with his name: Harry Wild, Harry Wild, Harry Wild, Harry Wild ... I used to

think he did it out of boredom but it was more likely egotistical obsession. He would put curly finials on the ends of the capital straight strokes and a curly loop on the tail of his Ts'. He'd been taught copper-plate writing at school so his letters were all joined up and sloped to the right. It looked very neat.

When my dad had finished the first letter, which took up almost one side of the paper, he said to Bert:

"Do you want to sign it yourself Bert or shall I sign your name?"

"You'd better sign it Harry or she'll know I've not written it".

"Why? Doesn't she know you can't write?"

"No. I've never had to write anything. I can sign my name. That's all I've ever had to do. She won't remember what it looks like. She can hardly see, anyway, with those glasses of hers".

"Do you want me to read it to you?" my dad said, starting off: "My dearest. ..."

"Nah, It'll be all right. Just do us a couple more".

My dad shook his head and wrote another two brief letters. He asked Bert the number of his house and addressed three envelopes.

"There you are Bert. Those should keep you going for a while".

Bert thanked my dad and said: "You won't tell Hetty about writing the letters, will you Harry? She'll only tell Annie, and then the fat will be in the fire".

"No, you can trust me Bert, tell'em nowt".

When Annie came to see my mam the following Wednesday she was much more cheerful. She'd told Bert that he must write and he'd promised he would. He was going to ask to come off the overseas draft and be given a home posting on the grounds that his mother was ill and had just buried her husband. If he got one, and it wasn't too far away, he would be home occasionally on a 48 hour pass.

Three weeks passed. Annie started to look glum. No word from Bert, despite promises.

On the following Saturday afternoon Annie came round to our house, unexpectedly. She was carrying a letter with a stamp on it saying "Passed by Censor". She took the letter from the envelope and said: "Can you read this to me Hetty. I can't see a thing in these glasses and I've never been much good at reading. I missed out on a lot of schooling what with my asthma and having to nurse my mother.

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My mam took the letter and unfolded it.

"Oh!" she said, "this writing is exactly like Harry's: they must have taught all the boys to do copperplate handwriting".

My mam started to read the letter. "My dearest darling Annie. ..."

"Eee it never says that does it! He's never called me that ever in my life!"

"Well it's what it says here", my mam said, before continuing. "I've missed you so much it's like a light going out in my life being away from you. . . ."

"He's never written that has he?" Annie giggled.

"Well it's got his signature at the bottom so he must have done. He's a dark horse is your Bert. I'd have never guessed he was so romantic. Just listen to this Annie!"

"At night I think of you with longing and shed a tear. It's so unfair that we two lovers should be torn asunder by this cruel war. ..."

The letter went on in similar vein terminating in: "Your everlasting, loving, Bert".

"I don't believe it!", Annie said. "They must have got the letters mixed up when they censored them!"

"Count your blessings Annie. I wish Harry had some bloody romance in him. I don't think he's said one tender word to me since the day we got married".

I was very much surprised by the content of my dad's letter. My dad was a great talker and quite knowledgeable. I'd expected something different. He could do the *Evening Chronicle* crossword. He knew a lot about politics too. He was full of opinions about Germany and Russia and how "Old Joe" would sort out "Jerry". Where he got his knowledge from was a bit of a mystery. He listened to the wireless but said he didn't believe half of it and he thought the newspapers were "nothing but a pile of propaganda". He never read books either. Apart from the *Evening Chronicle*, *The Football Pink* and *The News of the World* I never saw him read anything except the St. John's Ambulance book and a dog-eared, second hand, "Teach Yourself Russian" text he'd picked up from a junk shop and struggled with for a few weeks. My mam said he fancied himself as People's Commissar for Prestwich. He'd must have read a lot at some time in his life though, or perhaps he picked it up at political meetings. What sur-

prised me was that none of my dad's knowledge or opinions appeared in Bert's letters. But come to think about it, perhaps my dad was a lot more clever than I thought.

A month later another letter arrived. It was packed with similar phrases and sentiments to the first one. Annie was over the moon.

After passing out, Bert was posted to an army training camp "somewhere in Yorkshire". He came home on a 48 hour pass. Annie was all over him.

"I hadn't realised till I got your letter Bert how much you cared for me" she said.

Bert called round at our house when my mam was out.

"What the hell did you put in that letter Harry?" he said to my dad. "She's gone bloody daft: I can't put a foot wrong".

"Well make the most of it", my dad said.

When Annie next came round for her Wednesday afternoon gossip she said:

"I feel quite different about Bert since I got those letters. I had a lovely weekend".

Annie usually made do with two cups of tea but when my mam offered a third she didn't refuse. My mam was watching the sugar. As Annie distractedly took a second spoonful she said:

"I'm in a bit of trouble Hetty. Bert asked me why I never write to him. You don't think you could do a letter for me do you Hetty?"

"Course I will Annie love. What do you want me to say?"

"Oh I'll leave it to you. I'm not much good with words".

"Well neither am I", my mam said. "I suppose I could say something like: My dearest darling Bert, my fondest love, I've missed you so much. . . . Always and for ever, your loving wife, Annie."

Two weeks later it was Bert who was round at our house. My dad said: "Bloody hell Bert, you're always home. We'll never beat Jerry like this. How did you wangle this one?". Bert told my dad he was home on a week's embarkation leave. He'd been posted overseas. His mother would have to get over his father's death on her own. He asked my dad would he do a few more letters for him.

"I could do with about a dozen Harry, If I send one about every couple of months or so that should see me through. I can't see the war

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lasting three years now the Yanks have joined in".

My dad reluctantly agreed to write the letters.

"I'll do them tomorrow at the Yard", he said, I'm on nights. I don't think there'll be much doing".

So the war continued with my mam and dad's letters going back and forth to the Middle East. Each time Annie received one of my dad's letters from Bert she brought it round for my mam to read and reply to. It used to make me laugh my socks off: my dad writing letters to my mam and my mam writing letters to my dad without either of them knowing it! And it was all so arse about face. A total waste of stamps! My mam should have given her letters to Bert, before he was posted, with instructions to open one every three months, and my dad should have handed his direct to Annie.

A funny thing happened though. My mam and dad never wrote to each other. My dad was sent with the rescue team on various courses to places such as Little Budworth in Cheshire and Holker Hall at Grange over Sands in the Lake District. I remember she once took our Arthur and me to a Families' Open Day at Little Budworth to watch my dad demolish a mock building. Each time he went away my mam said: 'You will write won't you Harry', but he never did. She didn't hear from him for months on end.

As Jerry targeted different cities: Manchester, Coventry, Liverpool, the Prestwich Rescue team was sent, like a flying squad, in a special Rescue Bus equipped with tunnelling and demolition gear. Towards the end of the war when Hitler concentrated his VI and V2 rocket attacks on London and the South East my dad's outfit was posted to Croydon. He'd been there nearly two months, stationed in a building adjoining a mortuary. A V2 hit the canteen killing nineteen people and destroying the Rescue Bus. My dad's team were sleeping in a dormitory at the time and woke up with part of the building on top of them and the twenty-three bodies that were in the mortuary mixed up amongst them. My dad said:

"It was bloody awful. You didn't know who was supposed to be dead and who was supposed to be alive". As they were in shock and had no equipment the Prestwich team were sent back home.

My dad was in trouble the moment he stepped through the door. "Why didn't you write? You could at least have let me know you

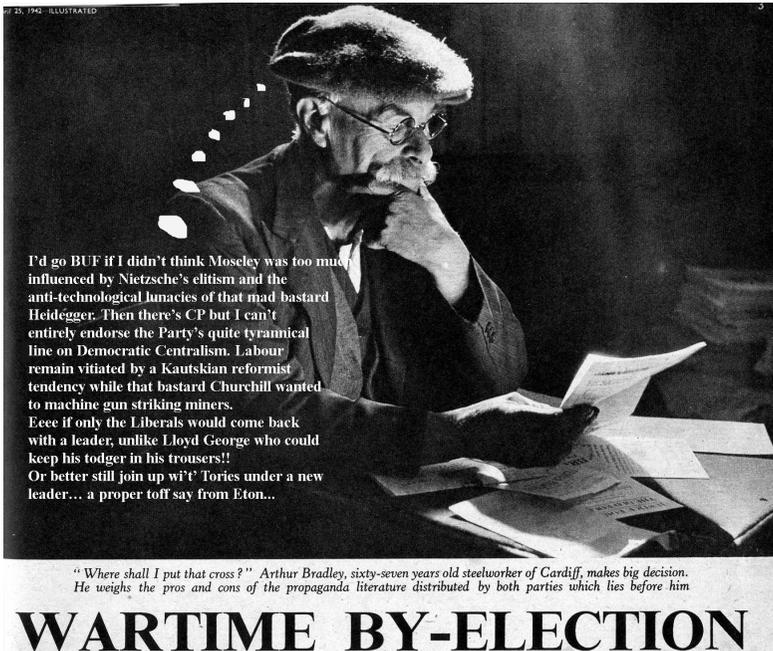
were coming home. Even Annie Richards gets letters from Bert and he's in the bloody Middle East!"

When she'd heard what my dad had been through she quietened down and said she was sorry. She was even more contrite when my dad said that he had written and that she should have had the letter.

The letter, with a Croydon post mark, arrived in the afternoon post the following day, Wednesday. My mam was gossiping with Annie. My dad had gone to the Town's Yard. As she opened the envelope she said to Annie:

"Wonders never cease, he did actually write after all". She started to read the letter. "My dearest darling Hetty, I've missed you so much it's like a light going out in my life being away from you. . ."

"Well I'll be buggered!" she exclaimed. "He must have got your Bert to write it for him before he went abroad. Just wait till he get's home!"



Illustrated - 1941

IN THE KEBAB SHOP

Ron Horsefield

There was a strange crowd in the Kebab shop that night. They looked like the usual stropy oik scruffbags you get around midnight on a Saturday but when they spoke... Mohammed was slicing a huge chunk of mutton on a rotating skewer. The place was full, a long queue almost out the door.

A taxi stops outside and in bursts a geezer in a hurry. He pushes up to the front provoking an angry murmur.

“Mo!” he shouts at the man behind the counter “I phoned my order in earlier. Is it ready? I’ve got the girlfriend in the taxi. She’s gaggin for hot meat. I anticipate a successful climax to our evening at the disco if my order is to hand.”

