

THE CRAZY OIK
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Danger Men at Work is from Ken Clay's collection ***Nietzsche's Birthday***. It appeared in ***Voices 22 Autumn 1980*** and in ***The Peniless Press 14 Autumn 2001***

The Professional Musician is from Tom Kilcourse's collection ***The Human Circus***.

Salvage and ***Irony Frigs*** are from Tanner's collection ***Dole Anthems*** Soon to be published.

Front Cover – *Work* (detail) – Ford Madox Brown 1852-65



Manchester's City Art Gallery isn't the greatest in the region but it does have a fine collection of pre-Raphaelites. Ford Madox Brown's *Work* is one of the best; probably his masterpiece. The card alongside it reads:

One day as Brown walked to his Hampstead studio he caught sight of a group of navvies digging a drain. He had been reading Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* which discusses the nobility of labour. It occurred to him that the navvies were as worth painting as any group of picturesque Italian peasants who graced the walls of the London Galleries.

He made these constructors of the modern world the central focus of his painting surrounding them with those who do not need to work or are deprived of meaningful work.

In contrast on the right (not shown on our cover) Thomas Carlyle watches as he converses with the Reverend F.D. Maurice, founder of the first college for working men. These are brainworkers, the cause of purposeful work and happiness in others.

Brainworker Carlyle, on the extreme right (significantly?) far from inspiring happiness in others in fact looks quite shifty. Reading Tom's strangulated prose is not recommended to any modern seeker of happiness either. Another Ford fan is Weatherspoons who have named a pub in Oxford Road Manchester – The Ford Madox Brown. A mouthful perhaps – but memorable.



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EDITORIAL

Since the experience of work looks like becoming as rare as a sighting of the great crested shitehawk I thought an ornithological investigation of the activity worth a go. It was Oscar who said “work is the curse of the drinking classes” and this issue seems strangely pre-occupied with these opposed states. It begins with Colin Watmough’s memoir of his time as a vac student in a brewery. The oiks immediately christened him “Collidge” (surely worthy of Oscar himself) and taught him how to booze for free. He was soon awarded a doctorate in piss-headery (a PhD) – then left to get the less distinguished MA (Cantab) and hence never needed to work again.

Nigel Ford, a Brit working in Sweden, describes with his usual deadpan the lunacies of Swedish oiks attempting to lay a cable. I imagine they invented elf an’ safety. Their struggle against the elements and the bureaucracy reads like an episode of *Wallander* set in Trafford Park industrial estate.

Brett Wilson restrains his usual nutty surrealism to describe the goings on in his office. It still sounds surreal but I believe every word.

David Thomas stands in as temporary shopkeeper at his dad’s ironmongers only to get stuck with a mad-eyed crackpot demanding a repair for his clapped out garden tap. Dave tries to brush him off – it is nearly closing time – but Enoch Powell isn’t taking no for an answer.

Nick Woods finds himself in an epiphanic moment grading oysters.

Jack Smylie Wild highlights the plight of the police struggling to keep us safe in the capital. He doesn’t look like an Arab but he *was* writing poetry within half a mile of Downing Street. Obviously a wrong ‘un who deserved everything he got. Where would we be without these conscientious custodians of liberty? Surely the government aren’t seriously proposing to monitor the forthcoming police demo with a volunteer army of students with pickaxe handles?

Tom Kilcourse is shocked to recognise his posh girlfriend's dad as something less than the toff he expected.

We extract from Paul Tanner's explosive new book two examples of life among the unemployed of Liverpool and urge Oik readers to find more in his new collection *Dole Anthems* – to be published soon.

My own *Danger Men at Work* aims to show what good times can be had dire circs. I can vouch for its authenticity. Ron Horsefield's similar take on workshop fun must be a fantasy. But Ron has done time on the shopfloor and he assures me it's all true.

Elsewhere and off this theme we welcome Kayti Doolittle from Kansas City (see the website for pics with cat) and welcome back Marie Feargrieve, the prolific S. Kadison, David Birtwistle, Bette Braka and the enduring Ray Blyde.

Ken Clay April 2011

BROWN ALE FOR BREAKFAST

Colin Watmough

There are some things that are indelibly stamped into your memory. Your first lay. Your first gigantic social blunder. Your first set of wheels. Up there high on the list was my first work experience, a revelation of real life that drenched me like a cold shower after the sheltered world of academe.

Cloistered in the local grammar school, a sixth form boy of promise from the gritty back streets of Warrington, I had swotted and sweated my way to a scholarship at Cambridge, the alma mater of Mr Jackson our headmaster. Jackson was a cool dude. Standing six two, with an imperious stare and given to theatrical sweeps of an outflung arm at the lectern on prize day, he greatly impressed parents. He straddled the class divide between Guinness and dry sherry like a colossus, encouraging his flock to aim high and only compromise if forced by lack of talent or discovery.

Accordingly, I took my A levels with distinction and sat a half dozen entrance exams to red brick and Ivy League colleges. It was because of Jackson's encouragement that I had added Cambridge to the list. After months of anxious waiting, and gruelling interviews with faculty staff, actually held in French and German to test your language skills, I was offered an immediate place at Fitzwilliam or entrance to Magdalene after two years national service. To my chagrin I learned later that, had I chosen later entrance after national service, I would have spent a cushy six months as an officer cadet in the R. A. F learning Russian, followed by 18 months assigned to a ski station in Austria monitoring Russian short wave military transmissions, enjoying free skiing, and chasing the local mädchen in their dirndl skirts and shirred blusen. Moral: youth is stupid and impatient. As the old bull said "Lets walk down and get them all".

So, on to Cambridge and its dreaming spires. I don't quite know what I expected of Cambridge, but it did not quite measure up. First off, students were not allowed to have cars. Cars would have choked the quaint little city. Having ascended in my estimation to "grown up" status, it was demeaning to have to pedal around everywhere on a wrecked bike for the next three years, with an oily chain that jumped off the sprocket at any opportunity. The good news was that

academic gowns were compulsory wear to all lectures, tutorials and dinners in commons. This meant that there was always a rag handy to reattach the chain, wipe off your hands [or vomit if it had been a heavy night] and press on. In fact I soon learned that the bike and gown image were developed by the more senior students into an elaborate counter culture. It was a point of pride to have the biggest rustiest wreck, the most shredded gown. Freshmen could readily and contemptuously be recognized by their serviceable wheels and kempt appearance.

I don't know if it is still true today, but at that time the colleges were segregated and student life was surprisingly monastic. At first it was demoralizing to learn that the university comprised 18 men's colleges and only two women's colleges. This was a daunting ratio even for Lancashire's great unwashed. Only later did you appreciate that this fierce and forced social and sexual competition would hone competitive skills of persuasion and salesmanship which would serve well in later life. Incidentally, the colleges / university thing truly gave rise to the little joke at our American cousins' expense "Gee, Elmer, if you keep stopping to look at all the colleges, we will never get to see the university."

As regards competition, a case in point was the Saturday night dance. Typically we would rent a couple of coaches and by invitation to go out to one of the two local women's colleges. On the way the coaches quivered with febrile anticipation. High spirited groups of twenty year old studs, physiques honed on the playing fields and in the coxed eights, would descend on an equally expectant horde of females, hormones vibrating like quartz chips in cheap watches. College tutors, lecturers, docents and others designated to act as chaperones in the hall were laughably out manoeuvred. Couples who barely knew each other paired off at lightning speed, disappearing across lawns, over walls, and through galleries to the nearest dorm rooms where they could grope, resist or submit, all at the accelerated pace dictated by the midnight curfew.

On the coach back, some self appointed leader in the group would take it upon himself to establish the night's tally and individual credentials. "Okay, so who got some?" he would demand with authority, projecting his voice and sizing up the bus. "You're a liar and I don't believe you" he would exclaim. "Give me your finger. Let me smell it." This crude but accurate methodology, conducted down the

BROWN ALE FOR BREAKFAST

length of the bus, separated the lucky from the merely boastful. The latter, unmasked, slid further down in their seats and pretended sleep. This tally became the benchmark for the next excursion. Records were established. Legends were born. Heroes identified. Future plans laid.

Examples such as this were not the only uplifting features of academic life at this, the finest seat of English learning since the tenth century. I spent many months learning more and more about less and less. I can still quote you voluminous erudite detail about the life, manners and literature of the seventeenth century Austrian folk theatre for example. On the cocktail circuit Johannes Nestroy became my best buddy and literary wingman. Unfortunately I cannot recall any occasions since college when, in a Lancashire pub, or chippy, or bus shelter, I had occasion to debate with my fellow members of the public the intellectual imperatives of Kant or Fichte, the trauma of Goethe's *Sturm und Drang* years, or the exquisiteness of Molière's social satire. Only some time later did I come to the happy realization that you can get by very well in life without this bullshit.

However I digress. Each summer we were released from academe to go home, or "going down" as it is called. Under these curious linguistics the university is deemed to be perched on some sort of intellectual peak, so that leaving involves "going down", and returning involves "going up". I think this concept simply plays to academic vanity. Impecunious and drinking cheap sherry, the dons take comfort from their supposed lofty perch above the grubby materialism of the world below. Now at home I am delighted to face the prospect of three months liberation [and – thank the Lord – a much more favourable women ratio]. I plan to use half the time hitchhiking in Europe. It will not require a lot of money, but it will require some. A neighbour on our street, one of mother's friends, had a son who was a "gaffer" at a local brewery, apparently with some influence over their temporary summer hiring practices. Thus it was that in the early morning of a fine June day I found myself pedalling happily along Folly Lane and over the railway lines, with a recommendation in my pocket, to sign on as a loader at Walkers' brewery and to experience the industrial epiphany I mentioned earlier.

After minimal paperwork I was on the payroll and on the job! My provisional nickname "Collidge" had already been established in the first five minutes. I quickly got to know that that anyone with a bet-

ter than a tenth grade [secondary modern] education is automatically viewed with suspicion at best and contempt at worst by the average brewery worker. It became the standard denigrating form of address for me, as for example in “hey, Collidge, can yer write? put yer name ‘ere” or “hey, Collidge, get yer arse over ‘ere”.

The next stage of my orientation was an introduction to the local T.G.W.U. convenor of stewards. As convenor he had his own “office”, a cube made of plywood nailed across an unused corridor near the main gate. Apparently he claimed the need for his own office based on his official duties, interviewing aggrieved union members, plotting negotiating tactics against “the manidgement ”and generally leading the global charge “fightin for a livin’ wage”. I never understood what the phrase meant. The works runner took me there, tapped on the partition and called out “Harry? You in there? Here’s another of ‘em. Going on the loadin’ dock. Starts today. ”

The convenor pushed the door ajar, releasing a heady gravy-like aroma of brown ale into the corridor. He was a slightly built man, somewhat shifty looking, with sharp appraising eyes that slowly looked me up and down. His look registered the mix of suspicion and contempt that I was fast becoming familiar with. “What’s yer name” he asked and then, without giving me a chance to reply, said “Listen. Keep yer nose clean. Do what the boys tell yer, an’ yer will be a’right”. With that he made to withdraw back into his cube but then stopped in mid turn. “Oh, I forgot. ’ere is your opener”. He pulled a bottle opener from his pocket, apparently an essential union gift for every new starter. “If yer ‘ave a drink, be sure to take off the date stamp” and to illustrate, he leaned inside the cube, took a brown ale off the table and ran his thumb nail down the indentations on the side of the paper label, erasing them. He then took a swig, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and disappeared.

I learned later that removing traceable evidence of the bottling date in this way supposedly confused management stock controls and kept “manidgement” unaware of unauthorized pilferage and consumption. I very quickly found this proposition impossible to believe. I did a rough calculation and estimated that, conservatively, a full twenty percent of the brewery’s output disappeared in this way! The tales of mass pilferage were epic. Apparently the previous July, one of the loaders had married and at the reception, which lasted a full six hours, he and his lovely bride had hosted two hundred of

BROWN ALE FOR BREAKFAST

their best drinking buddies, family, and future relatives, at a reception provisioned entirely with purloined stock from the brewery. Including casks! It was hinted that whole truckloads had disappeared on nightshifts prior to the wedding and had reappeared [with defaced labels of course] the day of the nuptials. Heavy on-site drinking was also the norm. Empties littered the loading bays and bottling halls. Old hands routinely cracked a brown ale for breakfast after clocking in on the 6 a.m. shift. It served as a frequent refresher during the day, and at knocking off time the stream of bikes pouring through the gates emitted a low continuous clinking from knapsacks suspended over the handlebars. It was expected that you would also take home a small supply to see you and your friends through the evening.

After my meeting with the convenor, I was taken down by the runner to meet my checker, a portly man in his fifties with an elaborate comb-over and a chequered waistcoat which had established his reputation in the firm as a dresser of some weight, importance and taste. Alf was my checker and my boss. My job was to load wooden crates of ale onto the Scammells – long flatbed open trucks 30 feet long – that pulled into and out of the loading docks all day long. You would stand one foot on the dock and one foot on the Scammell, grasp a crate filled with 24 glass longneck bottles and swing it in one long fluid graceful movement off the pallet and onto the Scammell, stacking in orderly rows five high and six crates wide across the width of the bed and working back until it was fully loaded. Alf's job as checker was to tally the loading, to make sure the right quantities of brown, pale, stout and speciality brews were on board and stacked in the right sequence for offloading, to fulfil the orders from specific pubs in sequence on that particular Scammell's route.

After the mind-numbing monotony of reading the classics 10 hours a day for weeks on end, the joy of such strenuous labour was exhilarating! It was physically demanding. You developed a sweat. You developed a rhythm and a technique. Weight on the back foot, lift, swing, guide, and drop, adjusting the trajectory of each 25 lb crate through the air to its proper place on the next stack and the next row. A well built stack was a thing of beauty, like a tight dry stone wall running through the Welsh hills. Within weeks you felt like Adonis, shoulders firm and rippling with the exertion, abdomen tight, legs muscular. After a month I was probably in the best shape of my life. On their break, the girls from the bottling plant, in their headscarves

and curlers, would walk through the loading bays for a giggle from time to time, and we loaders would oblige by stripping off our tees. “Hey, Collidge, fancy a quickie tonight? ‘ere’s me number” but there was a lot more respect in the tone this time. Many of the offers were very serious.

I enjoyed my job so much it almost got me fired one day. Mid morning, and I was in the swing of it. Rhythmic, easy breathing. Feeling good. “Lets get this one done” I called to the fork lift driver, Jimmy. “Keep em coming, but faster” and I picked up the pace. My checker Alf started to fall behind and had to hustle to stay with the pace, bobbing and weaving among the pallets, checking the stock numbers off. Jimmy was roaring round the warehouse picking up pallets and lining them up on the dock so I could move straight to the next. He seemed to be enjoying the unaccustomed bustle and the urgency. Alf however was becoming peeved and out of breath. “Hey! Collidge” he yelled finally “Listen. You’re not supposed to work like this. You’ll spoil it for everybody. You’re ruining the time and motion. If the steward sees you, he’ll have your guts for garters. So, knock it off. Go an ‘ave a beer. Come back in an hour.”

I was chastened and crestfallen. This was my very first intimation that perhaps not all industry and commerce applauded performance.

Oiku 51. Field of Dreams by Gregory O'Faulden. (Dave Birtwistle)

Jean-Paul began to see football as the perfect metaphor. There was no contradiction here because he was determined that intellectuals should take a public stand on every important question of the day. Anticipating the true importance of *Match of the Day*, he realised the whole emotional focus of the proletariat was on a small square of turf for ninety minutes every Saturday. Thus began a sequence of reasoning leading from existentialism to post-structuralism. He'd been good at footy himself at school largely because he had a knack of keeping one eye on the ball and the other on the defender.

ENOCH'S TAP

David Thomas

Enoch Powell wasn't much of a customer. His wife was the one who spent the money, regularly buying kitchen utensils and garden tools from my father's ironmongers shop in Wolverhampton's Chapel Ash.

During its final years the shop's trade had declined and my father ran the place alone. From time to time he'd ask me to take over so that he could enjoy a much needed weekend break. It was towards the end of a dismal November day and I was looking forward to closing up and heading homewards.

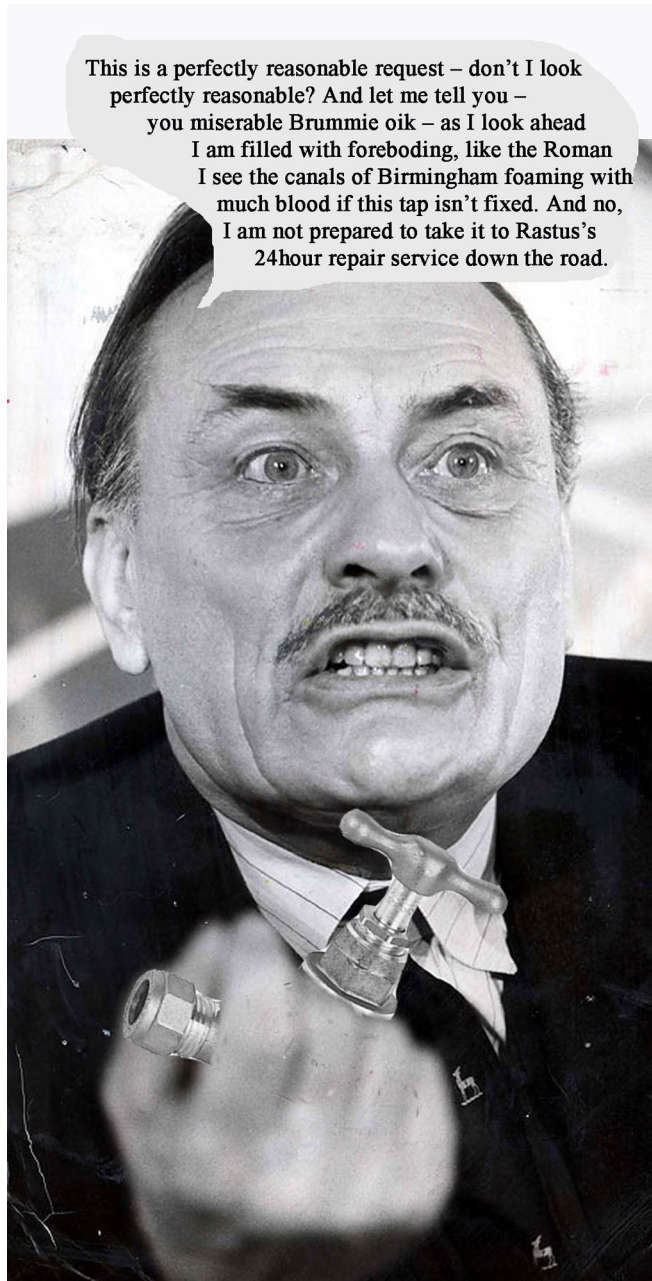
There had been no customers since half past five and, as I began to cash up at ten to six, rain was falling steadily in the darkness outside. There were rarely any customers during the last half-hour of the day and I often wondered why my father never chose to close the shop that much earlier. It was only years after that I realised the shop's closing time coincided with the opening of The Clarendon, the congenial pub only a step away, where Dad invariably put a full stop to the day's business.