“Mr Greengage I very sorry but shop is full. You must join queue. Your esteemed order will be processed in due course.”

“Hey Greengage! Back of the queue if you don’t mind! We’ve bin here ages” shouted up an old trout with hair dyed deep red, or possibly a wig.

“Shut it you ugly old ruminant” reposted Greengage

“Hey! That’s my missis you’re insultin you cheeky woman’s wee-hole!” piped up an old codger.

“Oh so it’s the rectal sphincter putting in his two pennorth is it?” continued Greengage “She looks to me like an aged piece of furnace debris and quite why a woman of her gargantuan body mass index should need additional nourishment at this time of night is frankly incomprehensible”

“And what about that filthy trollop out there in the taxi?” replied the ancient “I’ll warrant she’s a receiver of swollen goods via the rear entry.”

“You impertinent front bottom!” ejaculated the intruder “I’m a regular here. I expect preferment especially as I ordered an hour ago. So Mohammed just get your skates on you dark-skinned, cranium-clothed immigrant”

“I not Sikh Mr Greengage. I Muslim Shiite. No cloth on my head. Now if you just go to back of queue”

Other voices were raised querulously.

“Yis Greengage! Get to the back you penis-brained nincompoop.”

“I don’t give an air-borne intercourse for your phoned order – just wait your turn!”

“Flaming haystacks!!”

“You scrotum visaged scumbag Greengage!”

“You monstrous bolus of malodorous excrement”

“What the reproductive conjunction is the hold up?” yelled another.

The queue surged angrily against the counter. The hot skewer fell onto the floor. Dishes smashed. The clientele slithered on a pool of fat and couscous. Greengage dashed back to his taxi shouting to his innamorata:

“Inseminate it luv! We’ll just have to share a pork sausage back at the flat”

The racket in the kebab shop grew louder. Mohammed picked up the phone. After only a few minutes a squad car, fortuitously on a mission to deliver a clergyman to a nearby dying crone, screeched to a halt outside. The reverend Rodney Rumphole and his nephew constable Roger Rumphole entered the chaotic din-filled emporium.

“What the fuck’s going on here!!” shouted the cleric.

“Just keep the noise down you rowdy cunts!!” yelled the PC.

A profound silence suddenly descended. Such language was unprecedented in this recently gentrified district. They were taken aback.

“Really! How shocking!” muttered an old fart as he pushed his copy of Crazy Oik 6 back into his anorak pocket “Such disgusting obscenity should surely be confined to the decent obscurity of a small literary magazine!”

“It’s possible children may overhear!” whispered another “My own two are even now only next door watching porno videos – the soundtrack is largely grunts and muzak and even when words are uttered they are usually in Danish”

“There’s no need for it” mumbled a dishevelled lady in a gin-soaked cardigan “It betokens a severely impoverished vocabulary which is only to be expected of hoi polloi. These profanities aren’t found in Shakespeare or Sir Thomas Browne”

IN THE KEBAB SHOP

“Nor in Rabelais or Rimbaud” added a third who had a small library of great works in translation published by The Reader’s Digest.

They straggled out into the night under the vigilant gaze of the Rumpholes. Mohammed began to mop his floor.

“What about the chippie?” suggested someone.

“Nah! It only opens for an hour on Tuesday.”

“Lazy white bastard!” came an unidentified utterance from the darkness.

Already, as JP Sartre had predicted, deep-seated inhibitions were beginning to break down under the impact of scarcity

OIKUS

David Birstwistle

A Question of Classification.

He got a call from the auction house. The accent was French. "We 'ave an item which requires your expert opinion. C'est les lunettes, spectacles." "You want me to authenticate?" "No monsieur. The frames are proper National 'Ealth. Ze left lens is like a beer bottle bottom and the right like a Bordeaux buccin or whelk as you say. They were in Madame de Beauvoir's boudoir marked 'mementos d'amour.' Should we say 'curios' or 'literature' or 'philosophy' or what?" "How about 'les yeux oppose' or 'avec un certain digression' or to be even more politically correct, 'sur le penchant?'"

Less to this than meets the eye

The hostage situation was over. They flew him back to Brize-Norton after two years in an Iraqi compound. US intelligence sources deny that negotiations involved the release of members of Asaib Abi al-Haq. He described his experiences, "The first three months were hard and I'm not going into now but once they allowed me a food parcel I never looked back. My black peas, chitterlings and tripe and elder were seen as *simpatico*. After that I got the works. My favourite was sheeps'-eye tagine with cumin and pine nut scrotum slices and Si-moon blanket-rippers. I'm looking forward to being re-captured."

THE TOWN OF THE FUTURE



■ There can be no doubt that our future towns will be as different from those we knew before the war as a radiogram is different from our first crystal set. And just as our admiration for the elegance and the greater efficiency of the modern does not in any way impair our affection for the old-fashioned, so we need have no regrets when we come to live in the town of the future.

Towns and cities damaged by the war are already considering their rebuilding plans. Residential districts, we are told, will be designed on the garden city principle of villas or semi-detached houses each with its own garden; or ten-storey blocks of flats surrounded by communal lawns, flower walks and rose arbours. It is gratifying to note that experts are planning for a green and pleasant land

with plenty of space, light and fresh air. In the past, towns and cities have straggled and sprawled, capturing parts of the countryside with the same inevitable disappointment as the caging of a wild bird. The town of the future will be erect and compact, with the trees, the grass and the flowers of the countryside brought to its front doors. Schools and playgrounds for the children will be included as an integral part of the communal plan. These will be so positioned that children will not have to cross main roads on their way to school. The Shopping Centre, in view of its supreme importance to housewives, will receive very special atten-

tion. Architects, remembering the British climate, will develop the arcade principle for greater all-the-year-round convenience, specially appreciated on wet shopping days.

These will be long, windowless warrens called Arndale Centres and will be covered in glazed yellow bricks giving the whole thing the look of a slithouse block on an East-German housing estate.

All the old pubs and shops will be demolished and the oiks will live in similarly shaped concrete barracks going up about ten stories. The lifts won't work and will usually be full of shit and piss or burning mattresses which the young 'uns will send up and down for a lark.

The problem of getting to work won't arise since there won't be any. The resident oiks will live off benefits which they will spend on drugs supplied by local entrepreneurs and breed weapon dogs which will bite the arse off anyone they don't like. Paradise or what?

Pears

RENOWNED AS THE LEADING TOILET SOAP SINCE 1789

THE FIND

David Birtwistle

He was tall and dignified with grey hair, a straight back and a far-away look in his eye. Old Mr. Jackson hadn't yet spoken to the newcomer except for an odd 'Howdo' when the new arrival found out that the old man was moving. His wife had been gone for over a year and the general feeling, as far as he could gauge it, was that the old man was grieving, drawn in on himself, simply pretending to get on with life.

Then the newcomer met him in the pub one night, out of the blue. The old man was sitting there

on his own, staring into the middle distance when the newcomer came in. The younger man ordered a pint his gaze attracted to the crackling coals in the fireplace when it suddenly dawned on him there were only three other people in the pub besides himself. The farmers didn't arrive till 10 o' clock. A couple were in deep conversation down at the far end of the room and the old man was sitting there on his own, just behind him to the right. 'Hello' said the younger neighbour in a polite tone of voice. 'Howdo' said the old man, adjusting the cap on the back of his head.

He thought that would be that. The old man would sit there in his own world, unforthcoming, wrapped inside his grief. So he sipped his pint and looked out of the window. A storm was brewing. Outside the night sky was turning purple into black as it did in that neck of the woods. The wind was beginning to rise over the top of the moor. The moon was hidden behind low cloud and flecks of sleet began to tap the windowpane. It was a cold place in wintertime up here. The single row of cottages down the hill had been built to tuck in and huddle up against the blast. At least the walk home was short and downhill. Even for the old man. He took a good gulp of the pint this time. It was good. Cold, bitter, hoppy. Something about a coal fire on a night like this brought that extra flavour out in the beer, he thought. But you needed the fire to enjoy it to the full.

"Tha' knows this weather?" He was taken by surprise.

"It's not looking so good" he replied. .

"Snow's on the way," said the old man.

"Is it?"

"As God is my judge. It's going to be a rum winter, this one." He'd never seen the old man as talkative as this. The younger neighbour adjusted his seat, faced the old man, gave him his whole attention. "You know all this damp and sleet and rain?"

"Yes I do," he replied.

"Well how many of these bones of mine have rheumatism? Go on, guess. How often have I suffered from that arthritis?" This whole area, open, exposed, the moors, the mist, the cold and the damp seemed a breeding ground, the definitive environment for degenerative bone disease. Most older people were crippled with it. "Dost know how old I am?"

"No, Mr. Jackson, I don't." He was suddenly conscious that this was the first time he had ever used the older man's formal name

"Well. Now then. I'll tell you. I'm seventy six next February." Before he could work out some sort of reply, the old man went on. "Do you know how I've managed to live up here in all this and not have an aching bone in my body for all that time?"

"No. Tell me."

"Nettles," Mr. Jackson said.

"Nettles?"

"Twice a year, as God is my judge. I stand in the bath. Naked. And I flay myself with a switch of nettle leaves. All over. That keeps rheumatism at bay. Mind you, my eyesight's not what it was." He paused and looked away. "That was the last straw I think. That's why the wife left. She thought it was unnatural. God bless her, wherever she is."

Two weeks later he was gone, Moved to the far side of Preston someone had said. It was a cold winter, living up to all the old man's prophecies. Snow piled in drifts on the fields then melted into the long-dead grass. The bus service became erratic. Sheep died out on the moor. The fires were kept in for weeks on end. By December, the newcomer had established himself as a regular. He was an outsider perhaps to the 'hidden' part of the village, the chapel-goers he'd seen on Sunday mornings, but he was now a regular, someone you could talk to in the pub.

A couple had moved in to the old man's house and they just took it

THE FIND

for granted that he was a part of the furniture. This feeling of belonging was unexpectedly reinforced when three strangers took lodgings and set up a base. They were from the university at Manchester, the Archaeology Unit. They would be here for six months to look for evidence of Iron Age settlements on the moor. They were going to do surveys and dig. Almost everybody had a keen interest in local history and folklore was a common reference point in conversation hereabouts.

The long, winter nights were now more enjoyable than ever. Whatever the weather he would trudge his way up to the inn with an increasing sense of anticipation. Sometimes just the older farmers would be there and he listened to the tales of sheep and dogs and cattle and dry stone walls and who owned which land and who had married whom. The accents and the dialect made the stories come alive and the crackling fire, the wind outside and the isolation on the moor took him into a world he imagined it was like before radio and television had turned conversation into a thing of the past.

Twice a week the bearded trio from the university would be in there when he arrived. Occasionally they would sit in the corner and pore over sheets of computer prints and talk almost incomprehensibly about geological data. The newcomer wanted to be instrumental in bringing them into the fold, as it were. The farmers began to use him as an interpreter. They were intrigued but unsure as to how to speak to the university types. "I don't know how tha' manages it lad. Half of what they say is gibberish to me."

To start with the newcomer gleaned only bits and bobs, specklets of information with not much meaning to them. But the picture the archaeologists were building up began to fill itself in. He discovered that the old caves up on Gaulkthorn Heights were occupied at one time during the Upper Paleolithic. He looked that one up. It meant during the last Ice Age. A tribe of hunters came up in the summer months and searched for food on the edge of the glacier which gripped the higher ground. The scientists determined this by the discovery of some disintegrating bits of bone and antler, probably an elk, they said, and two arrow flints which had been embedded in its flesh. This really livened the farmers up when the newcomer reported back.

"Elk? What's that?"

"It's a sort of large deer. A moose. With big horns." he said.

"Get away with you! Up here? And whose arrows were they anyway? Red Indians? Up here?"

He enjoyed exercising his patience and re-interpreting the evidence for them.

"They were a tribe of Stone-Age hunters. Our ancestors. They used to come up here in summer when all this was ice."

"Ice? Summer? You mean these lads were relatives.....of ours?"

"Black Jack's grandad more like."

And they would rattle on and speculate and wonder what these primitive peoples looked like and who in the village most resembled them.

"I can just see Beetroot Bob in a tiger skin, howling and shouting and dancing round a fire with a bone through his nose."

He would leave the pub after a lock-in till well past one o'clock, filled with a sense of the span of historic time. The farmers would leave filled with a confused sense of wonder and dark suspicion.

The next week he sat with the three bearded men as they poured over sheets of figures and tables he could hardly fathom.

"What's that?" he asked again.

"It's the pollen profile. It's the only way we can date activity when it's up to 3000 years old"

It showed that there had been cultivation of crops, a more settled society once the climate had warmed up.

"What we have got here is forest clearance and the beginnings of agriculture."

They were looking for something substantial like a neolithic burial mound or other hard evidence but so far they had to make do with microscopic information like this and a few old bones.

It was enough to get the farmers going again.

"Farmers. Up here? How long ago did you say? Three thousand years. I thought everyone were on t' ark in them days."

"Is ther nowt to suggest they supped ale back then, or what?"

"I bet some of them lads could sup seven miles o' canal after chasing them elks o'er t' moor!"

"What do you reckon them women were like wi' just them tiger skins on?"

THE FIND

"Black Jack wouldn't kick one o' them out o' bed."

"Black Jack'd shag sheep!"

"I've seen him staring at yon Jacob's tup wi' a right funny look in his eye."

The newcomer was beginning to get the hang of the way they spoke and he tried a few expressions himself. He used 'Hey up' and 'Howdo' quite automatically now as he entered the room. He felt almost one of them. It excited him more than anything else he had done. The dark nights up on the moor, huddled round the fire, discovering magical things about the past. It felt like a conspiracy, a huge secret which he shared with a chosen few. He felt special, he felt wanted and he felt at home for the first time in his life.

The work on the survey was slow and exacting. The information came only in dribs and drabs. When direct evidence was unforthcoming the imagination did the rest and triggered the debate well into the early hours.

"You reckon them lads had more than one wife?"

"They'd have four women in that bear-skinned hut and cuddle up in a heap."

"By the left, some o' them lads'd be well tired out."

"Send the women out to work and stay in all day and recoup."

"Mind you, I don't suppose they had a *Mirror* to read in them days."

At the end of January came a find that electrified the Manchester men. They had seemed so calm and methodical. The one who spoke had the face of a startled gazelle. There were only four items but they seemed to hold exceptional significance. The 'mad scientists' as the farmers called them, became very animated and very difficult to understand. The newcomer was now addressed as Tom' even though his real name was Peter. He assumed that the farmers had deliberately chosen the name because he reminded them of someone who used to live round here and had either died or gone away. Trying to find out who it was, was impossible so he simply accepted it and beavered away at his task.

"They've found a stone axe going back thousands of years. And they've dug up a scraper and two flint knives. They think this is really important."

"Stone axe? Flint knives? Sounds like they were all going about

coshing people's heads in!"

"Sounds more like a black pudding shop to me. Tha Knows. Smack 'em over t' head, gut 'em and drain 'em and boil 'em all up in a brew. Tha knows"

"Paleolithic? asked one of them, ominously.

"These lads are getting to know their onions at last," thought Tom, He was calling himself 'Tom' now.

February had come but there was no letting up with the cold. The survey team were still in thermal underwear and one of them spent each day in his eskimo gloves and waders up to his thighs. The low, cold sun allowed them to work from nine o'clock in the morning till half past three when cloud blotted out the remaining sparks of winter light. They had set up what they called 'base camp' at the old quarry near Iconhurst, the oldest farm on the moor.

"Nowt doing for a bit now."

"No," said Tom, "Nothing exciting this week."

"No women's clothing or owt like that?"

"Interfering wi' women's clothing is all you think about."

Then came the big find. Digging among the rushes and the peat on a curiously flat step of the undulating moor, in a field too wet even for sheep, they found a body. For three days they didn't tell a soul until they'd checked and dug again and analysed. Then the day after they told Tom the local press were given the briefest details.

"A three thousand year old corpse?" said the farmer.

"Murdered," said Tom. "The chemicals in the peat preserved him. They reckon he was hit over the head, had his throat cut, then thrown into the bog. They reckon he was sacrificed. An Iron Age victim," Tom added.

Fourteen miles away, George Jackson read only the first few words in the Lancashire Evening Telegraph. 'BODY FOUND IN LOCAL VILLAGE'. He stopped to check only the name of the place and went straight round to the police and gave himself up.

"It was me. I buried her in the cellar and concreted her in. I did it. As God is my judge."

Four farmers, Tom and the three men from the survey sat dumb-struck round the fire in disbelief. That evening's Telegraph lay on the

THE FIND

table beside them. Only the headline and the first paragraph had been read. 'Local man admits to killing wife'

Police were already working in the house. Two bodies in a week! It was a good ten days before any of them could find a word to say.

OIKUS

David Birtwistle

Biosphere IV.

The outside temperature was minus sixty and gravity 1/6th of earth's. His job in predictive logistics was to consider forthcoming probabilities as they built the dome over the large crater and created a human habitat on Mars. They would create greenhouse gases to liberate water and then they'd recapitulate the history of life on Earth, only faster. He re-read the mission statement..... "to spread intelligent life as a gift to the universe." New religions at each other's throats, big business, phase III golf courses, interplanetary Disneyland. He thought 'Fuck this!' took early retirement and bought a caravan at Knott End.

'Weapons Dog.'

The slaving pit-bull next door was used for intimidation and 'street status'. The low-life at the end of the leash said he was less likely to "get robbed" if he went out with it. He was over-weight, wore a baseball hat on sideways and had tattoos on his neck. Being creative the next-door neighbour thought food was the answer. He bought a large Aberdeen Angus steak, dipped it in his granny's mulligatawny soup with extra asafoetida and lobbed it over the fence. Not dead but feeling not at all well it was mugged three days later by a Jack Russell.

THE WINNER

Tom Kilcourse

It saddens me to see my friend like this, pacing his terrace so restlessly, his rotund figure absently circling the wrought-iron table and chairs. How many more times will his finger press tobacco into that pipe? He lights it repeatedly, scattering the paving with spent matches. His weary eyes gaze across the lake without seeing the beauty of it. Nor do his ears appreciate the serenity as they strain to hear the sound of the Renault. I am tempted to join him out there, if only to distract him, yet I know that it would be a futile gesture. There seems to be little point in going through the routine conversational charade again. Searching for a safe topic proves tedious, the garden perhaps, those acres of uncared for land that he patrols from time to time. Questions about his plans for cultivation may draw an answer, after a fashion, but the light would be absent from his face. His gloom can be lifted only by the distinctive rattle of a battered car, chugging up the track from Poigny. One particular car, that is. It is two hours since she rang to say that she was leaving Paris. One hundred and twenty minutes, forty-five of which have been spent out there: pacing.

She should be here soon now. Any moment and I shall see his back straighten as he grasps the balustrade firmly, bracing himself. Dejection will evaporate as the satisfied little smile touches his lips, briefly. The gates are open in readiness, waiting for the scarred, grey Renault to career through, hurling itself up the incline to the house. At least a decade, one sixth of his time, will slide from his face, but only momentarily. Years of experience remind him not to appear too enthusiastic, and he is well rehearsed. I have seen the greeting before: the unconcerned saunter to the porch, the light peck on the cheek, the tired joke about her driving. All signs of anxiety well buried beneath layers of hardened urbanity.

So, rather than join him on the terrace to participate in the ritual I shall continue to watch through the glass. I much prefer to sit indoors, nursing my dread of the evening. My capacity for acting is limited and to enter the drama too early could prove too great a strain. It is better that I wait stage-right, rehearsing my part, preparing to make her the centre of my existence for a few more hours.

THE WINNER

Perhaps the smile will reach my eyes this time, not that it would be noticed. My wife waits in our room, also preparing. She will surely remember to remark on the beautiful hair, the trimness of figure, the chic attire, indeed on the overall, captivating appearance, comments to be received as of right, with but the slightest hint of insincere modesty.