I was locking the back door when the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and heard the unmistakable tones of Enoch Powell. He had a curious accent - what I can only describe as 'posh Wolverhampton'.

'Don't close yet,' he ordered me. 'I'll be there in five minutes.'

I was very young and he was a distinguished statesman, so I did as I was told. All the same, by five past six I decided he wasn't coming after all, so I switched off the lights and made for the front door, which I'd locked while counting the day's takings. As I reached it there was a loud tapping on the glass. The prominent eyes of Enoch Powell peered from his pale face into the gloom within. His moustache quivered with urgency and water streamed from the broad rim of his black Homburg hat.

Reluctantly I let him in and locked the door behind him, wondering what problem was so urgent it was worth braving such foul weather. He marched up to the counter, pulled a green-stained brass garden tap from the pocket of his heavy overcoat and placed it in front of me.



ENOCK'S TAP

'It needs a new washer,' he said flatly.

I turned on the lights again and asked him what sort of washer it needed. He didn't know; he couldn't get the thing apart. Great, I thought. After several minutes of futile struggle, engaged in a sort of arm-wrestling match with Mr Powell, who held the tap in the grip of a large wrench while I heaved on an equally large spanner, I gave up.

'It's not going to shift,' I said. 'You'd be better off with a new tap.' Enoch Powell, however, gave up less easily.

'We need a vice,' he said. 'You must have one in here somewhere.' I should have replied with a categorical 'No'. Unfortunately, I hesitated.

'Not really... There's a very old thing upstairs, but...'

He jumped on this eagerly. I explained that there was no light on the top floor; electricity had never been installed beyond the first flight of stairs. In fact, the upper storey of the house was now used only for the storage of unwanted clutter, piles of dusty hessian sacks in which lawn seed had been delivered, broken and unrepaired tools long forgotten and unclaimed by their owners, and several life-sized cardboard figures bearing cheerful smiles as they demonstrated some new product or other.

Many years ago, the front room of the top floor had been a simple workshop. The bench my grandfather once used was still there but it now leaned awkwardly at a sharp angle since one of its legs had become detached. The vice was completely rusted over but eventually I managed to open its jaws and, while Enoch held the torch, I tightened them on the resisting tap. Slowly I prised it apart. I picked up the pieces and, taking the torch from Enoch's hand, led the return to the ground floor, periodically shedding the light behind me. It wasn't so much courtesy as a desire not to be crushed to death by a falling Enoch Powell.

Behind the counter, on a high shelf reached only by the small wooden ladder kept for the purpose, was a box of leather washers. I climbed up and brought it down. Inside, the box was partitioned by interlocking cardboard dividers into 24 small compartments, each containing a different size or shape of washer. On the underside of the lid was a diagram replicating its contents with a brief description of each item - three-quarter-inch cup, half-inch heavy duty, etc. Un-

fortunately, the compartment that should have contained washers of the sort needed was empty. Somehow, I wasn't surprised. Mr Powell reached into the box and picked out one of the three-quarter-inch cup washers.

'This should do it,' he said. 'It just needs trimming to shape.'

So, naturally, that's what I did. I took up a Stanley knife and trimmed the cup-shaped flange until I'd achieved a three-quarter-inch flat washer - more or less. I squeezed it into the tap, reassembled the various bits and handed the product of half an hour's labour to what I assumed to be a highly satisfied customer.

'How much do I owe you?' he asked. I peered at the lid of the box where prices had been written in pencil, probably by my grandfather 25 years earlier. It read '6d' - six pence in old money.

I should have said six shillings but I was anticipating a handsome tip.

'Sixpence,' I replied. And that's what he gave me - sixpence - not a penny more.

By the time Enoch Powell had departed into the night, it was turned half past six. I switched off the lights once more, stepped into the still pouring rain, locked the shop door and walked, very briskly, to the pub.

Oiku 52 : Spelling it out loud. (Dave Birtwistle)

As it thawed he left his lawnmower collection and went out digging. He overdid it and pulled his back so he took his wife to 'Music night' at the British Legion. The beer was 50p cheaper than the pub and the burger and chips was less than you could make it for yourself. The first turn was the Chechenska Republika folk ensemble, followed by the Djibouti percussion orchestra and ending with the Bob Blenkinsop Blues Band. Meanwhile instead of Bingo they played Countdown and that quiet man from Kyrgystan won it with 11 consonants and 5 vowels making 'smegmitis horrens'.

OYSTER GRADING

Nick Woods

Standing there in the little wooden hut tucked into a great wall of
shore rock and marram grass,
I grade the oysters listening to a moody radio reception,
My wet pruned hands squirm in sweaty green rubber gloves,
My toes are curled into little pale shrimps cowering in damp dark
sock folds,
And my greasy hair looks as if it's been mopped,
From the floor and squeezed out onto my scalp,
Each hair in a sticky gelatinous loving embrace,
A dull ache rams its hooves into shoulder blades,
Stamping its anger into the tender bone and muscle,
The tremors reverberate down my spine splitting cracks,

In the wet concrete cement holding my joints together.
Furious light blue eyes bleached by the sun, dart to see,
My porous shape smothering the oysters with clumsy hands.
Grabbing an oyster in his paw, he places it gently upon my scale,
Then throws it simply to a basket,
The chief has spoken.
It is the way in which I drizzle my hands over the baskets finding the
most attractive shells,
And my pausing to play with the winking crabs caught up in the
mess,
That marks the frown furrowed across his tanned cracked face,

So in time, I teach my arms to think for themselves,
I let my ears gorge upon the sharp sound of wafer thin shell,
Skidding across smooth wet metal scales,
Whilst I keep my head bowed,
My eyes staring unblinking at the little digital scale reading.
It is through the oyster grading that I fall upon old loves,
I step into tears pooled on my bathroom floor,
And I leap into the Lochs where brown trout slap the water,
It is through the oyster grading that I find myself.

ACTRESS

Nigel Ford

The project, given the acronym ACTRESS (Airtight Cordless Telecom and Routing Electricity Supply System), was to advance the public technology available to the district, and labour was entirely voluntary. Team spirit was essential to success, assignments were distributed in the spirit of equal opportunity.

The job involved digging a trench and laying a cable from the High Street along Mayhem Lane to the back yard of the Duck public house. Operations were scheduled to start in the small hours. The budget was modest, the schedule tight and there was no time to be lost.

EDWIN

Being here kept me out of the pub. I felt fine so far, but it would be interesting to see how I felt by lunch. Operating the JCB was a heavy responsibility. For those that don't know, a JCB is the colloquial term for an excavator. Just as a vacuum cleaner is called a Hoover. We're using a small one for this job, of about four tons. On the buildings they weighed in at fifty tons or more and you sat so high up, you might as well have been digging holes on the Moon, shouting Avatar! Avatar! That was then. Later a drinking habit had driven me to find an alternative profession, but as long as I was very careful I should be all right. Now a milkman, I took great pleasure in exploring the spaces of my empty mind in the early mornings. I got to the site before the others, put the road signs up and walked the stretch of the projected trench to inspect the terrain. A big problem popped up right away; the cables and sewage pipes under the tarmac had not been marked out. This should have been done. Renting a JCB is not cheap, the budget won't allow for a second day. This wasn't my job at all. I allowed myself the satisfaction of a deep sigh of resignation and got out the cables and drainage drawings. The positions of the cables were supposed to be marked in red paint and the drains in yellow paint. All I had was a piece of white chalk, so I decided to solve this problem by using a double chalk line to indicate the red markings and a single for the yellow. Walking down the lane towards the pub with my coat collar turned up was all right, but murder walking back in the opposite direction with a mix of rain and sleet blowing in

ACTRESS

the face straight down the lane from the east. The drawings flapped about like a desperate creature in a transparent plastic cover. I'll confess to being a bit of a dreamer, and once I was crouched down ready to mark out I realised I'd left my folding rule back in the cab. I needed that to measure the whereabouts of the cables and drains.

Back in the cab it was nice and dry, rummaging for the folding rule in the tool box while the newsman read out stuff that had naught to do with me; only football news interested me. There was Irene outside now, waving, hair blown across her face, a wet fag stuck in her mouth. Dressed unsuitably, but that's Irene for you. Who knew where she'd been. She held up a plastic carrier bag in which the outlines of two tins could clearly be seen, tins of paint presumably, and offered me an eloquent shrug. She put the bag down on the ground, sank to her knees and assumed the begging for mercy position. Ought to be more careful about laddering her stockings; anyone else and I'd have told them what for. The words '... really truly sorry' drifted faintly through the double glazing of the cab windows. Project like this, bound to get a public, people like to watch other people working. But this early in the morning? The one in the hard-hat and the donkey jacket? He must have been very keen.

IRENE

Forgotten to paint the lines in the road yesterday afternoon I had, dear o dear, and since then I'd been busy with someone. Lovely, but not a wink of sleep. No time to change. Only just had time to wash the parts that would become odious later if not, and to make a cup of tea with a bag and hot tap water. Little bits of coagulated milk floated on the surface. The taste was sour. But I needed a cup of tea of some sort. Should brush the teeth too. Couldn't go and breathe over everyone without brushing my teeth. At least his toothbrush had looked quite clean and most of the bristles stood up straight. Outside I did not enjoy the first fag of the day one little bit; the ash blowing into my eyes and only just managed to brush a glowing ember off my nose to avoid burning it. The fag lasted about one minute instead of the normal four. Could practically see the wind pushing the glowing end up towards my face. Good thing wasn't far to walk. Carrying these tins of paint didn't help either. I was angry and upset owing to lack of sleep, and because I like to enjoy the first fag in

peace, not struggling down a windful street in a gale at an unearthly hour under the swaying street lights. On top of it all, I knew when I got there apologies would be due. Got an itch between my legs that needed a scratch. Stood there with my skirt up and my back to the road scratching away. Such a relief. Someone walked past my back. Gave me a start. Pulled my skirt down and looked sideways, saw the flash of his eyes as he looked. Do me a favour mate. Some bloke in a donkey jacket. I needed another fag. Turned round and tried walking backwards into the wind to light up, but that was no good, no proper sense of balance this early. Might have fallen over. I had to stop to light the sodding fag. This was not a good day so far. Edwin was operating the JCB. Hadn't known he could. I'd assumed we'd have to hire one with a driver. Edwin is a man of many parts, I've said it before and I'll say it again, there's more to Edwin than meets the eye. According to other parties, Edwin fancies me and they may be right. Didn't know whether to be flattered and fluttered or not, Edwin being what you might call a working alcoholic. As a matter of fact, I own one of the pubs he drinks in. On the other hand he's tall, dark and good looking with a nice twist of humour and a modest manner. Perhaps he could be got off the booze. The itch was killing me. Walking against the wind pushed my skirt up, I felt like a witch on a broomstick. Once I'd apologised to Edwin with a curtsy and a humble plea for mercy, he kindly volunteered to help paint the stripes in the road. This was not bad, it was more good in fact, because it meant we were working together. Bloke in the donkey jacket was watching. Why the hardhat?

DICK

I would have been a working man you see, if I'd known how. Going to enjoy it today, taking a pride in doing a good job. I felt a lot of sympathy for the working man, pined for those times as a working man I never had. I miss the solidarity. Even though I never had it, I still miss it. Worked on the buildings in the summers, when I was a student, we used to sit around and play cards when it rained. I almost got to be a hoddy. Failed to get it right though, kept falling over. Tried using fuck every other word, but they looked put out and one of them said: 'Dick old boy! You reaaaly shouldn't talk like that!' Taking the piss. Their concord was palpable as it bounced about between those dry, dusty, unrendered brick walls. I ached with envy,

ACTRESS

but they wouldn't let me join in. Laughed at me, said I was daft. I went so far as to learn to roll my own with one hand like John Wayne. They pretended to be impressed. Once graduated from my ancient, well-bred university I borrowed money from my dad and opened a newsagents. My way of giving the finger to the system. That was over three decades ago.

Still, I'm digressing. I've got a brand spanking new spade across my shoulder bought from the ironmongers yesterday. I'd been assigned the heavy labour of digging out the tricky bits. A few spadefuls of wet soil would soon give me backache. O yes, I bet it would. This is what being a working man is all about. Got my face turned up to the rain and was whistling as I marched through the deserted streets. Edwin was out of his cushy cab, stooped in the rain, trying to draw a line with a soggy stick of chalk. Irene, unsuitably dressed, was dipping a paintbrush cautiously into a tin. She'd not come back last night. This could be one of those times at the moment. I never ask. Don't want to go down that road. Relationships are fragile things aren't they? Don't want to rock the boat. Irene's a bit common some might say. Suits me down to the ground. A whiff of her hit me in the face. She'd been at it then, that was sure. Enough of that. Getting down to it I knew it would be chaos from the word go; they'd got no idea.

The JCB was supposed to start digging now. There was no time to lose; the JCB was only rented for the one day and the budget didn't allow for any more. But here were Edwin and Irene drawing stripes in the road to tell us where the pipes and cables were, a job that my Irene was to have done yesterday. Irene was sassy in tight dress, high heels and short rabbit jacket. Inappropriate attire in my view. One hand on her hip, talking to Edwin, who looked like a folded stick insect as he bent over to draw the stripes.

'Morning all!' Expensive cigar smoke and a ruddy glow in the pre-dawn dark. Doctor Jackson carried a tool box and looked benign in his carpenter's overalls, everybody's dad and confidant. I'm not slow on the uptake and the cigar smoke put me in the picture. That was a sort of relief; at least it was someone familiar. Rain pelted on my gear. Jackson had not thought to wear a hat and the shoulders of his overalls were already soaked through, and that made me feel right cosy.

I was wearing yellow oilskins for this occasion, in bright canary

yellow, plus a hardhat. Equipment I was issued with the one time I worked on the roads for the Council in my student days. We'd got an audience I saw, bloke in the donkey jacket who also wore a hardhat for some reason.

DOCTOR JACKSON

The gang was all here I saw. Edwin and Irene were painting the stripes in the road and probably in vain in this rain. While Dick stood proud watching then, a spade over his shoulder. On guard! The spade looked new. Bought it specially I supposed. He'd have no cause to own one, having no garden. Probably want me to prescribe him something for his back tomorrow. The paint dribbled untidily across the tarmac in the rain. I'd understood Irene was supposed to paint in those marks yesterday. She didn't tell me she hadn't, and she didn't look as if she managed to find the time to go home and change, poor girl.

Dick looked officious, stood in the road dressed in bright yellow oilskins, the rain bouncing off his hardhat. Strange how getting together like this over a project makes life seem worthwhile. Despite the deterrent weather I found myself grinning.

'Morning all!'

Irene and Edwin were too busy to notice and Dick didn't reply, but looked at me with a know-all expression. My cigar was getting itself into a spot of bother; not so much as the wet extinguished it, as it smelt sour and the end went soggy. I thought I'd better give Edwin some help. What did Irene think she was doing still wearing that skirt. She could hardly bend over.

'I'm surprised you can keep that burning, Doc,' Edwin said

'Can I give you a hand here Edwin?'

'It doesn't smell too good in the wet,' Edwin went on.

'I thought you were driving the JCB.'

'Irene was supposed to have done this yesterday,' Edwin complained.

'Let me give you a hand. I can paint the red stripes.'

'There's only the one map,' Edwin said.

'O'

ACTRESS

‘You’d be better off getting on with those buttresses, Doc’ said Edwin. ‘You’ll find the materials stacked on a pallet under a grey tarpaulin at the end of the road. You might like to get a move on, we’re already behind schedule.’ He straightened up. ‘If you follow along with the Doc, Dick, you’ll find a pickaxe under the tarpaulin. You’ll need it before you start using that nice new spade.’ Dick and I took off down the lane side by side. He looked like a disconsolate canary.

‘Are you going to sing to keep our spirits up Dick?’ I asked

‘Very funny,’ Dick said.

A barrel of laughs. He seemed a bit down. Perhaps he’d twigged about me and Irene. Still, as Irene asserted, she’s was no-one’s particular property. I suspected Dick had a bit of a yen for this kind of activity. For my part, I felt privileged to have reason to do some manual work. Good for restoring the vital energies that are natural. Digging a potato patch is good for that too.

Among this temporary crew, owing to the size, power and inherent dignity of his machine, the boss was the JCB driver, even though we had elected Dick project manager at the general meeting last week. But a man in my position, the carpenter, was a man of freedom, the anarchist by whom others are measured. My word, this was a muddy dismal morning. Mind you, that chappie over there, in the donkey jacket wearing a hardhat, I’d a suspicion he might liven it up.

Oiku 53: The Elvis Diet: you know it makes sense. (Dave Birtwistle)

She was down at the local weekly class. She’d had the beds strengthened and a reinforced rubber mat under the carpet to stop the floorboards splitting. That gained her ten points for a start. She’d had the kids blood pressure taken, introduced them to Californian syrup of figs and been to the Compulsory Eating Disorder forum. That gained her twenty more. She weighed herself and saw her trainer who checked her exercise plan, her personalised goals and her body/mass index. She went home and had an eight ounce butter-puff fudge as she read the *Lard News and Beef Dripping Weekly*.

ILLUSTRATED

THE BEAVER (See Inside)

THE INDEFATIGABLE MINISTER OF SUPPLY LORD BEAVERBROOK NEVER STOPS! HE BEAVERS AWAY EIGHTEEN HOURS A DAY TURNING YOUR SAUCEPANS INTO SPITFIRES. EVEN AFTER A HEAVY NIGHT DINING WITH WINSTON - CIGARS, BRANDY, STEAK AND CHIPS OR A HOT CURRY - HE'S BACK IN HIS OFFICE AT 6 A.M. ON THE DOT. NATURALLY AFTER SUCH A BLOW-OUT THERE CAN BE REPERCUSSIONS BUT EVEN FOR THIS THE BEAVER REFUSES TO LEAVE HIS OFFICE. HE SIMPLY REACHES FOR HIS HONK-O-VAC (A BRILLIANT INVENTION BY BARNES WALLIS) AND VOMITS DOWN THE TUBE WITHOUT LEAVING HIS DESK! WHAT A MAN!!! THREE CHEERS FOR THE BEAVER!!!

BRIT
at the
KREM
New Pic
from R

Illustrated 1941

SWEET NOTHINGS

Kayti Doolittle

Chapter One: Ornaments

I'll never forget the way he used to look at me in the beginning. The way he used to meet me at his door every time I would walk into his house, the way he would kiss me and hold me when I came in as if this was the first time, or as if he never would be able to do it again. I remember him looking at me and telling me I was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Most people might be flattered. I couldn't help but hear what he was saying. He was calling me a beautiful thing. A thing. I have never wanted to be a thing; maybe beautiful, but a thing?