I wonder how the meal will be endured this time. Shall we again pick our way through the food to which my friend has devoted the afternoon? Thankfully, he has cooked fish. The many small bones demand sufficient attention to allow one to relax the fixed expression of fascination with her nonsense. Occupation with one's plate is a diversion that even she cannot find offensive. Perhaps she will spare the odd flattery for the quality of the meal, providing a brief digression from the stream of self aggrandisement. Comments on the food are at least tolerable. What I find unbearable are the loud protestations of love for my friend, and her bewailing the thought of ever losing him. The sight of them holding hands, smiling into each other's eyes as she pouts her dependence on him, or simpers her need for his affection, is a treat that I can well forgo, especially when I can anticipate the encore. When he leaves the table at the end of the meal, retiring to his bedroom, I shall have to restrain my impulses. Familiarity with her boasts does not dull my contempt. Her crowing about the lover in Paris, her mocking descriptions of my friend's efforts to rekindle his virility, always sicken. And my forbearance will surely be overtaxed if she again confides in my wife her preference for strong men, 'men like me', all the time watching my face for some reaction.

Of course, the evening may again be enlivened by a quarrel as my friend strives to rescue her from some intellectual cul-de-sac into which she has wandered, himself aware that he is arguing the inarguable. All to spare her the indignity of admitting that she has strayed from the shallows where she belongs. There are times still when I enjoy our combat, when my anger at his views is no more than simulated, a harmless part of the pantomime. The voices raised at his fear of another socialist President, or his nostalgia for Thatcher, are necessary to the entertainment. Yet now, the irritation is all too often genuine when he adopts ground onto which she has led him. It gives me no pleasure to debate with her on topics of which she knows nothing, only to have my friend step in when the stupidity of her position is revealed. Should the evening again take this course I may

repeat my vow never to visit the house again when she is there. It is a vow that I steadily come closer to keeping. I would be following a path well trodden by others.

Possibly, there will be no argument tonight. She has been known to steer clear of politics, economics, sociology, or the thousand and one other topics on which disagreement is assured. Yet I am not convinced that this would be an advantage, when I consider the probable alternative. Heated debate is at least preferable to attempting to satisfy her hunger for admiration. Her insatiable demand for eulogies to her beauty from anyone present is an intolerable imposition, particularly on the men. God spare us from another evening of cleavage begging attention, or thigh revealed 'accidentally'. To pretend attraction to such bait is dangerous for me, as it heightens the shock later in the evening, when wine makes me careless in my remarks. I assume shock, but it is possible that her vanity protects her from even the most cutting of comments.

It is some years since I first met my friend, years in which my feelings towards him have swung violently between exasperation, tinged with bewilderment, and fondness garnished with amusement. I cannot better characterise him than to describe some of his possessions. His large, brash house near Poigny was built by Americans, in a French forest. In an area littered with delightful, traditional French houses he has to buy one designed by Americans. It must be the only house in Yvelines without a bidet. The layout reveals much of him. The guest rooms are on the ground floor, comfortable and secure behind barred, shuttered windows. The communal area is one floor up, level with the terrace on which he has taken to pacing. His own suite is above all this, at the top of the house, where he can retire, surrounded by a forest in which he never walks, by villages that he never visits, and people with whom he never mixes. Then again, there is his Paris flat, on the rue Duplex. That too is on the top floor: the eighth.

My friend always needs to be on top, somehow unassailable. It could be perhaps a result of his Jewish heritage, although I have other friends of his race who do not display the same need. Again, it may stem from his lack of height, he stands little more than five feet tall. Whatever the cause, it is certainly an outstanding trait of which I became conscious very early in our relationship. He simply needs to win. Please do not misunderstand. There is no ruthless disregard for

THE WINNER

others' welfare, nor does he need to see others fail as evidence of his own success. On the contrary, he admires those who strive and succeed, and he displays great generosity to those who have not quite made it. Strangely though, now that I come to think about it, his generosity is usually scarred by an apparent fear of giving too much. I have never known him to refuse a request for help, nor to accede to one without imposing some trifling condition. Consequently, the beneficiary who should be thankful feels irritation at the pettiness. It is as if he fears being exploited.

It is strikingly ironic therefore, to see him pacing now, waiting with such evident lack of patience for someone who appears to know only how to take. This one is so different from the last, the Geordie girl with a Sloane accent. I recall a tall, elegant blond who delivered such a cultural shock at our first meeting, actually asking if I wanted 'champers', like an actress in some third-rate comedy. She at least understood her role. Expensive gifts to her were rewarded with graceful subjugation. She was merely decorative, and accepted it, stifling whatever urge to individuality might have lurked within. My friend was envied then by his business acquaintances. I saw her ogled, even pawed, but she never yielded to rival, proprietorial bids. His choice of companion used to puzzle me in those days, a young, vacuous woman, intellectually virginal, her mind unpenetrated by thought worthy of the name. As my friend and I argued about the Metro workers' strike, or his ridiculous attachment to British monarchy, she added nothing other than a smile, and a supportive arm thrust through his. Despite her origins, she seemed not to share the English distress at any sign of passionate disagreement, remaining quite unflustered as her male companions shouted at each other across some restaurant table. I am no longer puzzled. She was meeting his needs, not mine, and meeting them very well. Her eventual fall from favour was not the result of any misdemeanour, merely the automatic consequence of reaching her thirtieth birthday.

Significantly, this French woman for whom he waits is turned thirty now, yet there is no sign of his interest waning. Time has perhaps weakened his hand more than hers, or maybe she is cleverer with the cards dealt. She seems not to be fooled by the public face, or by his apparent need to take the lead. Instinct tells her that he will nevertheless play straight-man, while she hogs the spotlight. Friends who fail to admire vocally are banished, or withdraw, saddened by his failure to assert. Maybe she sees through the casualness of his welcome,

recognising it as the mask it undoubtedly is. She is the winner, with an inferior hand. Yet it is not his losing that saddens me, nor even his increased isolation from other friends of long standing. It is simply that he chose to play the game at all.

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BETTE BRAKA

MISS NAOMI CAMPBELL

Oh, Miss Campbell
Haven't you done well?
Subpoenaed to The Hague,
You were delightfully vague.
With Mr Taylor, you were flirty;
He gave you some stones
That you said were dirty!
Indeed, they were used to finance
An army of chance,
Children soldiers, amputations,
A world so far from glossy celebrations.
You like diamonds that are flashy
That sparkle, as you sashay
Up and down the catwalk;
Remember the children who cannot talk,
Cannot walk, in West Africa
Because of cruelty, so savage
In a war of ravage and hysteria,
Financed by the diamonds of Liberia!!



Rue St Jacques - Dieppe

UN CHEF-D'OEUVRE INCONNU

Ron Horsefield

Dieppe is both seaside and fishing port but not a swank resort. It has a oiky low-rent charm – probably because of the brick. With a hand-out from the Crazy Oik Foundation Fund I make a foray whenever I can. “Ken” I say “Any chance of *coffing* up for a trip to Dieppe?” V. droll what? In a previous age it had a certain cachet being a haunt of Oscar Wilde who wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in the Café Suisse, and Walter Sickert who spent so much time here he was called the Canaletto of Dieppe. It was here he advised Gauguin to give up painting and go back to stockbroking. Wilde has many associations with the place. Here he first read Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, the famous novel of decadence, on honeymoon in 1883. And here he found refuge, disguised as Sebastian Melmoth, after getting out of jail in 1897. Jacques Emile Blanche and Aubrey Beardsley snubbed him in the Café Suisse. Shortly after he moved five miles up the coast to Berneval. Ernest Dowson, the poet, met and befriended Wilde. When someone regretted that such a fine poet drank so much absinthe Wilde remarked “You shouldn’t regret that poets are drunkards rather than drunkards aren’t always poets”. It was Dowson who tried to get Oscar interested in women again and fixed him up with a local whore. Oscar reported: “The first these ten years, and it shall be the last. It was like chewing cold mutton.” Then as an afterthought “But tell it in England where it will entirely restore my reputation”

The beach is all stones as are all the beaches as far west as Etretat. So we were spared the sight of half-naked shitehawks distracting us from spiritual thoughts. Delacroix stayed nearby on August 25 1854 and wrote: “Here I am at last on the Quay Duquesne, with a seascape all around me. I can see the port and the hills towards Arques: it is a delightful view, and its variety provides me with constant entertainment when I stay indoors.” His first impressions of the place were not so good describing it in 1838 as “an atrociously boring town” – he shut himself up in the town library to read Lebeau’s *History of the Decline of the Roman Empire*. By 1852 he’d got to like Dieppe “The sea still delights me. I stay for three or four hours at a time on the jetty or on the shore at the foot of the cliff. I cannot drag myself away from it”

It was in Dieppe, a few years ago, I made a great literary find in a bookshop just off the Boulevard Verdun; two tiny rooms looked after by a man in a wheelchair. There in a box under the table I discovered a stack of porno graphic novels (comics, if you prefer) and bought *Pour l'Amour d'une Pute* published in Paris in 1988. But surely this is a much earlier misogynistic pastiche by Proust, who stayed here with Reynaldo Hahn, or even an early piece by JK Huysmans when he was still in his naturalism phase – more like 1888 if you ask me. It is illustrated by Walter Sickert who eventually tired of the fishwife concubine he'd picked up in the oik district of La Pollet or possibly Georges Braque who lived just up the coast at Varengeville. George used to put on his carpet slippers to drive the Rolls taking Madame Braque to the hairdressers'

In *PLADUP* the scion of an aristocratic family, Comte Albert, falls in love with Valerie who works in the brothel. Al is smitten but just wants to talk – a sign of true love since, at the same time, he's banging the arse of every other floosie in the establishment. They get married even though Pop disapproves and cuts him off without a sou. Val is only good for one thing and soon they're living in a shithole with Al going to work each day. The exigencies of French slang result in Al calling his homely dump a brothel "*Quel bordel! Valerie n'est manifestement pas attirée par les travaux domestiques!*" while the actual brothel itself is drawn as a very swank gaff – the kind of place you'd be glad to live in yourself, even without the girls. We flash back to earlier times and see Val seducing her stepfather and then joining the village *bordel*. It becomes apparent that even before she met Al she'd had enough to put a handrail round Australia. But Al's backbreaking regime outside the bedroom is getting him down. He admits in a moment of clarity "*Je ne suis pas fait pour travailler...c'est trop fatigant*" – oik readers will have no trouble sympathising with this aristocrat sentiment. Eventually Val decides to go back to the brothel and Al goes back to the family chateau, but he'll see Val from time to time. Best for all concerned really.

What other treasures lie undiscovered in provincial French bookshops? They're always worth a trawl. Yes, I did feel a twinge of guilt as I handed over a paltry 2 euros for what will surely finish up in the Bibliotheque Nationale. Just remember you read it first in the Crazy Oik.

UN CHEF D'OEUVRE INCONNUE



POUR L'AMOUR D'UNE PUTE



MY LIFE IN PRINT

Ray Blyde

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ownership of the motorbike transformed Sed's lifestyle to such an extent that even Henry was forced to comment on his obsession.

"Bloody 'ell Sed, I thought I was keen, but you take the biscuit."

"I'm dead made up Hen. It's the best thing that's happened to me since....well, I can't remember when."

"You should be ready for your test now. I can't teach you any more."

"I want to be able to strip it down and tune it like you do."

"Hold on wack, you've got to learn to ride before you can race."

"I got a letter yesterday morning, my test's next Thursday at 4.30."

"Great, it used to be taken around the liver building."

"It still is."

"Well d'you fancy a quick spin around the block," urged Henry. "And concentrate on letting the clutch in smoothly." They donned their helmets, Sed kickstarted it first time. He opened the throttle two or three times. The engine roared, then settled to a nice even burbling tickover. Pulling in the clutch lever with his left hand, pushing the gear lever down into first, letting the clutch lever out with a jerk they lurched forward and sped away in a cloud of smoke.

The day of the test dawned damp and misty. He hadn't slept well, he kept going over and over in his mind the questions in the highway code. When is it unsafe to overtake?...er, junction, hill, humped back bridge.

"There's egg on toast on the table Sed, don't let it go cold," said Elsie looking anxiously at the frown of concentration on her son's face.

"I don't feel very hungry mam."

"Get it down you, you can't go to work on an empty stomach you silly boy!"

"No, I can't face it, I'll just have a cup of tea."

"I'll be glad when you get over this motorbike madness, it's all you think about nowadays. You never see that girl very much now. All you think about is that damn bike!"

MY LIFE IN PRINT

"Don't keep on about it mam, I'll see more of Gwen when I've past my test then I'll be able to take her out."

"What's wrong with the bus?" said Elsie placing a cup of tea down in front of him with one hand and removing the egg on toast with the other.

"Nothing," replied Sed knowing full well that he couldn't win this argument.

Sed parked the bike outside the Liver buildings and went inside to report to the test centre. There was about half a dozen blokes sitting nervously waiting for an examiner. One bloke got up and walked to the window and started trying to read and memorise registration numbers. He obviously had poor eyesight, his glasses had thick lenses which reminded Sed of Tizer bottle bottoms. One by one the condemned men went to meet his maker leaving the man with the bad eyesight and himself to face the executioner. Sed's stomach was rumbling with anxiety, when Cyclops spoke to him.

"Do me a favour will ye see 'ow many of these numbers I get right." He read off about half a dozen, half of which he got wrong.

"Is this your first test mate?" queried Sed beginning to feel sorry for him.

"No, it's my second. I failed my first one because I couldn't read a number at twenty five yards, mind you it was very foggy. The examiner taped it out for me and I still couldn't read it. He said I should go for an eye test."

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Have an eye test?"

"No, but if I can memorise those six cars outside I've cracked it. If I can just get on the bike I know I can pass the test." He took off his glasses breathed on the lenses and gave them an energetic rub with the tail of his shirt. At this point an examiner emerged from behind the counter with his clipboard called his name and off they went outside. Sed watched for a brief moment then a voice behind him said

"Mr Kirk?"

"Yes," said Sed starting to sweat profusely.

"Have you got your licence?"

"Yes," replied Sed diving into his inside pocket hoping he'd remembered to bring it with him. The examiner looked a decent enough cove who would hopefully make allowances for human frailty. He read the registration number without any problems and waited for further instructions.

"Ok," said the examiner, I want you to go straight up Dale street and take the second turning on the right, then first right, then second right, keep going right until you see me somewhere on the course, then I'll step out and you do your emergency stop, Ok?" Sed nodded, kickstarted the bike and set off.

Sed went right as directed, and after what appeared a indeterminate amount of time and a feeling that he was developing a right hand bias, there was no sign of the examiner. Eventually he pulled up outside the liver buildings as the examiner came out of the test centre with another candidate, he caught sight of Sed and didn't look too pleased.

"Where've you been?" Sed nearly said where d'you think, but decided he'd better be diplomatic.

"I went where you told me, second right, then second right again..."

"No, I said second right, then first right, then second right!"

"Oh," said Sed, "Does that mean I've failed?"

"Put in for another test, and pay attention to what you're told, look I have to walk around the course. I haven't got time to go chasing after you, at the end of the day I'm shattered." Sed nodded despondently. He had anticipated chucking his L- plates away, and riding home in triumph on a triumph, so to speak. He didn't feel as though he'd been given a fair crack of the whip. As he was kicking the bike over he caught sight of the lad with the bad eyesight wandering around looking panic stricken.

"Hey, how did you go on?"

"I'm not worried about that, some bastards pinched me bike."

"Are you sure, where'd you leave it?"

"Out front. I went back into the centre to get a form for another test."

"Look, get on the back, we'll have a look around to see if we can see it, if we can't I'll run you to the police station and you can report it."

"What about your L-plates?"

MY LIFE IN PRINT

"I'll take 'em off. Bollocks to it, the way I feel at the moment." He explained why he failed his test.

"How did you go on?"

"Failed! couldn't read the number plate."

"I thought you'd memorised them?"

"I did, but the crafty sod took me round the corner. I only got a couple of letters wrong, you'd think they'd make allowances and give you the benefit of the doubt."

The two failed test candidates set off in search of stolen motorcycle.

"What make of bike was it ?" enquired Sed.

"A B.S.A Bantam, a sort of dirty pale green." They searched the immediate area without success so Sed dropped him off outside Dale street police station.

"Thanks a bundle wack. I hope I can do you a favour sometime."

"That's ok....."

"Nick."

"Sed." They shook hands. It was gratifying to note thought Sed that he accepted his name without question.

"What you going to do about your test?"

"I don't know now, I can't do much without a bike."

"They will get it back, they usually do, sooner or later."

"If I do I think I'll sell it."

"Why d'you want to do that?"

"Let's face it Sed, my eyesight's not good enough to pass the test. I'm just kidding myself." Sed felt sorry for him and a little less depressed himself. He could always put in for another test and pay attention next time.

"Don't give up Nick, I hope you get your bike back?"

"Thanks, its funny how things turn out, here's me as blind as a bat, and you as deaf as a post!"

It took a month to get the second test date. It was a dull, cold, with drizzle. Sed could hardly see through his visor because of the rain and the condensation. He pulled into the kerb and wiped the inside of the visor with his handkerchief. He had that strange feeling of foreboding again as he rode on. When he got to the test centre the feeling

intensified when he found out that he'd got the same examiner. He listened intently as he was given directions on which way to go. Before he reached each corner he looked behind him, changed down and gave a clear hand signal. Having turned right he was about to change up when the examiner stepped into the road from behind a bus queue. Sed applied the brakes, with a combination of wind rain and greasy road surface, Sed and the bike continued forward at the same rate of knots catching the examiner a glancing blow knocking his trilby off and separating him from his clipboard which went slithering across the road. People from the bus queue helped the examiner up dazed but unhurt. One old lady set about Sed with her umbrella and railed on that all motorcyclists should be banned from the road and threatened to call the police. A bus came and most of the people boarded it. One man offered the examiner his name and address as a witness.

"I'm terribly sorry, I tried to stop...."

"It's you isn't it? I might have known." He looked heavenwards and threw up his arms.

"You nearly killed me d'you know that?"

"Not purposely, are you ok?"

"You're the one who got lost about a month ago?"

"A slight misunderstanding on my part, anyway shall I carry on?" Sed got the distinct feeling that he'd failed his second test.

"No you can't carry on, in fact do me a favour if you have any intention of applying again don't apply to this centre ok?" Sed watched him straighten his trilby, and strut away muttering something about in all his years as an examiner.....

Sed decided that he would take his next test somewhere else, to see if his luck changed. He was fairly confident that there was nothing wrong with his riding ability given a fair crack of the whip. However, it looked like the business of another test would have to go on the backburner because his mother had another attack of depression. She usually staggered against Sed when they were out walking which was a sure indicator that another bout was in the offing, then after a week or two she would be confined to bed, followed inevitably by her visits to Sed's bedroom in the middle of the night. Sed dreaded it. It wasn't the fact that she was ill that upset him. He knew she couldn't help herself. It was having to cope with it on his own.

MY LIFE IN PRINT

Eadie was very supportive, she came down most days while he was at work. What bugged him most of all was the impotence of the medical profession. Her doctors complete inability to know how to treat her. He would dispense tablets like liquorice allsorts which made her dopey and put her off her food, and the prolonged period of time in bed was making her weak. Matters came to a head a few days later. Sed was in bed reading when there was an almighty bang from his mother's bedroom followed by a scream. He leapt out of bed and dashed into her room to find her trapped half way in and half way out of the bedroom window. He held on to her right arm while he pushed up the sash window and pulled her back inside. She was so drugged up she had no idea where she was. He locked the window, made her as comfortable as possible then went downstairs to the phone. He was so angry he could hardly speak coherently.

"I want to speak to doctor Benson, pardon...what d'you mean he's not on tonight...who's on? Well whoever it is I want him to come out now! my mother's just tried to commit suicide. The tablets she's been taking are making her hallucinate." He was assured that the locum would be there within the hour. He went back upstairs to find that she had gone to sleep which was a relief. He went back downstairs and made himself a cup of tea and waited for the arrival of the doctor.

It was nearly two hours before the doctor finally arrived. He was a small dapper middle aged man with shifty eyes and a pronounced stammer. He reacted as though he was frightened to death as Sed tried to explain the situation while doing his utmost to hold his temper.

"W..what tablets is s..she on?" he enquired his eyes darting all around the room. Sed opened the bedside cupboard and handed him the bottle. The doctor squinted at the label as though he was badly in need of a pair of reading glasses.

"Hmm, th these are a bit on the s..strong side, I'll p..prescribe s..something m..more suitable." Sed looked at him incredulously and thought that he was in need of medical attention himself.

"Look doc I don't want her to have anymore tablets, what she needs now is treatment in hospital." He explained her previous treatments with E.C.T.

"It's a very c..controversial t..treatment, s..s..some p..people believe it damages the b..brain."

Sed was in no mood to argue the fat with this bloke.

"And all these drugs are not doing her brain any good either. I want Dr Valman to see her, can you arrange that?"