What is the purpose of a beautiful thing? What happens when the beauty fades or you get used to what you are looking at? Aren't things disposable? Isn't beauty replaceable? I never want to be a beautiful thing to anyone ever again.

Chapter Two: "To Go" Boxes

Christian was tall and lean. Almost too lean. Not a starved lean, but a perfectly calculated unnatural lean. It was a skinny that could only be achieved by portioning. Some people called it self-discipline; I called it vanity. His skin was soft. It was not soft just from expensive lotions or moisturizing, but from time. It was malleable. It moved and stretched in ways that youth's skin did not. His lips were thin, probably from smoking, by spewing bullshit, or both.

He was happiest when counting money. He made money, which he didn't always report in his taxes. This caused him to have an excessive stash of cash in his home. He couldn't possibly put any of that in the bank. So he would hoard the money in the restaurant "To Go" boxes in random places throughout his beautiful half a million dollar condo. I remember watching him sitting on his bed counting the piles of green. I saw in his eyes that paper justified everything for him. That paper made his world go round, made his work worthwhile, made his life successful, which gave him purpose. Not under any conditions did he ever look at me that way.

I'll never forget in one of my random moments of hate for him I considered going over there and stealing some of his money. I didn't really want or need the money. I just thought I would take the one thing that actually mattered to him. Then I realized I would be just like him, with nothing but a bunch of dirty paper.

Chapter Three: The First

Christian and I were at a nice dinner.

It was a wonderful restaurant in the best contemporary art museum in the city. I supposed it was on behalf of the "To Go" boxes that we had the luxury of eating at such a place. A restaurant like that was special to most, especially to me given that I was 19 and my meals previously had consisted of Taco Bell and canned vegetable soup.

People's thoughts were constructed into physical things scattered, hanging all over the walls of the room. The art was better than the food, although the food was good too. And the food was better than our conversation; awkward, stagnant, lacking no productive purpose other than buying time. We really didn't have much to say to each other. For me I was still having a constant debate in my head. I still to this day wonder what was going through his head...

I was uncomfortable in my chair trying to adjust the new lingerie I had purchased earlier in the week. I was trying not to let him notice me fidgeting with my clothing. Although I am sure he did. I loved the lingerie. Cream. Light blue. Lace. It was not sexy, it was pretty. It was light. Innocent, how I suppose I was at the time. I was still not sure how I was going to pay my credit card bill for the expensive purchase, but I figured it was an important occasion. It was like a dress for prom, a swimsuit for a cruise, a car for your 16th birthday. Christian randomly went to the bathroom during one of our nothing conversations. I sat and tried to calm my inner voice. It is okay, it is safe, it is going to be fun, I kept repeating internally to myself. I just wished I would be his first. But at 32, most of his firsts have been consumed by life experience.

Christian came back shortly, frazzled with a heap of half-wilted white roses. I suppose they were wilted from being in the trunk of his car. I hated, and hate roses. They were impersonal, easy, and a void of a thought. "I couldn't find lilies," he said. Which in boy language meant I waited until the last minute and now this was all

SWEET NOTHINGS

they had left at Hy-Vee. There was only one thing left to do, one response. I did what I knew best; I smiled prettily and gave him the convenient answer, "Thank you. They are beautiful."

I pretended not to care. He pretended not to notice that I did care. We did this as the server came up bringing us a free dessert. "You two are just too sweet. I love seeing people this happy. This one is on me," he said with a look of yearning in his eyes, placing the beautiful cheesecake in front of us.

I should have known he was never capable of lilies.

Oiku 54: The Library: round the back. (Dave Birtwistle)

It was built in fifteenth century Gothic style with tracery windows and leaded lights bearing the arms of the duchy of Lancaster. The brick and stone contrasted with the soft green roof tiles and formed an island of tranquillity with a small garden on three sides. It was a 'temple of peace devoted to the uplifting of the people.' Doreen Dobson liked the postman to uplift her over the smooth stone and crunch her bum into the rustic brick. It was a grade 2 listed building. After the chapel and the tramp's hut Doreen listed it nine out of ten.

Oiku 54: DIY: Withdrawal Symptoms. (Dave Birtwistle)

He was waiting for the paint to dry. He wandered round the house. He tightened a washer in the loo, took a radiator off and put it back on, found some holes for his spare polyfilla, and put a new pane of glass in the greenhouse roof. The kids came home and walked straight into the paintwork, the dog licked the polyfilla, and the wife hadn't the faintest he'd done anything at all. He went to the shed in a huff and turned to his real hobby of straightening old, rusty nails and classifying his Aldi brochures and Screwfix catalogues.

HOW TO SPEND LESS ON SHOES—

even with prices so high

She put her foot in her letters until



You must make shoes last longer now. It's a national duty. Leather is scarce and shoes will cost more and more. Every time you buy new shoes or have old ones repaired get Phillips Stick-a-Soles and Phillips Heels fitted. Phillips Soles are fixed

firm as a rock with Phillips solution only—no nails, no screws. Then your shoes will last longer, look smarter, and never be down at heel. If your shoes just need heeling, fit Phillips Heels. Phillips save you money at every step.



Phillips

STICK-A-SOLES and PHILLIPS HEELS

Phillips Soles and Heels are entirely British made.

Illustrated 1941

THE PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN

Tom Kilcourse

‘See nowt, hear nowt, say nowt’. So went the counsel of wisdom on the eastern fringes of Manchester. Unseen, unheard, unsaid, and unexamined it nevertheless hung like an inn sign over every sinful heart in Newton Heath, where I was raised. It was a code, an amoral dictum that I understood and accepted long before I appreciated how ubiquitous and timeless it is. In truth, we saw many things as we weaved our way through evenings’ shadows, and we heard too, indistinctly and partially, muttered confidences where youths gathered: but we said nothing, at least to strangers. Of those who would rail against acceptance of such a maxim, who reproach us for protecting the guilty to the cost of the innocent, I ask where they believe it not to apply. During a life of varied experiences I have yet to discover such a place. Certainly the Church sees it as the eleventh commandment, and my son, a sergeant of police, could tell, if he chose, of deeds not prescribed in any manual. It is a condition of humanity, neither good nor evil, simply there: one might as well denounce the oceans’ tides.

Those who grow up where momentary inattention to the rule can be costly develop a second sense, an involuntary safety mechanism that manages the reflexes: brows do not lift in surprise, eyes do not betray fear or recognition. This process was well ingrained by the time I was introduced to Belinda’s father. Ah, Belinda! Where are you out there? Somewhere comfortable, no doubt, some better class of neighbourhood, chic and secure, which you grace with your elegance. Or has the elegance abandoned you now, leaving you a little bent, with rheumatic movement? Would it lift your spirits to know that in the head of this long forgotten admirer you are still twenty-two, your heels clicking with youthful rhythm, your smile shining with undiminished luminosity? Forty years have passed, yet I need only to close my eyes to have you step into my cerebrum, occupying it as of right, clearing out the trappings of two marriages and three kids, haunting it instead with your own image: the smell, the sight, the sounds of your younger self. Would it have been different had your father not feared me?

I had been gone from Newton Heath for about three years when we

met, and was living in Davyhulme, an altogether different Manchester on the other side of the city, with fields and gardened houses. The only terraced cottages were quaint structures, picturesque mementos of a less hurried age: quite unlike the brick rows of Newton Heath, built to house the fodder of labour hungry mills. We moved there, into a council house, as a result of my mother forming a relationship with someone at the town-hall. Little was said about the nature of the contract. Mother never talked about it, nor did I ask, but it led to the two of us occupying a three bed-roomed house, with a bath and several other comforts not experienced previously. I soon tired of evening visits to my old habitat across the city, a one hour journey by bus, and began exploring what was on offer closer to my new home. That is when I met Belinda, in a local dance-hall.

Had I been more athletic, I would that night have somersaulted my way home and entered the house via the upstairs bedroom window, reaching it with a single spring. But I was not athletic. Instead, I floated the two-mile walk, turning unseen corners, crossing anonymous roads. She had agreed to see me again – SHE had agreed, laughing at my cockiness, she had AGREED. What was her name? Linda? Brenda? It didn't matter. What mattered was that a soft-spoken angel, a gentle, graceful goddess had moved into my raucous world and not been repelled by its gaucheness, its clumsy, boastful shell. She was unlike any girl I had known, in voice, movement, in every way, and I was wildly, stupidly in love.

Belinda lived in Sale, a rather up-market district a few miles from where I lived. We would meet in Stretford, about half-way between our homes, where our bus routes converged, but the inconvenience of this arrangement soon became apparent. So, I bought a car, an old Austin A40 that had seen better days, but it served its purpose. I was able to drive across to Sale to collect her, take her into Manchester, and deliver her safely home afterwards. For a whole year I courted her thus, ever surprised that she retained interest in me. At the end of the evening we would park outside her home, a large, detached pile set in an azalea covered half-acre, and sit in the old banger, necking, or just talking about our world. I should say 'worlds', because those conversations emphasised the plurality of our backgrounds. In the earlier days of our relationship I was quite voluble, but as time passed and Belinda's world began to take shape in my awareness I talked less and listened more, lapsing eventually into virtual silence.

THE PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN

Once home I would go to bed to lie fully awake in the darkness, immersed in loneliness, my self-assuredness on the wane.

How can one build a bridge across an ever widening gulf? Whatever the topic, my unsuspecting goddess placed herself further beyond reach at each meeting. My efforts to narrow the gap seem trivial now, but involved significant sacrifice at the time. Whereas the pub had been my habitual source of entertainment it was superseded by Belinda's preferences; theatre, live concerts and dancing. My adoration of Manchester United yielded to tennis, a game that I had considered unmanly. Such matters were, at least, open to correction, but others were historical fact. When education was mentioned Belinda's shining at Grammar school contrasted with my habitual truancy from a secondary modern, and in conversation about holidays she spoke of times spent in places known to me only through the pages of brochures. 'Abroad' to me was the Isle of Man, while she had relaxed on two continents. So, I listened, nodded knowingly, and lied.

One subject though played a greater part than any other in heightening my awareness of the gap between us: our parentage. Belinda's mother was a secretary in a solicitor's office: mine was a cleaner in a factory canteen. Her father was a businessman in the entertainment industry, and a musician, while my vaguely remembered dad was a bus driver who had done a runner some years before. We pretend today in England that such things do not matter, and Belinda claimed so at the time, but I believed otherwise, and now *know* otherwise. So it was with feelings of intense panic that I heard her invitation to dinner, to meet mummy and daddy. Thankfully, my involuntary safety mechanism kicked in, allowing me to accept with apparent equanimity. Only later, in the privacy of my bedroom, did I let panic have free rein.

When the dreaded day arrived, after a week of rehearsed greetings and abandoned excuses for cancelling the appointment, I washed the car thoroughly in a futile effort to make mutton look like lamb, and drove across to Sale. There, parking well short of the house I crunched my way up the drive and pressed the illuminated bell-push. Somewhere in the depths of the pile cathedral chimes announced my arrival. 'You must be Harry'. I couldn't deny it, though I felt much like doing so. Belinda's mother was a forty-something version of her daughter, slim, fair, and elegant. The perfume that revealed itself as I stepped past her was subtle, quite unrelated to the nostril invading

stuff my mother splashed down her bra before heading out. The hand that took my offered bouquet was as gentle as the smile that invited me indoors. She was Belinda twenty years hence.

The hall that I entered almost on tiptoe, as if my great feet would damage the tiled floor, was the size of my bedroom, with three heavily panelled doors off, and a broad, wooden staircase curling upwards. My fragrant hostess opened one of the doors and led me into a sitting-room filled with wood and leather. No cheap, fitted carpeting here, but a sea of glowing parquet on which floated richly coloured rugs. 'Take a seat Harry. I'm off to the kitchen, but Belinda will be down any moment. Can I get you a drink?' My stay-sober resolution – '*for God's sake don't get drunk tonight*' – dictated the polite refusal, and I seated myself gingerly on the edge of a leather covered settee that would have looked ridiculously ostentatious in my own home, but fitted in here. I remained thus, leaning forward, elbows on knees, gawping at the picture festooned walls, until Belinda put in an appearance. I jumped to my feet, and for want of something better to say, blurted out the question that had just come to mind 'Hello love, where's the 'telly?' She giggled, and opened what I had presumed to be a drinks cabinet.

'Ah, here's daddy'. The door from the hall had swung open to administer the greatest surprise I ever experienced, before or since. As 'Daddy' approached I stared incredulously at the monkey-like features; black button eyes, vestigial nose, and thin lips that stretched in imitation of a smile. The simian impression was heightened by his stoop, and awkward, swinging gait across the room due to what was commonly called a 'club foot', his left, which wore a surgical boot with a six-inch thick sole. For once, my Newton Heath street-training almost failed me, but not quite. The laughter that bubbled within showed as no more than a smile to be interpreted as a courtesy. 'Hello Harry, I'm pleased to meet the young man who has set my daughter's tongue wagging so much.' 'Pleased to meet you Mr; Payne.' The thin lips stretched further. 'Please call me Stanley, I feel that we know each other already.' How true! How true mate! Or rather, I knew him, but not as Stanley, or Mr Payne. To me, he was known as Gordon, and I knew well his music, and his business. My face betrayed not a flicker of the relief I felt. All the nervousness of the last few days vanished and I suddenly felt my old, cocky self.

Much of the evening was devoted to the predictable interrogation,

most charmingly conducted by Stella, my beloved's mother, while Stanley's high-pitched, hoarse voice was heard rarely. The pall of self-doubt having been lifted by recognition of 'Gordon', I can only think of him by that name, although I managed to avoid using it on the occasion, I actually enjoyed the cross-examination and found myself falling ever so slowly in love with Stella. Her husband appeared to be slightly bored by the proceedings, until, that is, it emerged that I had lived until recent years in Newton Heath. At the mention of my old stomping ground his distracted eyes flared into new light and focussed on my face. 'Where about did you live there Harry?' The 'smile' was more forced than ever. 'Just off Culcheth Lane, near All Saints' church'. 'Ah, so you'll know Church Street well then'. Any denial would have been such an obvious lie as to give the game away on the spot. I nodded, and gave my attention to a piece of beef. He was silent for the rest of the meal, and I knew that he knew that I knew.

That was the last time I saw Belinda. A couple of letters went unanswered, and the only benefit from a telephone call was the opportunity to hear Stella's mellow voice. After a few weeks I switched into my 'not caring' mode: I'm very good at not caring. A brief affair with Cathy, who worked at the local dry-cleaners, led to her first pregnancy, our marriage, and eventual parting of the ways. That was followed by life with Janet, two more offspring, divorce, and memories for company. Of those memories, the most intense reach back to Belinda, and her father. It is they who rob me of sleep, causing me to ponder unanswerable questions. Did Belinda know, or was her father fearful that she would learn? Was the break at his instigation, or had she simply tired of my unpolished manner? If the former, he need not have worried: my code would have protected him from revelation. Though Belinda avoided me, I did see her father once more, but from some distance.

Curiosity drove me back to Church Street, Newton Heath about a year after that dinner. On a bright, spring afternoon I parked outside the Magnet cinema, wound down the window, and sat back to enjoy the music. The same old tunes drifted across from the steps of the Co-op Emporium: exactly as I remembered from my childhood and teens. Cheerful tunes to lift the spirits of the passers by, the housewives of Newton Heath scurrying from butcher to fishmonger to baker or chemist. Some had children with them, some of whom did

what I had done when a small boy accompanying his mother to the shops. A sudden wave of sadness made me wish to leave this scene of my youth. I started the car and pulled out from the kerb, just as another child dropped a coin into the open bag of 'Gordon, Gordon the accordion man', whose monkey head nodded thanks while his fingers continued to flick over the keys. Someone had once said that he was the richest man in Newton Heath, but I knew that he lived in Sale.

Oiku 55: A Bedtime Story (Bob Wild)

When Fred died Lucy started secretly "hitting the bottle" pretty hard. Twice she found a bunch of flowers in the toilet-bowl and what looked suspiciously like pee in a vase. She remembered sellotaping the creme-fraiche carton but why was it in Fred's tool-box? And where was the sellotape? Not in the fridge! Her bereavement counsellor insisted her problem was not Alzheimer's. "You're perfectly O.K. You know the Prime Minister's name". That night Lucy downed a celebratory bottle of Sherry, tucked a couple of wine bottles snugly into her bed, then set off in her nightie towards the 24 hr. supermarket.

OIKU 56: The Photo Opportunity (Bob Wild)

Olaf, the amateur photographer set up his tripod on the high river bank of the Avon gorge. Then asked his wife to take a (competition-winning) photo of him waving to her from the middle of a round sun as it sank below the cliff. "Back a bit" she said, anxious for a sharp focus. "Bit more". As she pressed the shutter, the sun stood still. Olaf disappeared below the cliff. When the film was developed you could just see a head above the river bank framed in a halo of sunshine and an arm waving. Olaf's body was never found.



So you see Maisky we here in the west believe the earth goes round the sun unlike your own assertion based, I understand on Engels' Dialectics of Nature, that the phenomenon is no more than a bourgeois delusion designed to extend the working day for ignorant oiks and to facilitate the exploitation of fuzzy-wuzzies in hot countries.

M. Maisky (right) whose hobby is astronomy, faces an embassy official over a sundial in his London garden

Illustrated 1941

PAUL TANNER

SALVAGE

Some urchin on the bus
reached behind the back seat
and he pulled out
a pair of tatty brown shoes.

‘Ay, they’re alright them
I’nt de la?
Do, them, won’t de,
laaaa?’

I told him,
you’ve gotta ask yourself
WHY
someone’d leave their shoes
on a bus,
so he sticks his nose in them
as has a good wheezing sniff,
‘Nah, they’re alright them!
Ah’ll just bung em in the wash
innit?
They’ll be job interview shoes,
won’t de laaaa?’

Then he scratched his balls
and said he needed 40p
and I didn’t have it.

IRONY FRIGS

Some scall comes in.

I'm picking an arm scab behind the till.

He slaps his CV down without word
and waddles back out. I
wait until he's disappeared among
the conflicting autumn tumults of leaves
and maccys wrappers out there
to wipe the crinkles out this wet piece of paper:

5 punctuation mistakes and no previous experience.
Phew.

I'm safe another day.

None of the pond life round here offer competition.

So I make a paper aeroplane out of it.
It's shit; I could never do them. Too impatient to
put the little slits in the wings and turn out the nose.

But I chuck it anyway –
it coughs around the fluorescents above,
stabs invisible threats in the wind tunnel doorway
then plops against
the unhappy face of a suited bloke.

The company's area manager, to be exact.

CAMOUFLAGE.