"Y..yes if y..you wish er..."

"Aren't you going to examine her doctor? she's hurt her arm trying to climb through the bedroom window." The doctor squinted at her arm.

"Y..yes... well, it l..looks c..clean enough. It will be a p..pity to wake her. C..c..can you put a bit of p..plaster on it?" Sed couldn't believe his ears.

"Me put the plaster on?"

"Y..yes...I haven't b..brought any w..with me." He rummaged through his briefcase for his prescription pad and started writing feverishly. Tore it off and handed it to Sed.

"Th..these are a w..weaker dose of w..what s..she is already on. In t...the m..meantime I'll c..c..ontact d..doctor V..valman. I b..bid you g..good day." Closed his briefcase and shot out of the bedroom down the stairs and out of the front door as if his life depended on it.

Sed had to take more time off work to look after his mother. His absences weren't going down too well with King now that he was a fully fledged journeyman he could ill afford to have him missing for long periods of time because he was having to pay Sed's wages into the chapel fund. The union demanded that if the department was working light the man's wages were paid into the fund and shared out every six months. Then Sed got some help from an unexpected quarter. One evening the doorbell rang, he opened it to find Gwen standing there,

"Hi!"

"Hello Sed, I thought I'd call round, seeing that there was no chance of you coming to see me."

"Honestly Gwen.....I just haven't had time with me mam and that."

"I know, that's why I'm here, mum's sent some scones and I've brought a bottle of wine."

"That's great come in," he gave her a warm kiss on the lips as feelings of desire welled up inside him. He'd missed her all right, he was just beginning to realise how much.

MY LIFE IN PRINT

"How's your mum Sed?"

"Not so good, she tried to climb out of the bedroom window last night."

"Oh my God, is she all right?"

"She's Ok at the moment. I've had the doctor, a bit of a pillock. He didn't examine her just gave me a prescription for some more of the pills that are making her go round the bend."

"Last time she was ill she went into hospital for some T.C.P. treatment?" Sed had to smile despite the seriousness of the situation.

"You mean ECT, they gave her some electric shock impulses to the brain."

"It sounds horrendous!"

"Apparently they don't feel anything because they put them under. It put her back on her feet for about two years." They were interrupted by a thump from upstairs. "I think she's fallen out of bed again." He ran up the stairs closely followed by Gwen. Elsie was stretched out on the bedroom floor. They each took an arm and heaved her back into bed.

"You're ok mam, no harm done."

"What's going to become of me son?"

"You're going to be fine," he assured her.

"Who's this? The doctor?" enquired Elsie as Sed tucked her in.

"It's Gwen, you know Gwen - Henry's sister!"

"What's going to become of me Gwen?" Sed looked up to the ceiling for some divine guidance which didn't look as though it was forthcoming.

"Don't you worry Mrs Kirk, we're going to make you a nice cup of tea and a scone. Elsie didn't show much enthusiasm

"Very nice, but I'm not very hungry"

Un professeur frappé en pleine classe

Un professeur de mathématiques a été très légèrement blessé mardi après avoir été frappé en plein cours par un élève de 14 ans dans un collège de Vitry-sur-Seine. Âgé de 31 ans, il a reçu trois gifles et un coup de genou de la part d'un collégien à qui il reprochait de parler en classe et de mettre ses pieds sur la table.

A maths professor was slightly hurt on Tuesday after being struck in class by a pupil aged 14 in a college in Vitry-sur-Seine.

Aged 31, he received three slaps and a blow from the knee of the student whom he had criticised for speaking in class and putting his feet on a table.

Meanwhile in our more enlightened state....

YOUR MUM!

S. Kadison

Daniel came into the classroom, as usual, as into a boxing ring. He was shortish, strong, and had the broad, straight shoulders that came from dedicated swimming. He thrust himself forward as if his head were a battering ram. His demeanour always declared: "Get out of my fucking way!"

"Get out of my fucking way!" he said.

"Can I ask you not to talk like that please, Daniel?"

"Like what?"

"What you just said, Daniel. It's not really appropriate in a classroom."

"What did I say?"

"I don't want to repeat it, Daniel."

"I didn't say shit."

"Can I ask you not to say that either?"

"What?"

"I think you know what I mean, Daniel."

"I never said nothin'."

"Can I ask you to sit down now, Daniel?"

"Can I just go to the toilet?"

"You've just had break. We need to get the lesson started."

"Am burstin'!"

Daniel grabbed his crotch and doubled up. The girls, who were drifting in, standing at the back looking out of the shoulder-high windows, getting out their mirrors to adjust their hair, laughed with artificial glee.

"Ten seconds and we'll all be sitting down quietly, please. One. Two..."

And the chorus went up from all of them: "Three, four, five..."

Ms Dury stood at her desk waiting for the racket to die down.

"Shall we all sit for a start, please?"

"I need to go for a piss!" shouted Daniel.

"Okay. There and back in one minute, Daniel."

"Can I go?" asked one of the girls.

"I'd rather you didn't, we need to make a start."

"It's her time of the month," called her pal, "she could bleed to death!"

Once more the false laughter filled the room.

“Can I ask you to be back as soon as you can please, Kirsty?”

“You can ask me but I’ll take as long as I need.”

“Can I go with her?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“It is. She’s not feeling well. If she collapses in the toilets she’d sue you.”

“Yeah, I need her to come with me. I’ve got terrible cramps!”

And she doubled up.

The two girls left the room.

“Can you all sit down now, please? Becky, can I ask you to sit there please?”

“Why?”

“Because there’s no need to share a desk. There’s a desk each. It’s always better to have plenty of room.”

“I’ll be good.”

“I’m sure you will, but it’d be better if you could sit on your own.”

“No. I want to sit here. I don’t like sittin’ on my own. I get lonely.”

“Miss, he’s got me pencil case!”

“Shall we all sit down, then we’ll have a chance of getting some work done?”

“Give us it! Miss, he’s got me fuckin’ pencil case!”

“Can I ask you to restrain your language, Philip?”

“But he has!”

“Can you give him his pencil case back, please?”

“I haven’t got it.”

“He has! He taxed it off my desk!”

The boy whose pencil case had gone missing lunged at the other who grabbed him by the tie.

“Get off my fuckin’ tie! Miss, he’s got my tie.”

“Can you two let go of one another, please!”

“It’s not me, it’s him. Get off me you twat or I’ll fuck your mum.”

“I’ve already fucked yours!”

“Now that’s enough! Let go of one another and sit down or I’ll have to bring a senior member of staff.”

A sleek, swift paper aeroplane whose launch she didn’t see, hit her in the face.

“Who threw that?”

A gaggle of boys was sniggering, huddled against the wall.

YOUR MUM

“Let’s all sit down now. Come on. Ten seconds and we’ll all be sitting down. One, two...

And the mocking roar went up:

“Three, four, five, six....”

Daniel came back, climbed on the radiator and began to open the windows.

“Daniel! Daniel! Come down from there! Daniel! Can you get down, please, Daniel?”

“I’m only opening the windows.”

“Shut them windows! It’s bloody freezin’!” called one of the girls.

The two pencil case boys were now rolling on the floor. Dury went over to them.

“If you don’t get up and get to your desks immediately I’m going for Mr Cass.”

Attacking one another like fighting cocks the lads ignored her.

“You’re going to hurt one another. Get up!”

Another beautifully folded paper dart flew out of the window. Two girls came to get a closer view .

“Sit down you two.”

“We’re only lookin’!”

They jostled one another and bumped into Dury. She turned and put her hand on the upper arm of the nearest.

“Get off me!” the child shrieked. “See that? She hit me! I’ll press charges.”

“I didn’t hit you. I was simply encouraging you to get out of the way.”

“I’ve got witnesses. She hit me, didn’t she?”

And a great howling jeer arose from the girls and boys who were now pressing round menacingly. Their faces were alive with the idea of their own malicious power. They were untouchable. Their eyes were wide with the thrill of irresponsibility. They were in love with their own mindlessness. They celebrated ignorance and they were intent on bringing low anyone who tried to lift them out of it. They had great forces on their side after all. Television. Pop music. The whole ugly parade of empty vulgarity justified them. And here was a woman who tried to make them take Shakespeare seriously! What could she do? What could she do against their collective howling, their falling into the mindlessness that exempted them from all responsibility, that allowed them the excuse of *everyone was doing it*. So they revelled and triumphed in what, as individuals, they knew

was wrong. But oh, the vicious pleasure of doing evil without the possibility of consequence. And they would do evil. Yes, in their collective nastiness they would relish being able to push Dury down the stairs, to see her fall, helpless. To see her body go tumbling, undignified and to watch her land in a crumpled heap. And if she were dead? Well, it wasn't me. I wasn't doing anything. Everyone was doing it. How they longed to be able to drive their infantile desires to the limit, to have the sense of absolute power. For they were weak. They were immature and largely ignorant children. They understood virtually nothing, but they were afraid. Why did they so love their collective maliciousness? They had no inkling. They were lost to themselves. They howled and weren't responsible.

Dury found herself surrounded and being pressed back towards the wall. She seized a boy who was small and light and pushed him aside. He turned with an ugly, aggrieved expression.

"Now, go to your seats!" she bellowed. "This is very serious! Get to your seats now!"

Slowly they dispersed and sat down, sniggering, calling across the room:

"She's gonna get sued."

"Yeah. I'm gonna get my dad in."

Daniel was still standing on the radiator.

"Get down now, Daniel."

"I can't. I'm scared of heights."

"Better call the fire brigade, Miss!"

Once more they let fly their harsh, destructive laughter.

"Right. Enough's enough. I'm going for Mr Cass now."

She walked to the door. The racket subsided.

"The choice is yours. Do we get on with the lesson or do I bring Mr Cass?"

No-one replied. They were all sitting down and the noise was no more than a petty hum. She came back to her desk.

"We've wasted a lot of time. Let's get on quietly now."

"Aren't you going for Mr Cass, Miss?"

They did very little but at least they stayed in their seats. She'd already been told by Cass that if she kept them all in the room for the entire lesson, that was success. When they'd gone, she went to the staff-room for a Serious Incident Report form. The tale was sure to go around. The lad she'd laid hands on might take action. Her heart sank at the thought of the nastiness. She completed the form making

YOUR MUM

sure she included every detail. She put it in Cass's pigeon-hole and went to make herself a drink.