David Birtwistle

The man from London turned off the A road and on to the wide, bumpy square of unmade ground. He pulled in, crunching dust and stone and stopped against a low wall. He left the engine running and scanned the land around him. He had this sensation of time-warp. It seemed like the back of beyond. Ever since he'd left the motorway the whole of southern England seemed as far away as the moon. He wound the window down and a chill of northern air swept into the car. They'd told him to take something warm and they were right.

The panorama before him swept downwards to a huge, grey, Victorian mill. He had only ever seen pictures of them in a history book at school. In the northern Pennine light it looked like some dark, industrial version of the Palace of Versailles. It seemed to grow out of and back into the land. The walls were three feet thick in big slabs of millstone grit. Four floors of hooded windows for hundreds of yards, the odd light on here and there, the whole thing a vast, dark cathedral to nineteenth century technology. The wind carried the distant sound of metal being drilled and riven apart.

Steadman got out of the car, put on his woollen overcoat, turned up his collar and lit a cigarette. He could now hear the water where the canal sluiced into the river below. The whole of the site was an ox-bow where the river curved round in a loop before it drew alongside the canal and flowed down into the industrial heartland twenty miles to the west. Above the mill roof were the hills, brooding dark in silhouette, keeping the present at bay. And over them, the racing cloud and the grey sky. Something told him this might be just the place. Out of the way, it was camouflaged. All he had to do now was find the man and convince him.

Steadman walked the fifty yards down the incline and into the courtyard of a loading bay. The sound of metal being cut and torn grew shrill. Someone invisible was spraying paint and a cloud of green mist hung in the air of a darkened doorway. He turned away. No-one had seen or spoken to him. There, in the corner was the sign he sought. *'Artists Workshops. Private.'*

Steadman pushed the heavy metal door and adjusted his eyes as he stood inside. A small, weak, yellow bulb hung from a grimy piece of

CAMOUFLAGE

flex and glowed like a torch with a failing battery. Slowly he took the steps worn into curves by years of workmen's boots. Every ten or twelve steps the staircase took a right-angle bend. Every now and then he passed a dusty window and a ledge that showed the thickness of the wall. It was built like a fortress. He thought it could stand a siege.

Three floors up the light grew brighter. A cleaner, more cheerful air although the cold showed as his breath hung in the air like sheets. There was a large, heavy door, bright red and a sign painted boldly in white - *Studios*. Steadman's knock echoed down the well. Footsteps came towards him.

The door rolled aside and a man stood there looking at him, his overall splattered with paint and an ancient cap whose original shape it was impossible to guess.

"Yes?" said the man.

"Steadman. From London. Taylor and Browns."

"You'd better come in."

For a man who was as good an actor as Steadman had to be, even he was taken aback. Inside, the studio was a sea of colour. Tucked away, hidden in the Victorian darkness of a classic Satanic Mill, off the beaten track was this oasis. Spotlights played on patches of the wall, large canvasses hung like a gallery. Colours, lines, shapes, flowing from one painting into another and on again. Landscapes, half-abstract yet recognisable for what they were. Big clefts of blue and green and crags of the richest brown. And at both ends finished pieces were stacked with precision on trestles in deep array. In the centre of the room a large, portable heater pumped out a haze of hot air. Next to it a palette and paints and brushes mixed and blended into creamy pastes.

"This will look good in London. Very good. And Amsterdam. Then France and southern Spain" Steadman spoke carefully, trying to impress his man. The painter, used to success only in modest measures began to ask the sort of questions which revealed the limits of his knowledge of the world of the international dealer.

"What about transport? Insurance? And packing. I'll need some help with that." he asked, pouring hot water into two coffee mugs.

"That's all taken care of," said Steadman clasping his hands round a hot mug. "Insurance is with the firm. It's all tied up. I have a copy

for your file. For transport we have a specialist truck with four men. All gallery-trained. Each piece will be packed to avoid any form of damage. Lined corners, reinforcers, screwed batons, plastic sheets, then taped totally secure. The men accompany the work from A to B and back again. They're professionals. They know what they're doing." The coffee was warming him through and he was rising to the challenge now.

"What about space? he inquired as offhand as he could manage it.

"Well, I've built up a backlog of so much work I'm finding the storage tight. There are sixty canvasses in that stack there."

"What else goes on here? Besides you?"

"Other artists share this floor and the one above. Downstairs is empty. He went to America. The rest are industrial units"

"Have you thought of going bigger? Moving downstairs or something like that?"

"Downstairs is a whole floor on this wing of the mill. I couldn't afford that."

"The sort of exposure you'll get with Taylor and Brown, you'll be needing that sort of space. Any chance we can see it?" The painter went over to a hook on the wall.

"I keep a spare key to all the studios," he volunteered. "I'm here all the time. If anyone forgets I can let them in." They trudged down the steps and into the gloom again. The man from London watched as the painter struggled with the big key in the heavy door.

"Solid door," said Steadman.

"You'd have real trouble trying to break in," said the painter opening it enough to squeeze through and feel for the lights. A sudden whoosh of neon tubes and the whole place flickered with light. The room was like an empty factory with vaulted ceilings and ancient pine floorboarding.

"This is big!"

"Half of it would be more than enough for me."

"There's something about this place that I like," said Steadman. "I have an idea! With Taylor & Brown representing your work I think it could pay us both to rent this place and partition it off. You have a studio here at the front. We could take the back half for storage. I'm sure I can sell this to the directors. That way your work and our store

CAMOUFLAGE

space would be under one roof. I think this is an omen for a new relationship. What do you think?"

Steadman realised he'd sprung this on the painter a little too quickly. He couldn't take it all in. He went very quiet. "I don't quite know where to start. It's a bit like....."

Steadman controlled himself on the way back up the stairs.

"I could use another coffee if that's all right with you," he said As the painter put the kettle on Steadman sat down and took out his wallet. "I'll give you a cheque so you can start the ball rolling. A year in advance so that they know we're serious. You put the cheque into your account and pay the monthly rent as normal. Just think. London. Paris. Amsterdam. Southern Spain. We'll exhibit your work, invite the right people to the previews. And we'll hold back. We won't price it up for sale until next year in Italy. Your reputation will have grown. Your CV will be serious status. You'll have the reviews. We'll do a proper job on a glossy catalogue. And then we'll sell. That way, my guess is we'll treble the price. Don't forget, we're taking 30% but that's half cheaper than some of the other big boys. And we'll all be under one roof. We'll be looking after one another."

"It sounds great" said the painter, still in a daze.

"I'll phone head office when I've done a report. They're going to like this. My guess is the men could be up here by the weekend. If you sort the lease, we can talk lighting, heat, sockets, staging, that sort of thing. We'll build you the space you need."

"But what about.....?"

"We'll do it all. Just let the men in and tell them exactly what you want."

A week later the studio door downstairs had reinforced security locks. A panelled wall divided the floor in half. Heating units pumped out hot air and everything gleamed white. That wouldn't be for long. New canvasses, stretched and primed lined the walls. Tins of paint piled up waiting to be used. Belying their strength and security, the doors to the back storage area blended discretely into the wood. Soon they'd be flecked with splatters of paint.

Twenty of the painter's canvasses had been packed into the most wonderfully complicated crates, stamped 'fragile' and sent to London awaiting exhibition. He'd seen boxes, staging, palates, and a moisture-control unit go into the back before the door was locked.

"Better not keep a spare for this door," the man had said "You've enough on your plate as it is."

In front of him the painter had an opening in London, then Paris, Amsterdam and southern Spain. He knew he had it made. What he did not know was that a cargo boat would discharge at a small seaport up the coast from Malaga and the plastic 2 kilo packets of white powder would travel round Europe inside the sealed 'fragile' crates to be carefully opened in the capitals of Europe or stored next door till the time was ripe. The powder was milky, white as the driven snow, whiter than the bleached zinc pigment in his oils. On the painters desk was a new book, 'Protective Colouring in the Animal World'. He was gazing at it with a kind of crazed intensity.

Oiku 57: A Lovely Picture (Dave Birtwistle)

For years she'd taken it for granted but now they've pulled that scout hut down everything's open and bared to view. That was what had hidden them from the road. It had been a big shed and cast a deep shadow along the back of the Methodist chapel. Doreen wondered whether to risk it up the fire escape but reluctantly dragged the postman through the hedge and into cardboard hut. When the new metro goes past few will ever realise.....Doreen turned round, the postman adjusted his trousers, the boy scout pulled the cover back and the tramp took the photograph.

Oiku 58: DIY: extensions again. (Dave Birtwistle)

The first real sun of the year brought out the purple cyclamen and the camellias to the soundtrack of spanners ringing on scaffolding, foundations going in and radio one at full blast. Skips lined the road and neighbours were out in force dumping their dead Christmas trees on top of old joists and window frames. He was up a ladder with his drill like that man in the personal injury lawyers advert as the sound of glass broke all around him. He breathed in happily. "On a day like this it's almost impossible to hear fat people eating pork scratchings!"

PLUMBING THE DEPTHS

Ron Horsefield

It was a quiet day in the plumbing section. Ferguson was welding alkathene pipe with a hot air gun while Scraggs struggled with a lead-lined head tank for the HCl plant. The tank had a rectangular lid and Scraggs' next job was to cut a gasket from a sheet of black rubber. It'd be about twelve inches long by four inches wide with a letterbox shaped slot in the centre. Drifting off, as you do on such jobs, Scraggs suddenly became animated. He clasped the gasket to his boilersuit crutch, lay supine on the bench, opened his legs and waving them in the air yelled in a squeaky voice:

"Oooo take me Sir Roderick! Take me for I am yours!"

Ferguson, the Union rep, thought this display well out of order. For a start it was an insult to all women and in addition, the gasket being black, might be considered racist.

"Wot about that then?" said Scraggs pointing to a large picture tacked up over Ferguson's bench.

"There's nowt wrong with that" rejoined Ferguson "It's a Watutsi maiden preparing to suckle her young. It was sent me by the princess Mbugoni whose education I am supporting with a monthly cheque. In fact, Scraggs, following a recent correspondence, I will shortly be sending a more substantial sum to pay for her air-fare so she can visit our country to complete her degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the Umboguntwini College of Further Education."

Scraggs clutched his prosthetic once more and squeaked:

"Oooo mister Ferguson! Take me for I am yours!" Scraggs seemed quite chuffed with this prank and used a glue gun to attach the gasket more firmly in place. He even went into the canteen with it, standing in the queue, legs apart, scratching blatantly and uttering an occasional lewd groan.

In the afternoon, back in the shop, the exhortation mutated into: "Oooo Sir Rod O'Dick"

Things quietened down a bit, then about three o'clock, during the baggin break, in comes Fields from the boilermakers. Fields was a big black bloke who normally spoke like everyone else but suddenly he's talking like some caricature out of a 1940s film set in the deep

south.

“Ah heered there’s a new bitch in town an ah’ve come to git me some of dat juicy black ass” Fields had an eighteen inch length of thick black rubber hose hanging out of his overall crutch.

“Oh Porgy!” screeched Scraggs “Where have yo bin? Ah’ve bin waitin simply ages! Wha mah jelly roll is so hot it’s almos on faaa! Take me Porgy for ah am yours!”

Pinning Scraggs on the bench and clutching the hose with the other hand Fields attempted to mount saying:

“Ah’m jest gwine t’introduce y’all to mistah Johnson honey chile. Now hold still an ain’t nobody’s gwine git hurt”

This was too much for Ferguson. Perhaps he imagined Princess Mbugoni similarly assaulted. Yelling “disustin charade!” he lurched forward and grabbed Fields round the neck. But Fields brushed him off with a sweep of his elbow and tugging the hose out of his crutch whacked Ferguson over the head with it. More excited squeals from Scraggs.

“They’s fahtin over me!” It was at that point that the foreman had to come down to sort things out. Next day the head tank was assembled and installed on the HCl plant. Ferguson’s Watutsi maiden was taken down considered now both sexist and racist and an incitement to disorder. We heard no more from Sir Rod O’Dick or Porgy.

Oiku 59: The Unlucky Chimney Sweep (Bob Wild)

Our terraced-house chimney needed sweeping. The slightest wind blew smoke back into the kitchen, like someone puffing a pipe. My dad couldn't afford a Sweep. He borrowed rods and a brush and climbed on the roof. I was told: "Watch out for the brush-head appearing". "Can you see it yet?" he shouted. I shouted back: "No". He climbed down and came into the kitchen. "Strange, I've only got a foot of rod left. There's something wrong somewhere." There was a furious knocking on the kitchen window. It was a totally black-faced lady: Mrs. Jones from next door. (100 words)

I'm tellin yer Boris I've always detested fascism. I think your Stalin is a top bloke and even as a kid Hymie Goldberg was my best mate. I've read the complete works of Marx and that other geezer... whatisname....Spencer. The only reason I joined the SS was to try and change things from the inside. If I ever got near that mad bastard Hitler I'd've bumped him off. Any commie prisoners we got I'd always try an slip em a few fags or a plate of steak an chips..

This is good to hear Heinrich. You very suitable for propaganda on radio but first we send you to be trained at Kolyma Institute of Further Education. Now..how many soldiers and tanks in your company?



A Nazi prisoner is eager to talk to Russian intelligence officers. Many like him have offered to speak to their comrades over the Russian wireless and to tell them what they really think of Hitler and his satellites

AN INCIDENT IN DOWNING STREET

Jack Smylie Wild

On Tuesday afternoon, after the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery, I decided that I would take a slight detour on my way to the Embankment (where I had arranged to meet a friend for a drink) and pass by Downing Street. Seeing the infamous address for real filled me with curiosity and a peculiar excitement: so, Prime Ministers really did exist, and so too did their houses. Wishing to have a better look at the area, maybe catch a glimpse of the man himself, and absorb the energy of an atmosphere which was so very alien to me (power, wealth, security, fame etc) as someone from the countryside, I found myself wandering towards it, and then stopping outside the front gate. Two teenage girls were talking to the policeman who stood in front of the gate. Tourists were taking photographs. Passers-by glanced up the empty street. A man from the House of Lords arrived carrying a letter, and asked the guards if they could please deliver it to number 10. At first they refused, saying that all post had to go through an x-ray, scanning machine. The man, who I believe was a Lord himself, and something like the Foreign Minister for China, and had perhaps worked with Margaret Thatcher, told the police who he was. The man who was with him, whom I recognised from TV as an MP and a cabinet minister, and who was evidently a regular at Downing Street, made some jokes with the officer, who went off to ask his superior what to do. The former agreed to take it, and the old men, satisfied, departed. Fascinating. Politics in action, before my very eyes.

I carried on down the street, but instead of turning left towards the Thames, I took a right, eager to see whether I could get a better view of number 10. What went on inside these walls? How did these men and women become involved in this elite sphere of power? I arrived in an enormous gravel courtyard which lay at the back of Downing Street, opposite St James Park. I hadn't yet managed to do any writing in London (which wasn't necessarily due to laziness, considering I had only arrived the day before, but rather that on Monday whilst in the British Museum, with no pen and paper, I had felt silly at missing the opportunity to draw on the inspiration which the place and its marvels induced in me) and so that morning I made a conscious ef-

AN INCIDENT IN DOWNING STREET

fort to leave the flat well-equipped with the tools necessary to write a few a words.

So there I sat, atop a bollard, examining one of the most important and heavily guarded houses on earth, ruminating about power and freedom, the PM and the common man, enjoying the hot sun and free time. Why not scribble a few lines down? I wouldn't usually write about politics, but then again, I don't usually find myself looking at 10 Downing Street. And besides, I'm not really thinking about politics as such, but rather about the human life (Cameron) which finds itself at the vortex of its decisions, implications and schemes. I'm not so foolish to believe that my actions will go unnoticed - on the contrary, I'm sure there are cameras and eyes watching my every move, but I'm obviously not a terrorist (I'm wearing a yellow T-shirt and shorts for God's sake! Although I do have a small beard). After all, there are plenty of people actually taking photographs of the place and of the officers who guard it, looking potentially far shiftier than myself. I take out the pen and paper (just some sheets of A4, as I don't have a notebook), and begin to write. I have nothing very specific or illuminating in mind, but, I think, like doing the washing up, once one makes the unpleasant decision to start, it isn't too bad at all, and things start to flow. The following is an exact copy of what I wrote, word for word, and admittedly, it isn't very good:

I stand outside the garden of a man
Who has the power to realise the master plan
I see the trees he does or does not see;
The red bricks that keep him safe
For him to sip his tea.
Before, he was just an idea from the TV.
But now I see the fort he calls his home,
And I am no doubt watched
By the lens and eye alike
For 'making notes' - writing this poem.

[At this point, I walk across the road and sit beneath a tree in St James Park]

The backdoor is open to the small balcony,
And the curtain shudders in the breeze.
Step out David; Eton boy; top dog; winner –
I do not hate or understand you –
I am too unwise for either,

I only wish to glimpse the face, the doubt,
The thought, the story of the Tory,
The machine behind the mask

I hear a noise, and look to my left. An orange police car has pulled up by the road side, a few metres away from me. Two armed officers step out and walk towards me. I guess why they have come to see me: they probably don't get people looking at Number 10 every day, whilst doing some writing. No doubt they were begging for a bit of action; an opportunity to exercise their power and 'skill'. I can't quite believe it though - I haven't done anything illegal, and yet my freedom to sit and write is about to be disturbed. They reach me:

"We've been alerted to the fact that you've been acting suspiciously in an anti-terrorist Government Zone, and we're here to search and question you under Section 44 of the....." I try to write down what Section it is, but they don't allow it. I tell them that I'm just writing a poem about Number 10, David Cameron etc. They make me empty my pockets, after which my hands aren't allowed to return to.

"Do you know why we're here?" the younger one asks.

"Not entirely," I respond, a little too cocky for their liking. "I didn't think I was doing anything of the sort which would merit the involvement of anti-terrorist police officers. And I'm feeling slightly infringed upon, seeing as I'm only writing some poetry and I am not trespassing."

"Your attitude stinks mate. You cheeky fucking cock."

The younger officer begins to carry out various identity and criminal record checks on his phone. The elder goes through my belongings, which consist of my wallet, a bottle of water, my phone, some flyers from the BP Portrait Award, an A-Z of London, a pen and some sheets of paper. He picks up my poem, and begins to read, with a frown on his face.

"What do you mean by 'master plan'? What's this master plan then?" I take a step towards him, to have a look for myself.

"Don't fucking move. Stay where you are." I remain still. I'm a little stumped. In hindsight it does sound a little like some sort of pot head's conspiracy theory. However, I was only looking for a word to rhyme with 'man'! I tell him that I am simply referring to David's ability to affect change according to his own judgement and power.

AN INCIDENT IN DOWNING STREET

"You're bizarre you are. Has anyone ever told you that before?"

"Yes, they have as a matter of fact." I probably shouldn't have said that.

"Who?"

"It's none of your business."

"You need help you do. I recommend a book called Behaviour Breeds Behaviour. Read that, and have a think about who you are and what you do son."

"Who's it by?"

"I can't remember. But it'll help, because believe you me, you are not normal. Look around, do you see anyone else looking at the building and writing about it."

"No."

"So why were you doing it then?"

"Because I'm a poet, and I am allowed to do as I please if it's within the law. I felt like being creative, and this seemed like an ideal time to see where David lives, and to reflect upon the common man's perception of, and relationship to, his ruler."

"Do you have any sort of relationship with David?"

"What do you mean? Of course I don't."

"Don't get lippy with me son. I've been doing this job for 20 years, and I know when I see someone who isn't quite right."

"But I'm just trying to live a happy, healthy and creative life. And I haven't done anything wrong. Surely they are people doing worse things than me right now.... murderers, robbers, rapists."

"You're the one wasting our time. You made us come over here."

"No I didn't."

"I'll tell you once more, read Behaviour Breeds Behaviour. This could've been over with a lot quicker if you had cooperated and hadn't been so cheeky."

"I told you exactly what I was doing though, and it was you guys who were rude and over aggressive to me actually."

"Can you see why we are here right now?"

"I can appreciate that you are not used to people seemingly making

notes in such a high security zone, but I can't see why one of the officers over there didn't just come and have a quiet word and check out what I was doing - as opposed to being interrogated and verbally abused by armed police officers. I'd like to send a text to my barrister."

I bent down to pick up my phone.

"Leave it there! Stay still."

"Which Section is it that prohibits me from picking up my phone?"

"My law."

"Can you make your own laws up?"

"Yes."

"Right, fair play."

The guy who has been on the phone says that he's found nothing. The older guy looks disappointed and turns to me again.

"Right, there's a Weatherspoons around the corner. I suggest that you go there, buy yourself a pint, and leave."

"But I can stay here can't I?"

"We can't stop you."

"Have a good day," I say. The younger guy hands me a copy of the search form, which says Metropolitan Police Service, Form 5090(X), at the top. They get back in their car and drive away.

I look at the form in my hands, and read the main Search Grounds section, which goes as follows:

Subject seen R/O Downing Street observing and writing notes. Subject evasive to questions, appeared to be writing poetry.

I sat back down against the tree. "Brilliant," I thought, "the idiot's written 'appeared to be writing poetry' under Search Grounds! I wrote one more line of poetry in conclusion (employing a tad of poetic license in the rhyme):]

Now a man can't write poetry
And sit beneath a tree
And contemplate the existence
Of his own MP.

L'IVROGNERIE



Le buveur invétéré **PEUT ÊTRE GUÉRI EN TROIS JOURS** s'il y consent. On peut aussi le guérir à son insu. Une fois guéri, c'est pour la vie. Le moyen est doux, agréable et tout à fait inoffensif. Que ce soit un fort buveur ou non, qu'il le soit depuis peu ou depuis fort longtemps, cela n'a pas d'importance. C'est un traitement qu'on fait chez soi, approuvé par le corps médical et dont l'efficacité est prouvée par des légions d'attestations. Brochures et renseignements sont envoyés gratis et franco. Ecrivez confidentiellement à **Remèdes Woods Ltd. 10, Archer Str. (644 H) LONDRES W. 1.**

If the text above seems to you to be in French while this text appears to be English then you are in big trouble. What you are experiencing is bi-lingual dislocation – one of the many bizarre consequences of extreme piss-headery. The above text is in fact perfect English while the text you read now is classical French such as Racine may have written. You need our help. So sign up for our course before you head out to the pub for your nightly six pints or stay home to get stuck into that litre of Absinthe you bought in Skegness (it wasn't, of course, it was a seven pint party can of Old Fart Extra Strong lager you brought back from Paris). Such cultural dislocation is a parallel phenomenon. Soon, unless you take steps, you'll be settling down with a volume of Proust whom you now consider a better writer than John Grisham, or goggling at the films of Bridget Bardot whom you now consider a more attractive hornbag than Anne Widdecome. And you'll be asking yourself why they have French subtitles when Bridget is speaking perfect English. See? Your aesthetic senses are completely shot at too. How bad can it get? Try it on your fellow piss-heads in the pub. I'm sure they'll concur. We look forward to hearing from you – consider us your best mate.

THE ADVENTURES OF ADHD

Brett Wilson

Monday 10.30 am.

In the server room, Peter had been enjoying a nap. When Marvin and Guthrie had wandered in, they had found Peter with his legs on the table, his head back and his mouth open. Despite huge efforts, neither had been able to get the paper balls they had made, into his mouth.

“I win again” said the over-competitive Marvin, launching another paper ball from the other end of the room.

“They don’t count if they go in and he blows them out again.” said Guthrie. He thought for a moment. “Why don’t we put a pillow over his head and see what happens?”

Meanwhile in one of the side rooms, just off the main corridor, Linda was sewing a fly button back onto Gordon Newpool’s trousers.

“I really appreciate this” said Gordon, looking down at Linda’s head “Wouldn’t it be easier if I took my strides off though?”

“No, this is quicker. There, I’ve finished. I just need to bite the cotton off” she said, moving her head even closer to Gordon’s groin. At that moment Bert appeared at the door.

“Did you say a meeting in fifteen minutes?” Bert looked down, looked up and then down again.

“Er, yes” replied Gordon. A muffled sound came from Linda’s mouth. Gordon was just about to explain when Bert shuffled back out of the door. He would have to have a word with Linda.

Fifteen minutes later, most of the staff of Advanced Digital Hypertext Design had assembled in the conference room, awaiting the arrival of their general manager, Gordon Newpool, for a hastily arranged mid-morning conference. When Gordon walked in, Guthrie was showing Marvin the results of his latest body piercing.

“First of all,” said Gordon, arriving at his chair at one end of the room, “I’d like to apologise for last weeks er, fiasco.” Gordon had lost his train of thought slightly, at the sight of Guthrie putting away his left breast like a small, blind albino puppy. “Er, yeah, anyway.... as I was saying. I *do* apologise for last week. It really wasn’t the right kind of weather for doing that sort of thing....

THE ADVENTURES OF ADHD

There was a murmur.

“Obviously, the pictures in the local newspaper didn’t help.” added Gordon, not knowing quite where to look.

“The next time a half-arsed customer asks the company to run around in the all-together, we should lollypop him” said Guthrie, producing a two-foot long mock pencil.

“Actually,” said Vanessa, whose face had turned slightly pink, “we’ve had a lot of interest from new companies in the last few days.”

“Well exactly.” said Gordon “There’s no such thing as bad publicity. Particularly when it goes national.” There was a silence. Gordon paused for a moment, instantly regretting that he had been the first to reveal that snippet of information. “On that thought, I’ve asked Bert to come up with some kind of advertising concept. Have you had any more thoughts on that Bert?”

“Yes” said Bert “I’ve been thinking about something along the lines of that margarine commercial.... You probably know the one. We can call it something like ‘I can’t believe it’s not software....’”

This was followed by a silence so deafening that all that could be heard was the squeak of eyeballs as they darted from side to side.

“I think you may need to work on that one a bit Bert, but you’ve clearly been putting in the hours in the ideas department. Well done.”

Minutes later, as a bemused ADHD staff left the conference room, Gordon took Vanessa on one side.

“By the way” he looked furtively up and down the corridor, “I got a terrific price for the photos. I’ll give you a cheque for your commission later....”

11.00 am

Bert was trying to think of a first class advertising campaign. He glanced at Peter, who was reading his copy of “What PC” for the fifth time. The problem with Bert’s imagination was that it had too much of a life of its own. He would often start with a perfectly good idea, only to find that it was often hijacked and subverted into something very different. Nevertheless, Bert began to drift into a reverie....

Somewhere in deepest Kent, a handsome young man was showing a beautiful woman his palatial mansion for the first time. The sun was slowly sinking below the mountains in the distance.

"Yours?" she asked, pleasantly surprised.

"Yes" he said, smoothly "It's been in my family for generations. Handed down from father to son."

As he led her from the twin cam 4.5 litre BMW turbo Z5, gallantly carrying the Gucci bags to the door, he briefly glanced at his brightly jewelled Rolex. "Just in time for a spot of supper...."

At the top of the stairs she could view the opulent and expensive finishing, the elegant and slightly understated finery, matched only by furniture of the finest provenance. He paused to look at her, and then said, "This was my mother's room" pointing towards the nearest open door. She sighed and then gently lifted her eyes, until they met his....

Later, in one of the many oak panelled drawing rooms, they both sat quietly by the romantic log fire. "Coffee?" he asked, tentatively passing her a cup, the tip of her little finger briefly touching his hand, as their eyes met once again. She could detect a hint of finely tuned muscle ripple beneath his Versace shirt as he shifted forwards slightly.

"Do you work out?" she said, eyelids fluttering.

"All the time. Mentally as well as physically...." As he said that, his hand wafted gently in the direction of a softly whirring computer.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you...." He looked away sheepishly.

"Yes?" she said, a dreamy, adoring, and slightly expectant look filling her face." There was a long pause.

"Did you fart in the car on the way down here? Only I thought I smelled burning rubber, and I wasn't sure."

NO thought Bertie. NO. NO. NO!

01.00pm

Gordon had taken several calls that morning and had been his usual busy self. However, as he was contemplating who to ask to collect

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his lunch, he had received a short call which had made him blanch. Before the handset hit the base, he was out of his chair and next to Linda's desk.

"OK. Drop everything."

"I beg your pardon?" said Linda, winking.

Gordon ignored that. He would have to have a word with Linda. "The MD has just arrived at the railway station. I want you to pick him up. And can you get some biscuits on the way. The fancy kind. No jammy dodgers."

"Whoa. Slow down." said Linda, "Do you know what the visit is about?"

"Haven't got a clue" Gordon was chewing his finger "I'm sure there must be some ulterior motive. This needs some detective work. We might need to get Bertie on the case."

"I'll call him" said Linda, picking up the phone. "Oh Gordon., could you get the floppy disk out of the computer. It's under the desk, and I don't want to ladder my tights"

"Sure" said Gordon, bending down and then crawling under the space vacated by Linda's thighs, as she pushed her chair back slightly. Bert appeared.

"Hi Bert" said Linda, "Gordon wants to talk to you."

"Great" replied Bert, looking from left to right, "Where is he?"

"Here" said Gordon, his head popping up, just between Linda's legs behind the desk. Gordon realised that this looked bad. "I was just retrieving a floppy disk".

"I don't see any floppy disk?" asked Bert.

"Er.... yeah Linda, there wasn't any floppy disk in the drive" Gordon felt himself cringe inwardly. Bert was never going to buy that.

"Oh, sorry" said Linda.

He would have to have a word with Linda.

"Anyway," said Gordon, standing upright and dusting himself off "The MD is calling in tonight to discuss God knows what, probably sales, and I want everybody on high alert." There was a pause, "Let's call it defcom2."

Those creative management training courses are really coming in

useful thought Gordon. I'm going to bring all my meetings forward, and hopefully I can land a big one before the old bugger goes back to his estate in Toffchester or wherever it is....

Tuesday 8.00 am:

Something was wrong. Linda could sense it. As she walked through the doors to the main office of ADHD, she noticed that all the lights were switched on, several computers were running defrag routines and the scanner was warming up. Alarmed, she briskly strode into the general manager's office. Gordon was slumped over his desk, like someone who had lost all muscle control, halfway through the attempt to do the butterfly stroke. She gently lifted his head so that she could open his eyelids with her other hand.

"Hello?" she said in a booming voice.

"What time is it?"

"8 o'clock. Out with the MD last night...?"

"Lind, whatever you do, make sure I get plenty of hot coffee this morning...."

"The kettle's on..." her voice trailed into the distance as she swept from the office and into the main hall. Gordon was still mumbling:

"And try not to use the funnel this time, it makes my throat sore"

Linda was just rounding the corner when she bumped into Peter.

"God, you gave me a fright then. What are you doing?"

"I came in early"

"I can see that. Got to go..."

Peter could hear Linda filling the kettle, but never drank tea or coffee himself. "It makes me too hyper" he thought, as he opened another can of coke and put his feet up on the desk. He nervously eyed his itinerary for the day. Morning: scan-in holiday photos. Afternoon: collect doughnuts. Bert walked through the door. He was wearing a fawn coloured suit that looked as if it had been styled in the 1950s. It was obviously way too small for him, but he insisted on wearing it.

"Do you think I'm getting too old for this suit?" said Bert.

"I wouldn't say that." said Peter, stifling a laugh

"You would tell me, wouldn't you?"

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“Course I would.” Peter wanted to change the subject. “We got another email from Krapoli this morning.”

“Shit! That’s the fifth this week, and it’s only Tuesday”

“And the proxy server’s down again”

“What’s Guthrie doing about it?”

“I don’t know. And I’m not calling him. You know he gets mad if you wake him up before lunchtime”

Various telesales staff were now filing past.

“Good morning!”

“Good morning”

“Good morning!”

“Good morning”

“Hi Bertie” said Vanessa “I’m expecting a big deal today, so keep your eyes on that Fax machine”

“Roger”

11.30am:

“Are you sure that Fax machine’s not jammed, Bertie”

“Absolutely”

“Have we received any faxes today”

“Yes”

“It’s not broken then?”

“I can assure you it’s not broken, and I can also assure you that you’ll be the first to know when your fax arrives.”

“This always happens to me” Vanessa was muttering now as she headed back to the Tele-Sales office.

“Are you sure the fax machine is working?” said Bert, turning in Peter’s direction.

“God knows.” said Peter, walking towards the printer. Peter had just printed-off a price list of every known piece of computer hardware, from the Araxis website, something he did at this time, each day. “Memory’s gone down 95 pence...”

Bert was about to comment, when Marcus walked through the door.

Marcus was the top resident programmer in the organisation.

“Yo!” said Marcus

“Good morning” said Peter, with deliberate emphasis.

“Hey, hey, Bertie boy”

“Hodely ho, neighbour”

Marcus continued his way along the main hall of the office, and then stepped into the development room, almost colliding with Marvin as he did so.

“I did it!” said Marvin. Marvin had arrived earlier, and had immediately begun rendering a complex 3D object with graduated flood-fill. Marcus was staring into the development room

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, man”

“I had to. That was the only machine with enough memory....”

“Yeah, but it’s Guthrie’s machine!!”

“He’ll rip your head off, and use it as a basket ball” said Peter, who had joined them both at the doorway entrance.

“I think I might have it done before he gets in.”

“Let’s hope so” said Marcus, who continued on into the room.

Meanwhile, in the sales room, Gordon had just finished receiving an important call.

“I’m going out to lunch, Popit” he shouted to Linda, who sat outside his office. Linda was sobbing uncontrollable into a paper hanky. Gordon wanted to talk about the unbelievably huge business deal that he had almost won, but also felt that he should sympathise with Linda about whatever it was that was bothering her. “To hell with that” he thought. “Listen Linda, I’m about to close the biggest deal in the history of ADHD. Two hundred grand a year lease, for the next three years. If I don’t come back with a contract in my hand, I give you permission to feed my gonads on toast to your poodle.” Linda perked up, quite unexpectedly with that news. Gordon walked gingerly over to Bertie.

“Listen, you might have to get the fat out of the fire with this one. I’ll ring you if there are any technical issues”

“No probs”

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2.30pm:

“Want another doughnut?” said Peter

“No, five’s my limit” said Bertie

Bertie had just answered another technical query on their new software product. What he wanted to say to the client was “this is the crumbliest, flakiest software in the world” He could just imagine an amazingly attractive young woman (and obviously in need of a real man from the north), slip the gossamer wrapping off the ADHD CD-ROM with a heavy-rock sound-track playing in the background. “YOU’VE SEEN THE HYPE, NOW EXPERIENCE THE TASTE OF REAL SOFTWARE!” He was about to continue with his early afternoon reverie, when the ADHD main door opened, like a blast from hell, and John stepped in. John was a senior salesman with the organisation.

“I’ve just had a blow-out” said John

“What happened?” said Peter

“Tyre went. Ripped to shreds. I barely managed to keep control of the vehicle. Managed to stop it from flipping, but it was close”

“God. Where were you?” asked Bert

“North Manchester.”

“M62?”

“No. On the golf links”

“Jesus” said Peter “What was your car doing on the golf links?”

“Not my car. My trolley. At the eleventh. Got to the top of a hill, and the whole thing went pear shaped. It was looking very nasty for a while. If it hadn’t been for that sand trap, it could have been far worse. I’m going to look for some lint and iodine. Then I’m off to make a cup of strong tea.”

As John staggered off towards the kitchen, the main door opened again. This time it was Guthrie.

“Good morning.” said Peter.

“Don’t talk to me!” shouted Guthrie “My girlfriend tried to stab me to death with a knitting needle and I’m pissed about it.”

Meanwhile, in a restaurant, somewhere nearby...

Colin Bacon-Strong, the MD of McCluskey, Forsyth and Cook, was looking Gordon Newpool squarely in the eyes.

"OK, we've talked turkey, smoked the peace-pipe, and passed the baton," Colin was a man who liked to mix his metaphors. "I want to get the best deal I can..." his voiced trailed off. Gordon didn't like this. Colin had a mischievous look on his face. "That's funny," thought Gordon "there were no notes in the CRM about Colin having a sense of humour?"

"Bear with me on this one. I'd like to know just how far you'd go to get this deal."

"As far as it takes Colin" said Gordon, maintaining eye contact, and with not a smidgen of irony in his voice, he hoped.

"Hypothetically..., what if I wanted you, and your employees to run naked, around Cheadle this very afternoon."

"I can't foresee that being a problem Colin."

"All right. What if I wanted your wife to join them."

"I'd be willing to ask her. Is that it?"

"That's far from it, Gordon."

"Excuse me" said Colin. "I just need to go to the bathroom."

Gordon first checked all the cubicles before pulling out his mobile and dialling a number.

Meanwhile, back at the office, Guthrie was holding Marvin out of the window by his ankles.

"I WARNED YOU ABOUT USING HIS MACHINE!" shouted Marcus, trying to lean out of the window.

"Somebody should do something" said John, peering in through the door.

"You're right" said Bert "I'm going to talk to him" Bert strode manfully into the development room, eyed up his options, and then stuck his head out of the window. "Listen Marvin, I think you should be absolutely ashamed of yourself. 3D RENDERING WITH GRADIENTED FLOOD-FILLS! IT'S THE PITS!!" The 'phone rang.