There was a corner of the staff-room where the women congregated. There was now an equal number of male and female teachers, but a mere twenty years earlier there'd been only three women. The masculinity of the place lingered and it made the women pull together. This little corner was theirs, just as the men colonized the seats around the big, circular table by the window which admitted the most light. Anna sat down with her herbal tea, feeling awful. At these times, she always wanted to tell someone, but the telling brought humiliation. It had taken her a few years to realize that telling other teachers about your problem classes made them feel superior. She'd told Gwen Lightfoot, for example, when Year 11 had put a plastic bottle full of urine in her handbag and the result had been Gwen coming into her lessons almost every day announcing:

"Is everything fine in here, Ms Dury?"

Then the pupils had begun to taunt:

"Why does Mrs Lightfoot come into these lessons, Miss?"

"Is it because you're a crap teacher, Miss?"

She had thought teachers would support one another but the system made everyone fearful. They were fighting one another for promotion, after all. They were competing for money and status. Luke Hale, for example, who strutted through the staffroom like a little General and always spoke more loudly than was necessary had put her down in front of a class by shouting at her for not having completed her reports correctly. It was true, as everyone knew, he was a weak-minded man who had kept in with the right people to get his advancement, but he could throw his weight around and get away with it. He was expert in humiliation followed by the friendly smile.

She sipped her tea and wished she could walk out. What bizarre idealism had made her become a teacher? She had imagined productive relationships with classes of children glad of her efforts. What a fool! This was a system of coercion and when people are coerced, they kick against the pricks. She could have lapsed into tears very easily but had to hold them back, *toughen up*, as her boyfriend said. She let herself disappear in the hum of chatter.

Then Jayne Newman began to hold forth.

"I'm going for it!" she declared. "Why not? I don't have any discipline problems. Teachers who can't control classes aren't delivering properly. That's my view. I have no trouble at all. When I talk, the

little buggers listen!”

There was an Assistant Head post available and Newman, with a mere three years teaching behind her, believed she was perfect for it. “If you don’t push yourself forward,” she said, “you don’t get anywhere in this life.”

“True,” said one of the other women.

Paula McVee turned to Anna.

“How are you today?”

Anna looked into her eyes. She was one of those women who use excessive sympathy as a form of power. Anna had trusted her and confided in her and Paula had said all the right things about the difficulties she was having. But when a school production had been arranged and Paula had been a moving force, she’d left Anna out, obviously thinking she wasn’t worthy of responsibility.

“I’m fine.”

“Your classes okay?”

“Yes, no trouble at all.”

“That’s good,” said Paula with her usual *nice* smile of slightly sickly friendliness.

When break was over, Anna stayed in her seat nursing her empty cup. She had books to mark and a dozen silly bits of useless administration to attend to, but she didn’t move. People came and went, rushing about their urgent business. At length she got up, put her cup back in the kitchen and walked out of the back door, across the fields and into the woods she’d never visited. She followed the little path between the rhododendrons with the ash and sycamores and oaks towering above. Once lost in the quiet, the school no longer visible, alone, she felt she could relax. She went slowly, pulling leaves and tearing them. Then she heard a voice, young and female. She stopped. Noiselessly she went forward again, being careful not to brush the bushes and when she came to the edge of a clearing, there was a young couple, on the ground, the girl sunny blonde, the boy dark and broad. He was lying half across her and they were kissing violently. Anna watched them for a few minutes and felt herself on the verge of laughter. She knew she should pull back quickly. This was someone else’s intimacy after all. But she stayed. And the more she watched, the more hilarious it seemed. Finally, she turned away and went quickly back to the staffroom. But how odd, in the middle of the morning, while her emotions were churned up and she was feeling so trapped and wretched, these two, snogging away heed-

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lessly and letting the world go to hell!

Later that day Cass called her in.

His office was big, airy and light. It was well away from the classrooms and play areas, on a corridor forbidden to pupils so was relaxingly calm and quiet. He sat behind his heavy wooden desk, a relic of the grammar school days. He was a tall, blond man who had spent some years in the army and retained his military bearing. His back was always so straight you'd have sworn his spine was inflexible. He wore a grey suit, the jacket always buttoned. He put on his glasses, half-way down his nose.

"I've read your report, Anna. It seems rather strange to me. You say: *The pupils crowded round me and began forcing me against the wall.*"

"Yes."

"Why weren't they sitting down?"

"I think my report makes clear....."

"I really must insist that you begin your lessons properly, Anna."

"I did...."

"Well, you say two girls left the room to go to the toilet and didn't return."

"That's right."

"Why did you let them go?"

"The girl insisted."

"No. You're one who must insist. The rule is they don't go during lessons."

"She claimed it was her period...."

"What, both of them?"

"No. The other girl just took it into her head....."

"I really must insist, Anna, that you tighten up on the way you begin your classes. The rules are quite clear..."

"But they ignore the rules, Dick. You know that."

"I know. They'll try it on all the time. But it's your responsibility to start your lessons in a way which calms them down and gets them working quickly. I really can't sanction the kind of mayhem you describe here."

Anna lowered her eyes a second. When she looked up, she saw the little smirk on Cass's lips. Seeing she'd noticed, he quickly corrected himself.

"I really must insist....." he began.

Anna sat and stared at him. The corners of his mouth drew down when he lifted his chin to squint through his lenses. He had a habit of tightening his lips and of smacking them like a man about to tuck in, which was his way of expressing disdain. He scanned the report again moving his head from side to side like someone watching a miniature tennis match.

“I’ll have a word with Daniel Bylinski. Would you like me to do that?”

Anna looked at him and didn’t speak. He gazed at her over his gold frames.

“I think that’s the best I can do.”

“I started the lesson perfectly well.”

He shook his head slowly.

“Quite frankly, Anna...”

“These kids don’t know how to behave. They’re out of control. Everyone knows that.”

“Some classes are difficult. I don’t deny it. But your responsibility...”

“It’s not my responsibility to be surrounded by an ugly mob .”

“But you must begin your classes in an orderly way and insist...”

“Nobody insists with these kids. They’ve got us on the run. Put the little sweethearts in detention and you’ll get an angry letter from a psychopathic parent banging on about human rights. You’re in charge of discipline. You speak to them.”

“I’ve said I’ll speak to Daniel. From what you’ve written....”

“They need to be spoken to as a class. They act as one. They play on the fact that collective guilt means everyone’s innocent.”

Cass looked over his glasses once more. He took them off and rubbed his eyes. He pulled himself up very straight in his seat.

“When do you next teach them?”

“Tuesday two.”

“Fine. I’ll come and have a word with them. Take the heat out of things. Are you happy with that?”

She nodded.

All weekend she was tense. She kept thinking of Cass’s words and that horrible little smirk. The humiliation of that smirk! She went swimming. She and her boyfriend ate out and saw a film. She tidied the house. But all the time the disturbing thoughts worked away at her consciousness, like rats gnawing through skirting boards in the night.

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Tuesday two, Daniel came in as usual. He climbed on the radiator. The rest drifted in, sat on the desks, knocked chairs over, stood looking out of the windows. One of the boys threw his bag across the room. It hit another lad on the back of the head. He went down and lay on his stomach.

“Mr Cass is coming to talk to you so I’d sort yourselves out if I were you!” she bellowed. “I’ve submitted a Serious Incident Report about last lesson. Mr Cass is coming today. Sit down and shut up if you don’t want trouble.”

They slouched into their seats. The lad on the floor pulled himself to his feet.

“I’ve got fuckin’ concussion!”

“Just get to your seat. You’ll be okay.”

A paper dart came out of nowhere, flew past her and hit the whiteboard.

“Who threw that?”

They sniggered or put on innocent expressions.

“I’m assuming it was you,” she pointed to Daniel.

“You can’t blame me! I haven’t done shit!”

“It came from your direction. I’m telling Mr Cass it was you.”

“You cannot be serious!” Daniel was out of his seat, his chest puffed like a town square pigeon.

“Sit down, Mr McEnroe,” she said.

“Who?”

“Ten seconds and we’ll all be quiet.”

This time they didn’t count.

She was embarrassed at her own voice as she set them their task. The simple act of taking intellectual effort seriously was humiliating in this atmosphere of wilful resistance and entrenched stupidity. If she’d turned on the telly and let them watch *Big Brother* they’d’ve been delighted. But she was getting them to read a little story by Maupassant which she’d translated herself: *Two Friends*. She hoped the violence at least might appeal to them. She wanted them to read it to themselves so her voice didn’t do the work of interpretation but every few seconds someone called out:

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s crap.”

“What do we have to read this shit for?”

“Just try reading quietly. Make a bit of effort. It’s only a few pages. If you try, you’ll see it’s worth it.”

“Why can’t we watch a DVD?”

They weren’t making an effort, but there was relative peace. The Big Man was coming. The school, like all schools, ran on fear. Its model was the army. Ultimately, only fear of the Big Man kept these kids from throwing the desks out of the window. He had the power of exclusion, suspension, bringing in parents. Enough to make them take a step back. Anyone without power was fair game.

They were twenty minutes into the lesson.

“When’s Mr Cass coming, Miss?”

“He’ll be here.”

She turned on the OHP. There were five questions.

“What do we have to do?”

“Answer the questions in the front of your books.”

“Do we have to answer them questions?”

“Yes. Answer the questions in the front of your book.”

“Do we do ‘em in the back?”

“In the front.”

“What do we have to do?”

“What does it mean, what activity do the two friends share?”

“They’re bum chums!”

“They suck each other’s dicks!”

“Can I just remind you Mr Cass will be here in a minute! It means what do they like doing together. Like you might enjoy going to the cinema with a friend.”

“He might enjoy getting up his arse!”

“You enjoy getting up your mum’s arse.”

The joyless, sad laughter flared again like a sudden flame from a dying bonfire. The minutes went by. They were doing hardly anything. Not one of them had read the little story through.

“It’s too hard. There’s too many words.”

“Try to see the pictures.”

“There aren’t any pictures!”

They were into the last fifteen minutes of the lesson.

“When’s Mr Cass coming, Miss?”

“Don’t worry he’ll be here.”

“What if he doesn’t come, Miss?”

“He’ll come.”

She knew the last five minutes would be awful.

“He’s not coming is he, Miss?”

Daniel climbed onto the radiator. Two boys overturned a desk and

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began fighting between its upturned legs. A pair of girls ran out before the bell. She went and stood at the door to keep the rest of them.

“Pack away and stay at your desks, please!”

They crowded round her. The boys at the back got their shoulders down and pushed hard so the ruck pinned her to the door. She couldn't move. The bell rang.

“Open the door!”

Two big lads seized the handle and started pulling. She was thrust out of the way. She flung herself forward, grabbed a boy and shoved him as hard as she could.

“See that! She fuckin' hit me!”

The door was ajar and pupils were squeezing through.

“Where's Mr Cass, Miss?”

As she extricated herself from the melee someone called:

“Cocksucker!”

They were gone. The corridor filled with their fighting-upwards mania.

She was too angry to go to see Cass but later that day she bumped into him.

“I've spoken to Daniel Bylinski and his mother. She says he's very anti-school.”

“You didn't come to my lesson.”

“I didn't think it was appropriate.”

“We agreed.”

“Yes. But I changed my mind.”

She stared at him. He pressed his lips together, parted them and closed them with that curious little slap. Turning from her he pulled himself to his full height, straightened his back, looked at the papers in his hands and walked away.

Henceforth, the class was wild. They taunted her:

“When's Mr Cass coming, Miss?”

“Does he not like ya?”

And when the OFSTED inspectors arrived, this was the group they chose to see.

BONER

Ewan Kerr

There are lots of flowers in our garden. Lots of splendid blooms have blown in. I wish we could take credit for planting them. We live at the bottom of a hill you see. There's a curve. Like a hockey stick. When the bins are emptied on a Friday, the garden is full of empty crisp packets and soiled bin liners. I found a condom once. There are weeds too. It's surprising what the wind carries in.

The wife is as acerbic as ever "I put twenty pound in the car again."

"I put twenty in on Sunday."

"No you didn't."

"I left a receipt on your desk."

"I put ten in before that." She walks off. I think there is supposed to be a joke in there somewhere. A criticism with a smile. It's just that there are so many. I'm flattened under the weight.

Fred is tending his pansies across the road as I come out the front door. They run in an immaculate line along by a lush micro-lawn. Fred is boring, but a nice man. He's figured out his slug plague is originating in his neighbour's garden.

"They wait 'till it's dark, then they cross the drive and make for the flower bed. I realized this when I saw the lines of slime the next morning. I've been putting poison out these last three nights and shovelling bags full of them. It's unbelievable."

Very nice Fred.

Next to Fred is Jason and Gale. They're out washing the car. You can set your clock by them as they say. They get a new car every year. An Audi or a Mercedes. Money is no object. They wash the car every Saturday at 10.30 am. Jason always has a quizzical look on his face, like he is trying to figure you out but never getting there. Otherwise he expresses his zest for life by avoiding conversation and removing himself whenever he gets the chance. Gale has had a lot of abdominal surgery. I'm not quite sure what, but I'm thinking most of her abdomen must be empty, the skin stretched over like the membrane of a drum. On Monday nights an eerie blue glow can be seen emanating from the bedroom. It's the tanning machine.

Donald and Jane live next door. They have their fights outside in the summer. They can't stand living together. They haven't been able to stand it for forty years. They're like two pieces of plutonium.

On the other side is Hilda. I never walk on that side of the garden in case she sees me, but I need to grab the secateurs for later. Lots of dead heading to do. She's got another workman in to look at her gutting, poor bastard. She'll keep pestering him with petty requests and complaints about his workmanship until he has to change his number. I duck down as she emerges from the extension. She comes right up to the fence, less than two feet away from where I'm hiding. She's shouting. "Victor!" Silence. "Viiiiiiiictor!"

"Yes dear?"

"Would you like a cup of tea Victor?"

Victor is a living saint. "No thank you dear."

"It's in the pot?"

"I'll get one later."

"Easy to pour a cup?"

"No thanks."

"Shame to let it go cold?"

I told her that I had a back problem and I couldn't go out. This is because she wanted me to empty her pond. I'll do anything to avoid being sucked in. Lie, cheat, steal..... anything.

The sound of footsteps tells me they are heading for the kitchen. I don't know how he is going to get out of this one. There was not a hint of irritation in his voice. Hilda is difficult when she is hyper, but simply dreadful when she is depressed. One day he's going to put a pillow over her face.

The wife has gone to the shops. A chance to practice on my beef bugle. I've got a teenage brain but my prostate is a lot older. I'm godless too. The world feels empty. There's no joy anywhere. If I believed in the almighty, would I feel differently? It seems too high a price to pay, even for happiness.

I need some lawn food and a couple of large buckets of white paint for the exterior of the Hacienda. There's no chance that I can do anything this weekend without blowing my cover with Hilda, but the wife will be carping all day if I don't make a show. I could make a quick trip to the local store before Hilda has finished with the workman. Load up with some paint and a bit of shopping and leave it in the hall for the Ayatollah to spot when she arrives back. The car is on the drive, on the opposite side from Hilda. I'm breezing up the hill and taking the back road in the sunshine. There will be time for a latte at that new Armenian place. The proprietor is a bit unctuous but his pastries are top notch.

I'm coming out of Hall's Supplies with two ten litre tubs of white-wash when I spot Hilda coming in the opposite direction. I better nip into the minimarket. That was a mistake. She's followed me in. Need to dump the paint. I drop it near the entrance and head for the freezer food. I manage to duck down as she turns the corner. I'm speculating where the hell she gone to when I notice two monstrous calves next to me.

"Oh, hi Hilda."

"What are you doing down there?" Her eyes are like twin lasers.

"Dropped a penny." That sounded ridiculous.

"Dropped a penny? You're a bit of a skinflint aren't you? Had your wallet amputated have you?"

"Yeah, it does seem a bit trivial..."

"Besides which what are you doing out bed? You were in agony the last time I saw you."

"Still am Hilda. Don't know how I made it down here. I ran out of tea bags and you know what I'm like when I want a cuppa."

"You should have said. I can always bring some round."

"Yeah thanks."

"I think you better get up now."

I rise to my full height, slowly, as if in great pain.

"I better get back..."

She's looking very intently at me as I grab a box of tea bags and stagger towards the counter. As I'm leaving the counter girl calls me back.

"You forgot your paint."

"My paint? No it's not mine."

"Yes it is. I saw you put it down when you came in."

"She's right" says another voice. It's a security guard off to my right.

"Ah yes. Failing memory. You know what it's like."

As I pick up the paint and turn, Hilda comes round the corner. I stop for a moment and she looks me full in the face, then I turn and walk slowly towards the door like an ashamed five year old boy.

I bundle the paint onto the back seat and am back on the drive within five minutes. I can hear voices coming from the corner house. A new couple moved in last month. There's talk that he's a serial bankrupt. Never pays his creditors, but somehow retains his wealth. We all wish we could be like him. He never talks to anyone. Just stands on the lawn in his vest, a large gut hanging over his belt. Last night a car

collided with his concrete post, wrecking a new gate. We put it down to drunkenness. But now I wonder. Maybe an aggrieved creditor?

All this speculation is making me thirsty. I stack the paint and a few other items where they can't be missed and put the kettle on to boil. Only one chocolate biscuit left in the biscuit barrel. There is bound to be a comment if I don't leave her one. I put it on the plate with a couple of digestives. The tea is ready. Sitting in the extension, I can see Steve over the garden fence. He's looking in my direction. He has a huge lens on a tripod and camera so he can take pictures of birds. I'm a bit worried he might be taking pictures of me. Sometimes, when I wake up, I wander into the extension naked. I can't be bothered getting clothed, so I just run through on the way to the kitchen for an early morning cuppa. My todger might end up on the internet.

Another odd thing happened yesterday. Steve said he was having trouble with his hard drive. I offered to help by putting it in my caddy and extracting any file he wanted. While I was fiddling on my machine he was stood behind me and I got the strange feeling he was going to try to murder me. I know that sounds weird but when I turned around suddenly his tongue was lolling out at a peculiar angle. He didn't seem to think this was odd, but I kept him in my field of view after that by turning slightly to one side.

The missus is back. She looks tired. This means that I have to make the dinner. She sits down in the extension without commenting on the items in the hall.

The missus reckons that Steve and his wife bumped off their aging mother to inherit the house. Then a few years later the daughter 'disappeared' under strange circumstances. I reckon they are both under the patio with other victims.

There's the door bell. When I open it, it's Hilda with a net and some other bits of pond draining gear. She hands them to me. "9.30 tomorrow...." I am about to do her a favour, but the look on her face tells me that whatever I do will not right the terrible wrong, and I will be in servitude till the end of time. She walks off.

I should be worried but I'm not. My mind keeps returning to Steve and his patio. Last year the dog was digging near the edge of the corner flagstone and brought back what I swear looked like a human femur. It turned out to belong to an animal. Just yesterday he dug up what could be the ankle bone of a vagrant, or perhaps some poor

woman selling pegs? There's just time to make a call before I put the dinner on.

"Hello is that the University? Can you put me through to the forensics department? I need to speak to an expert in bones. The human variety. I think I may have unearthed an exciting specimen. How old is it? Now there's an interesting question."

And now we return to act three of Richard Wagner's Parsifal played by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Wilhelm Furtwangler. Apologies for the interruption in act two and the additional sound effects by the RAF. We urge our English devotees to write a strong letter to the gangster Churchill and the butcher Bomber Harris demanding that Opera Nights here in the capital of the Reich should not be disrupted in this philistine manner. Act three will be followed by our interval talk which this evening is by Dr Goebbels entitled "Shylock: An Elder of Zion"

**WAR-TIME GUIDE
FOR BATTERY USERS**

THE LISTENER

NEVER allow your radio to play too loudly. Remember that your neighbours may be on war work and will want to sleep in the day during periods of night work. Be careful to see that your radio is switched off when you go out of the room—the illuminated dial seen through uncurtained windows may cause a blackout offence. Above all, never leave the set switched on all night after the station has closed down. And if you are settling down for an evening's earful don't go playing that German shite—Beethoven, Bach, Wagner and Strauss. They are the enemy after all and besides most of that stuff sounds like someone just trod on the cat. No, what you want is a good dollop of Vera Lynn or George Formby. Get out your chair and have a knees-up with the missis. I suppose there are toffee-nosed, pipe-smoking old buffers who'll ignore this warning but just watch it—you could finish up on the Isle of Man with Oswald Moseley.

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