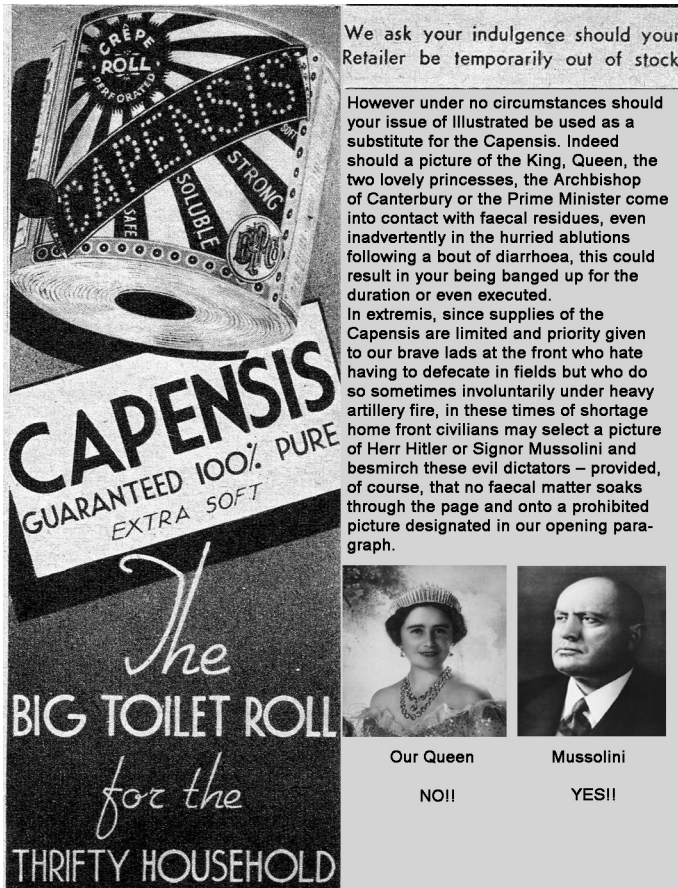
"Bert, it's Gordon for you" said Marcus.

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“Hi Gordon” said Bert. “What is it?”

“Listen, I’ve got a problem, and only you can help me...”



“OK. As long as it doesn’t involve taking my clothes off.”



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Retailer be temporarily out of stock

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graph.



Our Queen Mussolini

NO!! YES!!

Illustrated 1941

ANOTHER TRIP

Colin Watmough

Another trip, another inconclusive pilgrimage to worship
at a shrine of memories, and hear faint echoes of a former life.

How sad, to live too long, outliving reason, competence, and purpose
But sadly not outliving the bewilderment and pain that people call
dementia.

“Where am I? Where am I supposed to be?
What are we doing? Is my mum alive?
What’s happening today? Have I had my breakfast yet?
Did Dora die? What day is it today?
Where is my purse? Why did I go upstairs?
What am I looking for?
My mind has gone. I can’t remember anything!”

Repeated endlessly, my answers do not penetrate her fog
nor comfort her. She is adrift on oceans of confusion,
The minutes a continuum of puzzlement and existential angst.

Occasionally, though, like beams of sunlight burning through the
fog,
Come memories of happy childhood times. Friends. Family.
Excursions to the farm, through fields, to fetch fresh milk.
The thick topped cream, cow fresh, with crusty bread and jam.
Street games of hopscotch and of tag.

At times like these her face illuminates, her smile returns,
And you forget the shriveled arms and crooked veinous hands
And rings that flop around thin bony fingers.

You see the beauty still in that familiar face, high boned, care worn,
Close to a century of character writ bold in lines and creases,
Which tell a life well lived, and precious still to those who love her.

COMING CLEAN

Kayti Doolittle

I stand in the shower. It is quiet except for the running water. My life stands still long enough for my thoughts to catch up with me. No one can see me naked, exposed in here. No one can know what I am thinking. No one can question my expression. No one can see me curl up and cry. And No one can see me laugh hysterically at my random revelations. It is my own private moment of self-honesty with no outside influence. I can feel without worry. I just let this hot water rinse away the day.

It starts to trickle into my normally un-brushed mangled hair. My black mascara runs down my face. I bring my hands to touch my face only to leave the residue of the day and days past on my hands. I scrub my face trying to get the memories of last night out of my head. Slowly remembering that my face had been stained with black tears. The residue leaves with soap and hot water. However, I always wonder if the dirt is really gone after all.

I start shaving my legs knowing all well and good that tomorrow I will have to do it all over again. Glancing at my feet reminds me of how they danced and moved the night before. Rhythm and coordination have never been strong suits of mine. I giggle. I let the water just pour over me, washing away the unwanted. I want to be clean. Can I ever really come clean? Can I ever really wash everything away? Would I want to anyways? Or is the dirt just a part of me now?

I get out of the shower wrap my self up in warm, soft, sweet smelling towels. I realize the water is off. The sound of comfort is no longer. It is time to leave my honest haven. The thoughts are left scattered on the floor of the shower.

In Glasgow the pubs shut on Sundays. Only if you are a bona-fide traveller passing through the city from outside its limits are you allowed to buy a drink on the Sabbath



I've made out your permit to Captain P. Head. It allows you to have a small nip of Buckfast or a half of pale ale. On no account must this be followed by laughing, joking, singing, fornication, self-abuse, bestiality or congress with any purchased meat products. If you do find you have to urinate after this excessive ingestion you must hold you member with the wooden tongs provided. Should even this precaution fail to prevent an involuntary engorgement you must immediately phone the number on the back of the permit to summon a Catholic priest who will absolve you of any sin while at the same time trying to reduce the swelling.

Illustrated 194

WOODEN LIVES

Marie Feargrieve

She had awakened with a feeling that something wasn't right. A vague, uneasy sensation. On getting out of bed, she felt stiff; her movements across the room were jerky and uncoordinated. She thought she might be in the early stages of flu. At breakfast she mentioned it to Martin. He was chewing a piece of toast, not looking at her.

"Pass the marmalade please." He didn't look up from the paper.

"It's in the fridge. Get it yourself will you? I'm not feeling great."

"What's that?" he leaned onto the back legs of the chair, reaching to open the fridge. He looked round at his wife. "What's wrong?"

"I've woken up really off it. I feel as if concrete has been poured into my joints overnight."

"It's old age love."

"That's constructive Martin. Makes me feel a lot better."

Sheila went to work as usual. By mid week she was no better so made an appointment at the doctors. By the time she got to the surgery a few days later, she felt worse than ever.

"There's a brownish tinge to the skin on your legs here" the doctor pointed at the shins on both legs. She hadn't noticed it but sure enough, when she bent forward, it looked a strange light brown colour, like amber pale ale.

"There's also some crustiness to the texture. I'm not happy with it. I want you to see a skin specialist. You will be sent an appointment in the next few weeks."

Sheila left the surgery feeling apprehensive.

"It's probably psoriasis or eczema, nothing to worry about" said Martin when she told him. He looked at her legs, resting now on a footstool. *They did look swollen. Much wider definitely. But then she had never had thin legs exactly.*

The appointment with the consultant was rapid. He had been non-

committal. A biopsy had been done. The result had shown some cell abnormalities. They weren't at this stage mentioning the 'C' word but she wasn't optimistic. Finally after further tests the consultant had called her in, looking grave.

"In the skin on the legs the cell structure is most unusual. It is also spreading up the legs." Sheila knew this. The hard, brown fissured texture was now past her knees and creeping upwards to her thighs.

"In fact the cell structure is similar to that found in plants and trees in anything with a woody bark."

That shocked her.

"Can anything be done to stop its progress?"

"Further tests. As your mobility is so restricted now, rest as much as possible."

"Plant cells?" Martin was incredulous. "What the hell are they talking about?" He was worried now, angry and shouting.

"Let me have a look." Sheila raised her leg with difficulty.

"Hell, they are bad." Martin stared at them and looked at Sheila. "You're whacked. Go have a rest for a while."

He was shaken. No doubt about it, this was serious. He was scared. No showing it to Sheila though. She had enough to put up with.

Her condition worsened and within weeks Sheila had to give up work. The progress of the disease was rapid. An even stranger aspect was that her legs were fusing together. The skin had grown thick, scaly and flaky. It resembled the bark of a tree. The casing was now up to her waist. She felt no pain but was being swallowed alive by this thing. Doctors flew in from all over the world. Neurosurgeons, skin specialists, orthopaedic surgeons. All were fascinated, horrified, but completely perplexed as to the cause and baffled as regards treatment.

Sheila and Martin grew distant from each other. She felt devoured by this thing, physically and emotionally. He felt impotent and scared. His wife had become a freak. He hated to even think it but it was the only way he could think of it. The annihilation of her as a person was terrible and aggressive. The doctors appeared to give up on her. The media found out as was inevitable with something so rare. They were besieged by reporters and photographers. The only answer was to

WOODEN LIVES

move to somewhere remote, where they could have the privacy they needed. She wasn't a circus exhibit. *They were not going to get footage out of this. He was determined.*

Martin found a remote cottage in a forest setting, one hundred and fifty miles away. He had to hire a van to transport Sheila. She was now so encased in the terrible armour. She weighed a lot more. The headlights lit up the house. It stood alone amongst the trees. Martin opened the doors of the van. He grasped the three foot wide monstrosity, encircling his wife. The growth was now up to her shoulders. Only her head was visible. Her face was gaunt, haunted. He could hardly bear to look at her.

"Leave me here Martin, in the garden. You go. I'm OK." He half carried, half dragged her to a grassy spot, five hundred yards from the cottage. He was choked, he couldn't speak. He touched her cheek and went in. She looked at the clear, starlit sky. This felt her natural habitat. To be outside, not inside anymore. Strangely, at peace at last. Beneath where her feet should have been, something was moving. Tugging and straining, causing her to sway a little. It continued for ten minutes or so and after one strong surge the swaying stopped. She was steady and rooted. She was now embedded into the loamy forest floor. She knew her end was near. She wasn't afraid. She couldn't feel her body in this iron lung of bark. She was a mind. A mind alive without a body to control.

Martin hadn't slept. He stepped out at dawn. Looking towards the clearing where he had left her the night before, all he saw was a tall, solid looking tree. The trunk, wide and healthy, branches sprouting at intervals, leafy shoots and new growth waving from the top. He clasped his arms tight around himself. No grief, just relief. Her agony was over. And so was his.

He didn't forget Sheila. How could he? The tree was there, growing and thriving. A constant reminder. Life went on as life must. The press made a brouhaha over the whole thing. It was exceptional after all. An unexplained phenomenon. Headlines of "Wife Turns Into Tree." That sort of thing. But his wife was no more. She was a tree. That was it. Today's news is tomorrow's chip paper. It all died down quickly.

In due course Martin met an old flame from before his marriage to Sheila. He didn't tell her of his wife's fate. Where to begin? It was

too terrible and fantastical. He didn't want to scare her off. Things went well for them and marriage was being mentioned. This was a problem. He wasn't a widower technically and he wasn't a single man either. Closure was needed before he could be truly happy again. Being a staunch Roman Catholic, Martin contacted his priest.

"Sure, it is an unusual set of circumstances" said Father Riley. "We must apply to the Bishop for guidance."

The upshot was Martin had his marriage annulled. His wife had turned into a tree; she wasn't his wife any longer. On receiving news of the annulment, he did feel some remorse. He felt guilty, but what could he do? That day he placed some flowers at the base of the tree. He felt compelled to say a few words, as at a grave.

"Forgive me Sheila. Wherever you are I hope you are at peace. I hope I have your blessing. She isn't you but she's a good woman."

A tear slid down his cheek. He wasn't a bad man.

Inside the tree, what was left of Sheila's mind whirled. It was the only living part left and it was white hot, suffused with feeling. The energy emanating from it made the tree stir at the root. Deep fissures appeared in the bark and the branches whiplashed the air.

Martin brought his new bride home to the cottage in the woods.

"It's marvellous darling. What an idyllic place. I love it. Just you and me 'far from the madding crowd'. Heaven." Martin smiled. Life was sweet once more. The horrors seemed another lifetime away.

"Don't draw the curtains over. Look, it's a full moon. Let it shine in on us. So romantic." She smiled and held her hand out to him. Their lovemaking was passionate and protracted that night in the moonlit room. Around three o'clock Martin woke and walked to the window. A real twister of a wind had got up. The old cottage creaked and cracked, panes rattling. Gusts of wind blew down the chimney bringing soot and debris into the open hearth. Twigs hit the windows and great draughts came up through the floorboards. His wife sat up in bed looking anxious.

"It's more than a storm. It may take the roof off."

"Don't worry it will blow itself out."

Martin looked at the trees in the wood. They were all a little distance from the house. Hopefully if one did come down, it wouldn't hit. He

WOODEN LIVES

got back in bed, wrapping his arms around his wife. The cacophony of noise lessened. The storm was past its peak. They relaxed and were soon asleep. It was a brilliant moonlit night. If they had been awake and watching at the window, they would have seen a black shape ink out the golden globe of the moon and seconds later heard a tearing and wrenching of racked roots. A moments quiet and blackness descended. The towering tree fell, almost gracefully in a monstrous ballet, rending the roof, the walls, the rooms of the house in two. It obliterated the bed and its occupants. They were crushed and smashed beyond recognition. The rescue services said it was the most horrific scene they had encountered in a long time.

The huge tree had split in half as if axed by a lumberjack. At the point of destruction of the cottage, clouds of white ash puffed out rising above the dust and dirt of the disaster. It whispered on the wind, ruffling the leaves and grasses and rose high above the forest canopy, away into the blue.

BETTE BRAKA

DEMOCRACY

Tunisia
Algeria
Libya
Egypt
Tale of 4 countries
Seeking democracy, not aristocracy.
Losing, choosing, winning, spinning.
This area is like dominoes
Going through the throes
Of rebirth.
What will it be worth?
Innocents are dying,
Governments are lying.
These people deserve freedom
From cruelty and chains,
Lives of parity
Free from pain.

MY IDEA OF HAPPINESS

S. Kadison

The teacher set them an essay: *My Idea Of Happiness*. It was the kind of thing she liked. She could challenge them but it was personal. OFSTED liked personal. She got lots of accounts of how great it would be to become rich and famous.

Kerry Meakin wanted to be a pop star and marry a footballer. They'd be like Posh and Becks. She'd have three Ferraris and two Rolls-Royces, a private jet and an island in the middle of an ocean where they'd invite other super-rich celebrities. Their children would go to the most expensive schools. She'd start her own fashion line. Her husband would retire from football and become a Hollywood actor. It would be hard work and they'd have to deal with the paparazzi but she'd do charity work. She'd help poor children in Africa and Aids victims and she'd raise money for women with breast cancer. Ms Hamblin thought it a very good piece. She liked the imagination and gave it an A, adding a long paragraph of praise, as OFSTED liked.

George Powley wanted to be CEO of a big computer company. He would be the Bill Gates or Steve Jobs of the future. His products would be the most popular in the world and he would earn billions. He'd marry a glamorous wife, meet Presidents and Prime Ministers. He'd have his own golf course and tennis courts and houses in New York, Paris, London, Sydney, Moscow and Madrid. He'd buy country estates in Scotland and the Home Counties and would spend months every year travelling the globe on his ocean-going yacht, the biggest and most expensive in the world. Once he'd become the richest man ever, he would establish charities and give away billions, but he'd be so rich that no-one would be able to equal his wealth even if he handed out three quarters of it. Ms Hamblin liked this. She praised his realism in understanding how important computers were and his ambition in wanting to be richer than anyone the world had known. She congratulated him on his compassion. His style too was uncluttered and effective.

Jordan Hodgson wanted to make a fortune from porn. He would turn Kerry Maidstone, the most physically developed and precocious girl in the class into a porn star. He would have sex with hundreds of *hot* girls and all the drugs he wanted. He'd drive his Maserati at a hun-

MY IDEA OF HAPPINESS

dred and twenty through thirty mile an hour limits because he'd be so rich the fines wouldn't bother him. He'd have bodyguards and he'd carry a gun and if anybody crossed him they'd get it right between the eyes. Ms Hamblin had to condemn this: it was right to be ambitious and there was money to be made from porn but it wasn't good to be violent. It was nice he wanted to do well in life but he needed to stay on the right side of the law. Some of the writing was good though so she gave him a C.

Sophie Aspin was going to marry Johnny Depp, then dump him and marry Keanu Reeves, then dump him and marry Leonardo Dicaprio. She'd be in the magazines all the time and everyone would say she was a real bitch but she wouldn't care because she'd have so much money she could do what she liked. She'd have affairs with lots of men but if her husbands had affairs she'd say they were love rats and not let them see their children. She'd go on a diet and be super thin and everyone would be saying she was anorexic and wondering if she was going to die. She'd never wear the same pair of shoes twice and all her clothes would be made by the best designers. Ms Hamblin rather liked this. She thought it expressed female ambition well but she had to question the morality of serial marrying and dumping. All the same, Sophie was clearly a modern girl who knew what she wanted and wasn't prepared to accept second best. She gave it a B.

The first line of Tom Casson's essay read: *My idea of happiness would be communism*. Ms Hamblin went to make a cup of coffee. She'd always thought Tom a strange boy. He seemed clever but he didn't care that he did well. He was usually top of the group and though he obviously liked it, he treated it as a joke. In fact he treated life itself as a joke. As she bit into her *Jaffa Cake*, she realised he annoyed her. He had no ambition. He awakened in her a terrible fear of failure. It was very odd, because he succeeded. He could write well and his comprehension skills were excellent. When they had to do a spoken English exercise he talked about Helena Bonham-Carter; he knew her biography and her connections to Asquith, all the plays and films she'd been in and explained what he thought made her such a good performer. He spoke for twenty minutes without notes, made the class laugh and seemed perfectly at ease. Yet he had none of her own intense desire to be noticed. He could take or leave the approbation. She jogged her mug and made a small splash of brown liquid on the parquet floor, thinking she must mop it up later. At her

table she picked up the essay again:

Money doesn't make people happy even though they think it does. I think it would be much better if we all had the same. It's a pity communism didn't work in Russia. I think wanting more money than other people makes us unhappy. If we didn't have to worry about how much we had we could enjoy life more. The best things don't depend on money. I couldn't buy my family and friends. I know you can be rich and have family and friends too, but it's not the money that makes you happy. Everyone talks about getting on and what they mean is getting more money than other people or having a better job and being in charge but if you spend your life doing that you don't pay attention to the things that really make you happy like love and friendship. I think I would be much happier if we were equal because there would be no snobs. I don't like snobs.

Some people think they're better because they've got a bigger car or a nicer house or have more holidays but those people don't make me happy. I stay away from them. It doesn't bother me whether people have money or not. I don't choose my friends because they're rich but because they're nice people. I have a friend whose parents are rich but that's not his fault. He's a good friend and we have fun together. We go out on our bikes and play football and cricket on the park. My family isn't rich but he doesn't care because we're good friends and that makes us happy. I have a baby brother and that makes me happy because I can play with him and show him things like how to kick a ball. I'm happy when I'm with my mum and my little brother. I don't know why but it just makes me feel contented. I saw on the news that a politician has been sent to prison for getting money he shouldn't have had. Will that make him happy? He was probably pretty rich and he had power but I bet he's sorry now. Why did he want money? Everyone thinks it will make them happy.

I collected money for the Pakistan appeal and a boy I know kept some of the money he collected. Will it make him happy? I don't think so. It would make me unhappy because it's a bad thing to do and knowing you've done something bad gives you a horrible feeling. Like if you tell a lie to make things better for yourself. I think people get fancy ideas about happiness. I think it's very simple. It's just being with people you like and doing things you enjoy. I'm happy playing footy with my mates on the park. I play for Bispham Boys too and I enjoy it but sometimes the other team plays dirty.

MY IDEA OF HAPPINESS

They kick your shins or grab your shirt and that annoys me. What's the point? I like to win but I don't mind if we lose. I just enjoy playing. I don't think it would make me happy to win by kicking people in the shins.

That's why I think communism is a good idea. We should all be equal so we can all be different but not snobs. I'm cleverer than my best mate but I'm not a snob about it. I don't think I should have more money than him because I'm better at English. I think that's a stupid idea. What's money for? It's so we can buy food and clothes and have a house and the things we need. Everybody needs those things. If you're a snob you want to look down on other people because their house is smaller or they've got no car. I think that's really stupid because you might be looking down on a really nice person who could be a good friend. Some people say that people who don't have money are lazy but my family work hard and still don't have money. I don't think it's about hard work I think it's about snobbery. That's why I like the idea of communism because we can all work and share everything. Then there'd be no snobs and that would make me happy. This is just my opinion and lots of people would say that being able to become rich makes them happy. I think it's hard to be rich and not be a snob, which is why I disagree. Anyway, Jesus said give your money to the poor and I think he was a good person.

Ms Hamblin was inclined to put two red lines through this drivel. Was Tom Casson mentally disturbed? She found it very unnerving to read his little essay. She was going to give it an E and write a derogatory comment but she resisted and instead wrote simply: *Speak to me*. At the end of the next lesson Tom hung back.

"I can't speak to you now, Tom. Come and see me at the start of lunch."

He knocked and she called. She had his essay on the desk in front of her.

"Sit down, Tom." She turned to look at him and smiled. "Are you okay?"

"Yes thanks, miss."

He was a small, slender boy but well-proportioned and personable. She became aware of her own size: she was six feet two and thirteen stone but carried no fat. Lots of the boys were tall and hefty and Ms

Hamblin was glad she had an impressive build. It had become part of her way of dealing with pupils but now it seemed *de trop*. It was curious he could make her feel like that. She sat up straight and took the paper in her hands.

"I just wanted a word about your essay."

"Yes, miss."

"The ideas are very interesting."

"Thank you, miss."

"Very unusual." He laughed. "All the essays are pretty much the same, in a way. But yours is very different." He laughed again. "I thought your view of things was very intriguing."

"Thanks, Miss."

"I don't really understand it myself, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

"I suppose what I'm saying is it's not the way I think."

"No."

"Not many people think like that, at least I don't imagine they do."

She looked at him and noticed how there was the hint of a smile about his face. His lips were always almost smiling and he had a sparkle in his eyes which pleased her. He was such a lovely boy, to look at. She pretended to read the essay again.

"I'd like to give it a good mark," she said.

"Thanks, Miss."

"The problem is what other people might think. You know what I mean?"

"What other people?" he said with a little laugh.

"Well, OFSTED inspectors for example. You know all about them don't you? What worries me a bit, Tom, is that an inspector might think I've been teaching you these ideas."

"Oh, I'd never say that!"

"I know you wouldn't, Tom. You're an honest boy. And you're one of the best in the set. Probably *the* best, actually. But I'm the teacher and an inspector might wonder where these ideas have come from."

MY IDEA OF HAPPINESS

"They're my own ideas," he said. She looked at him and smiled.

"Do your parents talk to you about these kinds of ideas?"

"No, Miss."

"Where've you come across them?"

"I don't know, Miss. Nowhere really. We've done about the Soviet Union in History. But it's just what I think myself really. I don't like snobs."

"Neither do I," she said, laughing. But at once she thought about her new BMW. All the pupils had been excited when she arrived in it. She was very proud of it. She'd had to take out a loan of £20,000. The rest came from her grandmother's legacy. Did Tom think of her as a snob? "What makes a person a snob?" she said.

"I don't know. Looking down on other people and bragging about money. I just don't like it. I don't care about money."

"I wish I could say the same!" she said swinging back in her chair and guffawing. "But I've got a mortgage to pay. That's life I guess, Tom. We all get caught up in it, don't we?"

"I suppose so, Miss." She noticed how he'd slipped the fingers of each hand through one another and was rolling his thumbs together.

"You see, I was thinking you might like to rewrite this, Tom."

"I don't think so, Miss."

"No. It's unfair. You've done the work like everyone else. But I was thinking you might like to make it more personal. You know what I mean?"

"No, Miss."

"Well, for example, what would you like to own that would make you really happy?" She leant forward, pushing her elbows across the desk, smiled and tilted her head.

"I don't know, Miss. Maybe a new bike."

"Yes!" she said, sitting upright and clapping her hands together. That's it. You could write about that. A new bike and why it would make you happy."

"I don't think it *would* make me happy," he said and moved uncomfortably.

"I know what you mean. Yes. But at least a bit happier."

"Yeah. Well, I'd like a new bike. Mine's a bit old and it's only got ten gears. Some of my mates have got twenty-seven and carbon frames and all that stuff. I'd like a bike like that. But my mum can't afford it. So it wouldn't make me that happy, it's just something I want."

"Of course. But getting the things we want makes us happy, doesn't it?"

"No."

"It's not everything. You're right. But it does help, doesn't it. Like I was happy when I got my new car." She looked into his eyes. Boys usually loved to talk about cars and hers being expensive and fast, she could usually be sure they would respond, but there was a hardness in his eyes that disturbed her and his face showed no emotion.

"What kind of car do you have, Tom?" she said, realizing at once she might have made a terrible mistake.

"We don't have a car, Miss. My mum can't afford it."

"Well, that's okay," she said, picking up the essay again. "So long as you can get around. She sat for several seconds pretending to read. What should she say next? She couldn't give it a good mark because she feared what might happen if anyone thought she'd put these ideas in front of her class. She felt bound to challenge their naivety. Yet at the same time she felt unfair. She couldn't tell the boy what to think, though she wished she could. What kind of life was he going to have if he thought like this? He ought to be ambitious. He should be thinking about making money, getting a big house, an attractive wife. There was something morbid about a teenager thinking such thoughts as his. It was neurotic, or something. He must be very lonely.

"What does your mum do, Tom?" she said, still looking at the paper.

"She's a cleaner, Miss."

"What about your dad?"

"He's in prison, Miss."

A sudden shock went through her which she fought hard not to show. Why didn't she know? Why hadn't it been announced? God, this place!

MY IDEA OF HAPPINESS

"I'm sorry about that."

She set the essay down on the table.

"Well, Tom. I'll give this the best mark I can. The writing is okay. You're a good writer, usually. But what I'm trying to explain is....I could get into trouble. You see, we're not allowed to tell pupils what to think and these ideas are so off the wall, someone might think I've been trying to influence you. You know what I mean? Teachers have to be very careful these days."

"Yes, Miss."

"So if you wanted to rewrite it, you know, something about getting a new bike or maybe your mum buying a car or something like that...."

"My mum couldn't afford a car, Miss."

"No, but you see what I mean. Something that might make life a bit better and so make you all a bit happier...."

The boy looked down at his hands. She noticed how long his eye-lashes were. He really was a very attractive young man. He turned his face to her and she saw the hard look again in his blue eyes.

"I think I'd be happy if there were no snobs," he said. "That's what I don't like. I think about it a lot."

"Yes," she said, "yes. But perhaps you should think about yourself a bit more. There are lots of opportunities for a young man like you. You're bright, Tom. You could get on. Then you could buy your mum a car!"

She laughed, leaned back in her chair and ran her long fingers through her blonde hair. The boy studied his hands for a few seconds.

"I don't think it's a car she needs, Miss." His look, so fixed, so sure, so adult unnerved her.

"Well, I'll mark your essay, Tom, and let you have it back."

"Thanks, Miss."

As soon as he was out of the door she scribed a red E in a circle and began her comments:

Though this is quite well written, the ideas are bizarre and not what I expect from a boy of your age. I expected you to write about your

personal desires and ambitions, the normal things that everyone aspires after. I wasn't expecting you to write from a political point of view, especially one so far from the mainstream. This gives me a difficulty because.....

She stopped, packed away her things, picked up her bag and went to the staffroom. She would have something to tell her little corner circle of colleagues today. "Guess what..." she would begin.

**THE TRUTH ABOUT
CHOCOLATE**

*

**Where is all this
chocolate going?**

Every day, every night, Fry's Chocolate is loaded into vans and distributed throughout the country. Rationing of raw materials has inevitably had the effect of reducing output, but Fry's have done much by careful planning to help correct this position.

Where is this chocolate going? Why is there a shortage in the shops?

Well there is a list headed by the King and Queen and the two lovely princesses. Also the corgis need to keep up their strength. Then there's the cabinet and the civil service followed by the judiciary and the police. Teachers and clergyman also get priority as do street-walkers and spivs. Toiling oiks come last since we believe chocolate is bad for their teeth and might distract them from work. Fry's are, however, hoping to scavenge a few dregs from the flues of their processing plant. A team of unemployed actors and ballet dancers will take on this task. They will be known as chocolate chimney sweeps.

So don't blame the shopkeeper when he says 'Sorry, no chocolate.'

FRY'S CHOCOLATE PRICES

FRY'S SANDWICH CHOCOLATE
2½d & 6d (½ lb)

FRY'S PLAIN CHOCOLATE 2½d

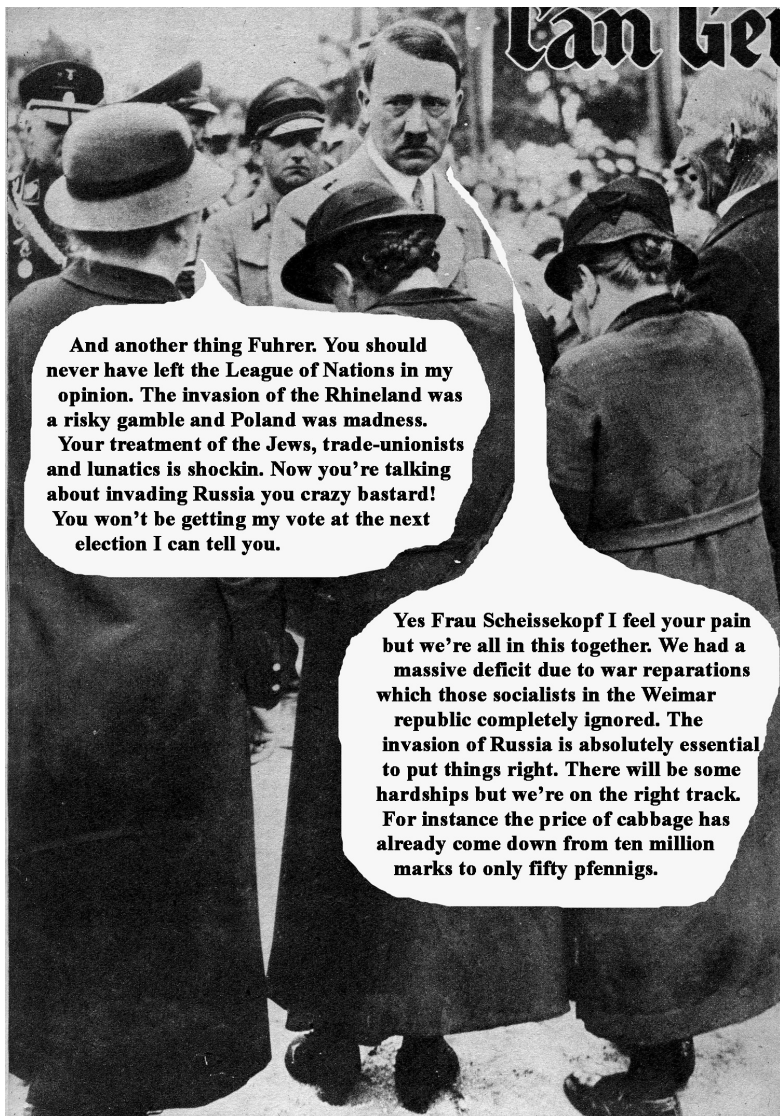
FRY'S CRUNCHIE 2½d

ISSUED BY

FRY'S

MAKERS OF GOOD
CHOCOLATE

D326.1741



And another thing Fuhrer. You should never have left the League of Nations in my opinion. The invasion of the Rhineland was a risky gamble and Poland was madness.

Your treatment of the Jews, trade-unionists and lunatics is shockin. Now you're talking about invading Russia you crazy bastard! You won't be getting my vote at the next election I can tell you.

Yes Frau Scheissekopf I feel your pain but we're all in this together. We had a massive deficit due to war reparations which those socialists in the Weimar republic completely ignored. The invasion of Russia is absolutely essential to put things right. There will be some hardships but we're on the right track. For instance the price of cabbage has already come down from ten million marks to only fifty pfennigs.

A Million German Widows are a menace to Nazism

These women confronting an anxious-looking Hitler are widows of men killed in a munition works explosion. Since this photograph was taken, their ranks have been swelled by some million, and as the number of the mourners becomes ever greater so the menace to Nazism increases with bitterness and hatred growing among the deluded people in Germany

DANGER: MEN AT WORK

Ken Clay

There was a cold war between Barrow and Broomie which sometimes got hot. They were opposites. The only thing they had in common was a job in the fitting shop at Carlisle Industrial Chemicals. Barrow, as the best engineering brain on the premises, got all the technical jobs while Broomie, as the worst, worked the drill. This was only one rung higher than sweeping the floor, which he did when he wasn't on the drill.

And yet it was Broomie who had pretensions to culture, always wore a tie, pressed his overalls, brought in pot plants, read the Daily Mail and invested drilling with the responsible complexity of a brain surgeon's trepanning operation. Barrow, in contrast, was an insouciant vulgarian who bared his hairy chest even in winter, sang dirty songs at the top of his voice, sometimes dangled red rubber tubing out of his overall crotch and affected an avuncular concern for Broomie, twenty years his senior, which Broomie had come to distrust. Nevertheless Broomie had to admit that some of Barrow's advice was well-founded, like the time he'd charged through clouds of boiling coolant to stop him boring a one inch hole in stainless steel at 2000 revs. But there were other occasions when he suspected he'd been set up, like when Barrow had insisted on an eight sixteenths hole and had Broomie searching frantically through his stock and rowing violently with the storekeeper.

Broomie's single talent was for scavenging. The day, in this respect, had started well. As he approached his machine he noticed a pound note sticking out from under the rubber mat. Greed obliterated any speculations about how this could have got there; his immediate concern was to keep at least one of his steel-toe-capped size nines over it until everyone had gone out on the plant. When Barrow called him over he covered it with a six inch flange.

'Keep this to yourself Broomie for Christ's sake. It's not really, your turn. If one of the other labourers found out I'd be lynched.' He cupped his hand round Broomie's ear and leaned closer. 'It's a parcel - feels like a jacket.' The old shop fore-man, now retired, sent in his cast-offs for general distribution.

DANGER: MEN AT WORK

'Where is it?'

'I've hidden it on plant. Bring it in later - on the quiet like'

'Right. Good thinking Barrow. These greedy sods don't appreciate good stuff anyway.'

They were interrupted by a muffled rumble from the amenities area followed by an agonised bellow. Ronnie, the new apprentice, had opened his locker and nearly got knocked over by a bouncing deluge of old rubber boots.

'The Phantom strikes again!' somebody shouted.

The first time had been three months ago just after he'd started in the shop. Then it had been screwed elbows, joint rings, stud couplings, valve bodies, gland packing and pump impellers stuffed into that vertical coffin shaped container which should have held only his personal effects.

He guessed somebody had a key so he changed the lock. But a few weeks later it happened again and this time the dirty swine had included a dead hedgehog. He considered complaining to the Health and Safety Executive on account of this rotting corpse being adjacent to his sandwiches but settled for the foreman who merely issued a general caution. His next lock would be unbeatable, he thought - until today.

A small crowd was already winding Ronnie up to new heights of rage.

'How's the bugger getting in?'

'He must be a bleeding genius!'

'I reckon its a master skeleton key.' The notion was taken up.

'Course! That's it - a master skeleton key!'

'Bloody skeleton key?' shouted Ronnie on the edge of hysteria, 'How could it be?' He opened his hand to reveal to those who pretended they'd never seen it before the Unbeatable, Impenetrable, Unpickable.

'A combination lock!' There was a silence while they gave a good impression of hard thinking.

'He must have hit on just the right combination' said Barrow pursuing the problem with remorseless logic.

'With five soddin digits!' said Ronnie. He was doing an HNC at night-school and rarely missed an opportunity to instruct his less fortunate colleagues. Only last week he'd spent all afternoon trying to convince old Barney that screw cutting a left hand thread in Australia was no different to doing it here.

'That means one hundred thousand combinations' he went on, 'Who could possibly try all those positions?'

'I've only managed forty eight myself.'

'Have you tried lying on top?'

'Fuck me no! Forty nine!'

'If you set up one every fifteen seconds' continued Ronnie remembering the calculations held done at the time, 'It'd take four hundred and sixteen hours to do them all. That's over seventeen days working twenty four hours a day!'

'Well how's he getting in then?'

'I'm blowed if I know' he said, pressing the steel sides yet again in search of a sprung seam. 'But I'll find out if it kills me!'

As they drifted back to work Barrow took an acrobatic dive over Broomie's flange.

'Aaaaaaagh! Jesus Broomie that's a hazard that is! Nearly had a lost time accident there!' He moved to pick it up but Broomie was out of his cupboard so fast he banged his head on the doorframe.

'Just leave it. You've got better things to do than clear up after me - besides its covered in oil, you'll get your hands dirty.'

'Ugh!' said Barrow in exaggerated horror 'We don't want any of that sort of thing.'

Soon the place was empty. Broomie walked to the door as if taking the air, then dashed back to the drill. The exposed corner of the pound note did indeed have the familiar green whorls and even what looked like a picture of the Queen. The rest of it, however, shouted in big red and yellow letters 'Win a thousand pounds in the fabulous Nescafe Grand Prize raffle!'

Towards the end of the afternoon Barrow and his team, a labourer and an apprentice, came out of the Benzene Hexafluoride and passed through the Bagging Plant on their way to the brew hut. The Bagging Plant was a cavernous steel-framed building with high grey

DANGER: MEN AT WORK

windows; sparrows flitted in its vacant upper regions. Down below forty massive stitching machines clattered and whirred, each one operated by a woman in a blue smock. Big Irma was in charge. She had Barrow's parcel ready and he paid for it by going into an enthusiastic clinch. Irma's vast rubbery lips jammed up against his like a plumber's squeegee; Barrow's grimy hands sank into her bulging buttocks; pelvic oscillations ensued. A human uproar sounded above the mechanical din. The embrace collapsed with great, stagy gasps on both sides. As his team left by the far door Barrow moved over for a private conversation with a young redhead in the corner.

Later he arrived at the baggin hut declaiming poetry.

*'Oh thou dark and hairy slit
Divided by one inch from shit
How men could wallow in thy piss
And call it everlasting bliss
I'm fucked if I know!'*

His filthy tin cup looked as if it had been filled with dark mahogany wood-stain. He poured in condensed milk and three spoonfuls of sugar. This glutinous fluid was gulped greedily.

'Getting anywhere with that one?' asked Owen the labourer.

'Getting anywhere? Am I getting anywhere? Just ask me if I'm getting anywhere!'

'Getting anywhere?'

'I've fucking cracked it Owen luv!'

'Not before time either. You've been working on it for months.'

'Worth waiting for though. What a body!'

'Has she got a sense of humour though' asked Trellie the apprentice, 'Can she cook?'

'Do you fancy poking Fanny Cradock?'

'What's been the big delay anyway?' said Owen.

'Its her old man; mad jealous he is; never lets her out. But he's also crackers about fishing.' Barrow gave a great cackling laugh and rolled over backwards along the bench. 'And tomorrow night...him and his mates....are driving down to South Wales ... for their once a year...ALL NIGHT SESSION!'

'Jammy sod!' said Owen.

'What if he comes back?' said Trellie

'Are you on? Definitely? Round there? Straight on the job? Up to the maker's name?'

'Fuck me no! She's a nice girl Owen, not one of your Cock and Trumpet scrubbers. We've only known each other thirteen weeks four days nine hours. I merely find myself in a position to take her out for a slap up nosh in one of the district's most expensive restaurants ... And afterwards, inflamed by our brandy liqueurs...who knows?'

'What about the missis?'

'Can't take her as well. Be too expensive.'

'Well I hope you've got a good story.'

'I'll bring my best gear into work and you can tell her I'm working late on the evaporators - perhaps all night.'

'I'll tell her you're working like a dog - a thoroughbred stud Labrador.'

'You could leave your stuff in Ronnie's locker' said Owen. They laughed.

'Who the hell is the phantom?'

'Christ Trellie I thought you knew' said Owen, 'Its this black bastard here!'

'But how d'you do it?'

'Here's my key' Barrow fished out of his tool bag a ground down nail punch.

'You could pick a cheap padlock with that but what about a combination lock?'

'You don't even touch the bleeding lock. You use it to knock out the hinge pins on the door.'

'The hinge pins! Ferkinell!'

'Best get moving' said Barrow 'Broomie's waiting for his jacket'. He got up, threw his dregs on the floor and picked up the parcel.

Broomie felt faint when Barrow walked into the shop with the package bulging blatantly out of the front of his overalls.

DANGER: MEN AT WORK

'Into the cupboard quick!' he said looking round anxiously.

'How will you get it home? You can't be seen on the bus with it.'

'Christ no!' Broomie travelled regularly with one of the other labourers; they even got off at the same stop. 'I'll walk it!'

'That'd be best. Pity its started raining.'

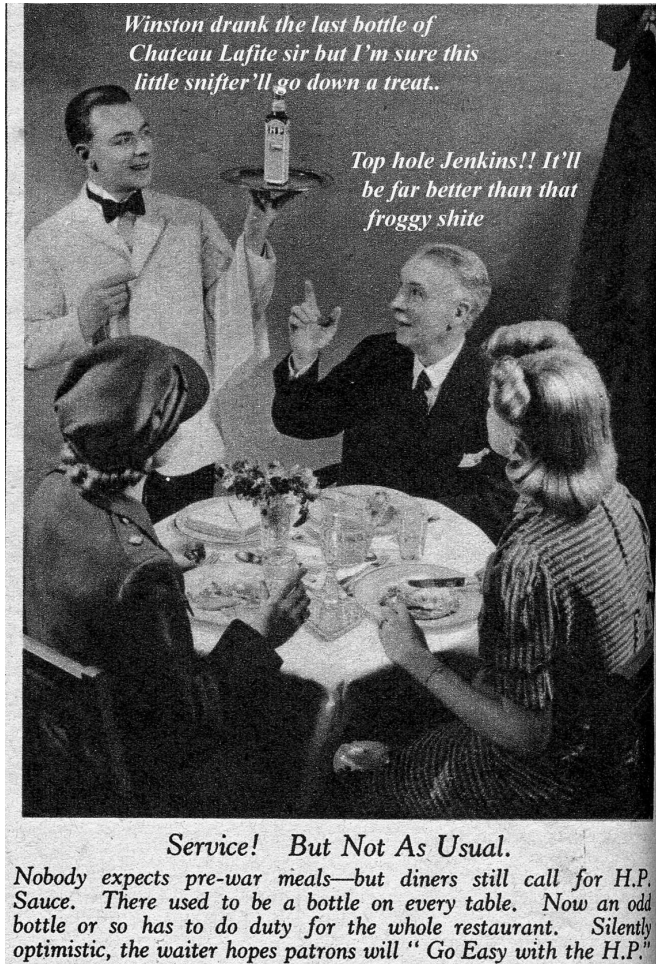
Broomie got drenched but reckoned it was worth it. When he got in he took off his boots and shouted for the scissors. His wife watched as he opened the parcel on the spotless kitchen table. In it was one of the filthiest coal sacks ever to come out of the power station. Damp black grit was compacted into its foul-smelling fibres. Big Irma had cut a hole in the top and two in the sides and, as a nice afterthought, stitched a label just inside the neck which read 'Specially tailored for Albert Broome Esq.'

At night-school, in the corridor, Trellie bumped into Ron. He couldn't help explaining the hinge-pin trick. It was a rare pleasure to have his brainy fellow apprentice hanging on his every word. They had a long talk about Barrow, the redhead and the jacket. Ron retired reflectively into his hydraulics class.

There was a lot of shouting next morning as Broomie struggled into his overalls: remarks about the jacket; a real withering barrage. Somebody handed him a coalsack tie. Broomie kept his trap shut with difficulty. The shop emptied as usual; only Ron hung back. He fitted extra-long hinge pins and mushroomed over their protruding ends then had a chat with Broomie. The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Late in the afternoon Barrow had a phone call from the Glauber Salt plant but when he got over there no-one knew anything about it. By the time he got back everyone had gone home. He plugged in the kettle and brewed an extra strong tea. First he slipped into his frilly white shirt then carefully knotted an expensive silk tie. Bending slightly he combed his glossy black hair in the mirror taped to the wall. One last admiring glance then he straightened and took a swig. Strange! He scarcely got a mouthful.

He tipped the half pint cup further and felt, with growing rage, a spreading warm wetness on his chest. The empty shop resounded with a howl of despair. He sloshed the remaining tea savagely against the wall and looked closely at the cup. Just under the overhanging enamelled steel lip someone had drilled four adjacent holes. It was a trick he remembered from his days as an apprentice - he'd

tried it himself twenty years earlier. Surely Broomie couldn't have dredged that one from the depths of his spastic consciousness. He pounded it flat with a seven pound lump hammer, ripped off his shirt and went home. He felt a bit like President Truman on learning of the Russian Atom bomb.



Illustrated 1941

MY LIFE IN PRINT

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ray Blyde

When Sed arrived home the first thing he noticed was Lloyd's seabag in the hallway. On the table was a note -Gone to the hospital see you later, Lloyd. Sed sat down to think again about the proposition King made to him. Working days or nights made very little difference if he couldn't get some help from somewhere. Lloyd would be the greatest help if he could be relied upon. He shook his head at the difficulties, he needed someone he could turn to for advice but he knew he would have to make all the crucial decisions himself.

As he contemplated his situation the phone rang, it was Eadie, she promised to come by later with a meat and potato pie. He didn't mention the fact that Lloyd was home she would find out soon enough. In the meantime he had to go to the post office to collect his mother's pension. When he got back Lloyd was back from the hospital he could smell him when he opened the door. His heart sank as he saw the ungainly figure stretched out on the settee in a drunken stupor. He was so far gone that it would have been crass stupidity to try and rouse him and expect to get an iota of sense. To crown it all he still had a large brimmed Australian hat perched on his head with his blond hair sprouting from below the brim made him look a ringer for Worzel Gummage. The image might have been funny to someone else but to Sed it was another problem with no solution. When Eadie arrived, it was all Sed could do to stop her attacking the prostrate figure.

"Don't upset yourself aunt Eadie, he's not worth it."

"Just look at the worthless baggage!" she railed. "Why didn't he stay in Australia and do us all a favour, he's not going to be any help, more a hindrance I shouldn't wonder." Lloyd grunted as his mouth opened slowly as his top set dropped down. "How disgusting, I can't bear to watch," said Eadie turning her back on the apparition,

"Funny that," remarked Sed staring at Lloyds unconscious countenance "I never knew he had false teeth, unless he had his own taken out in Australia."

Sed couldn't sit around waiting for Lloyd to recover he had to go for his nightly visit to the hospital. Elsie looked a lot better Sed thought

perhaps a visit from number one son might have had something to do with it. It was more a matter of twenty questions he would ask the questions and she would respond with a nod or shake of the head. "I bet you were pleased to see Lloyd mam?" Her eyes lit up with enthusiasm, she nodded her head vigorously. She wouldn't be very happy if she could see him now. "Doctor Valant said he's going to start you on some speech therapy when you're up and about!" She frowned. He held her hand to reassure her. "There's nothing to worry about it's part of the treatment, he'll have you up and about before you know it, then you will be able to come home," She tried to speak but the sound stuck in the back of her throat and her eyes filled with tears. He put his arms around her meagre frame and rocked her back and forth and wished he felt confident about the future. The sister told him that she was eating well which was reassuring. On his way home on the bike his mind was a turmoil about which shift to take combined with what to do about soft lad. His concentration wondered and he nearly ran into the back of a bus. That's all I need a straight choice - the hospital or the morgue. As he pulled the bike up on it's stand he resolved to give Lloyd a bollocking and a choice either toe the line or get out. He opened the door and resolutely strode in to say his piece. He had hardly managed to extract his keys from the door when Gwen ran into him, she flung her arms around him kissing him full on the lips.

"I love you Sed!"

"Whoa, what's all this about?" said Sed completely overwhelmed. She stood back somewhat embarrassed by her uncontrolled demonstration of affection.

"I..I'm sorry Sed, I just wanted to show you how much I love you." Sed wasn't ready for this. Still unsure how to react he said

"Where's Lloyd?"

"He went out, said he would catch up with you later."

"Bloody typical, he came home yesterday, his seabag's still in the hall, he hasn't bothered to unpack, he goes to see me mam and comes home pissed as a newt...I can do without this...."

"Look sit down and relax I've made a cup of tea." Sed took off his motorcycle jacket and flung it on the clothes peg in the hall, it missed and fell onto the floor.

"Stuff it!"

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"What did you say?" yelled Gwen from the kitchen.

"Nothing of any importance," replied Sed.

"Here, have this, do you want something to eat?"

"Er.. no thanks, I don't feel very hungry."

"How's your mum?"

"Frustrated...mostly. She's like a time-bomb waiting to go off."

"Look Sed d'you want me to go?"

"No, of course not Gwen, I'm sorry, I'm all keyed up, I don't know what to do, or which way to turn. It's not your fault, I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

"I understand, and I'd like to help, if you'll let me."

"Thanks, you and Eadie have been great. I don't know what I would have done without you,"

"Well what's the first problem?"

"I've got to decide whether to take the boss's offer of a night job."

"D'you fancy nights?"

"I don't know, I've never been on nights. The idea was so that I could be at home to look after mam when she comes out of hospital."

"Who's going to look after her when you go to work?"

"Well, now that Lloyd's home I was hoping he would look after her at night, now there's a laugh, he's incapable of looking after himself."

"I can come over and look after your mum after work if you decide to go on nights!"

"Thanks Gwen, but think about it, that would give Lloyd the excuse he's been looking for, no responsibility and out every night, no, he's got to do his share."

"I was only trying to help, don't shout at me." Sed pulled her down onto his lap.

"I'm not shouting at you. I think the world of you Gwen."

"Do you love me?"

"Of course, why d'you ask?"

"You never say."

"Well I have a lot on my mind right now, but I do love you." They kissed passionately.

"Well then let's get engaged?" Sed shot up with astonishment.

"Engaged? Hold it Gwen don't be in such a hurry....we hardly know each other."

"We've known each other since we were kids."

"Yeah, I know that but..."

"Then you don't love me enough!"

"Do we have to make our minds up now?" Sed felt as though he'd been pushed into a corner, it sounded like an ultimatum.

"There's no one else is there?"

"No, look can't we talk about this some other time."

"Oh go and chase spiders Sed Kirk, you're a waste of time." She jumped up smoothed her skirt and flounced out leaving Sed stunned with another problem to sort out.

Sed had a bite to eat then settled down to watch the six o'clock news on TV, when he heard the key go in the front door. Lloyd popped his head around the door with the silly hat still perched on top.

"G'day kiddo. Your big brother's home from Oz! G'day....is there anybody there?" Lloyd could tell from the look of disdain on Sed's face that he was on a loser. "Ok...what have I done to burst yer balloon?" Sed swallowed his anger because if he got too upset he become inarticulate, then he might resort to violence which would solve nothing, "well, say something for Christ's sake?" Sed folded his arms, then got up to turn the TV off.

"Ok, what happened to you last night after you went into hospital to see mam?"

"How d'ye mean what happened?"

"You were as pissed as a newt!"

"It was one hell of a shock to see the way she is, it's like a living death."

"So you got pissed because you were upset?"

"You've got it in one kiddo!"

"How d'you think I've managed?"

"With difficulty I imagine, but then again you were always the boy scout, dib, dib, and all that sort of thing."

"Well it's just as well we don't all go swanning off to the other side

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of the world to escape our responsibilities when things go wrong at home." Lloyd avoided eye contact and began looking a bit disconsolate.

"I hold me hands up, up to now I haven't made a very good showing with the old folks at home, but to tell you the truth Sed I'm scared of illness and I can't begin to tell you how I feel about death!"

"What is there to be scared about illness, even iron men rust, and death, well we're all going to die sometime."

"You make it sound so simple, you should have been the eldest son not me."

"Well, never mind the eldest son, I feel like an only child because everything falls on me. I need some help, if and when mam comes home she's going to take a lot of looking after, so if you're not going to be any help you'd better say so now and find yourself somewhere else to live!"

"Ok, what have I got to do?" Lloyd took his hat off and slung it nonchalantly on to the hall stand and sat down opposite Sed in the other armchair.

"What're your plans now your home?"

"Well, I suppose I'll have to get a job."

"Aren't you going back to sea?"

"No, the arse has fallen out of the merchant navy, mostly oil tankers now; high tech less men." he shrugged his shoulders. "I'll go down to the employment exchange tomorrow. I won't be a burden kid I promise." Sed had heard it all before and gave him a wry smile. "Honestly kid I'm a reformed character, give or take a slip up here and there."

"Like last night?!"

"Well, yeah, but it gutted me to see our mam like....she is." Sed opened a couple of cans of lager as Lloyd recounted details of his life in Australia. How he jumped ship got a job ashore as a trainee chef, and met this girl called Melanie who was a chambermaid in the same hotel.

"She was a great bird Sed, looked after me like no one else before or since. We rented a flat in Fremantle and things were great until her ex husband found out where she was living. He made our lives hell. He wouldn't take no for answer. We fought a couple of times. The second time he nearly put me in hospital. He used to follow us

around to bars, clubs. He was an obsessed sicko. Finally, he came into the hotel restaurant one lunchtime caused a scene, he was thrown out and she got the sack."

"What happened next?" said Sed getting really interested.

"It's incredible really, but she went back to him."

"Why did she do that, she didn't love him did she?" queried Sed. Lloyd shook his head vigorously.

"No not at all, but reasoned that it would be easier to go back and pacify him than put up with all the hassle. She claimed in his defence that he had never hit her all their married life, or so she said. I can't believe that after what he did to me." He showed Sed a couple of faded scars around his eyes. "He butted me in the face and broke all my front teeth. He grimaced at Sed and unhooked the plate of his upper set to show him. Sed smiled to himself as he recalled the incident the previous night when they dropped down while he was asleep.

"What happened next, did you see her again?"

"No but I spoke to her on the phone. I pleaded with her to leave him and come with me to Sydney, or anywhere, Oz is a big place, or even back here with me, but she wouldn't hear of it, said it was for the best." Tears welled up in his eyes, and for the first time in living memory Sed felt sorry for Lloyd. He put a comforting hand on Lloyds arm.

"Never mind, you're home now, you'll find someone, there's plenty of fish in the sea. Lloyd sniffed, nodded and took out of his pocket the dirtiest hankie that Sed had ever seen and wiped away the tears. "Bloody 'ell !" exclaimed Sed, "That snot rag looks like a car mechanics oily rag." Lloyd started to laugh.

"Aye, it's disgusting isn't it. I've got a bag full of dirty washing out there, when I get round to unpacking. Anyway kiddo I saw Gwen here this afternoon," said Lloyd his whole demeanour changing to one of enthusiasm. "You two going strong?"

"Well, we were until tonight!" Lloyd shot him a strange look.

"Why what happened?"

"She wants to get engaged, that's the last thing on my mind at the moment."

"Go to it, you can't beat the love of a good woman."

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"And you should know."

"I do know."

"Ok, well, sup up there's another couple of cans in the fridge."

"A toast, to all the girls I used to know."

"That's easy," joked Sed, "I've only known two."

Lloyd true to his word proved a great help around the house. He vacced, dusted, washed and changed the beds, on top of which he cooked some superb meals for when Sed got home from work, even Eadie was impressed which was an accolade in itself, but warned that Lloyd was on a high at the moment, the proof of the pudding would be when Elsie came home from the hospital. Lloyd dismissed her doubts and said he was quite looking forward to it. Sed had still not made up his mind about going on nights. Gwen told him she thought that working nights was anti social. She said it was bad enough when Henry worked shifts everyone had to be quiet and walk around in carpet slippers when he was in bed. They even had to silence the doorbell and wrap a cloth around the door knocker, she claimed it wasn't natural. However, his mind was made up for him when Lloyd came home to tell him that he'd been offered a job as a chef in a hotel in town, the hours were from one pm till nine o'clock in the evening. Sed started work at nine o'clock till four in the morning. So there was a short fall when Lloyd would have to travel home from work. Gwen said she would stay until Lloyd got home.

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