

Books that bite. Copyright P. Audcent.

Have you ever picked up a library book to find someone has marked the pages with their corrections? Sometimes its spelling and grammar, but sometimes they dispute the authors facts and list their grievances in the margin. Indeed often they themselves are wrong. Don' t you dare touch these pages they might bite back!

Graham Stourton lived alone in a small shack high in the Nevada' s, surrounded mainly by rocky outcrops in the summer, and freezing cold winds in the winter. It was then that he wrote, next to a large wood stove that he had dragged up from the valley below. In fact everything he had there had been carted up at sometime during his lifetime. Now he was contemplating retiring to the sun and sea. Frankly he was saddened and dismayed. Last summer on one of his trips down to civilization he had visited his local library and discovered his latest novel mutilated. The cover itself looked perfect, and it was with some pride he had plucked the book from the shelf and gently flicked it' s pages only to find a hideous scrawling amongst his very words. To Graham words were his life, and though his spelling was indifferent at times it added to his books flavor. His characters came alive by their very indifference to normal spelling as they spoke. He placed the book back on the shelf.

"They shouldn' t be allowed to disfigure a book," he complained as he sidled past the Librarian, she just nodded and continued her conversation on the telephone.

Thus it came to pass that after he had collected his supplies and was loading the truck up, old Jack Fleeting Horse came out of the barbers and slapped Graham on the back in greeting. They agreed a beer would go down nicely so they repaired to the bar. It was here that Graham finally got his anger out of his craw. Old Jack just nodded and asked him what he wrote with.

"Pencil" said Graham.

"Ah, that' s fine if you want to rub out the words later on, but if you want 'em to stick you use charcoal crayon."

"No such thing Jack, its either one or the other." Graham laughed and drank his beer.

"What youse need is biting words."

Graham nodded his eyes now lit in amusement.

"Old Rocky Moondance, she showed me once, when I was a kid at lessons. Believe you me Graham I was bit all over. Story book about a young bull bison if I remembers correctly."

Graham signaled for another two beers, perhaps this story he could use.

"All you do is break the charcoal up finely and mix it with the local beeswax and grossweed, you get a charcoal crayon."

"OK that' s fine for the paper you write on, maybe and I' m not entirely agreeing with you. But how does it get transposed to the printed word? Got you there Jack."

Jack shook his head.

"That I don' t know, but take it from Rocky Moondance it follows through

once it's been writ. The book I read was one she had written, and like you had it published and printed all formal like. Coloured pictures an' all."

Graham sank his beer and slapping Old Jack on the arm, laughingly he marched out and drove back up to his shack. That drive up through the pass and onto his land gave him time to think, well there was no harm in giving it a whirl. He stopped on the way and plucked a bunch of grossweed from the road side.

He collected some charcoal from his heater and mixing it with wax and grossweed, rolled it out into strips then cut them to size. He put them in a box for later use, when the urge to write was upon him. That was usually the late Fall when snug in his shack, he had no place to go. He tried them but the coolness of the cabin made them awkward to write with and he gave up after a few attempts. The problem was the pressure he needed to exert to get any viewable characters. He stuffed them back in the box, and reverted back to pencil.

Ultimately he sold up and moved to the warmer climes, his fame had reached the sunny shores of California. Once settled he visited his library and was instantly pleased to see his whole range of novels neatly stacked on the shelves. Imagine his horror at lifting up the first books cover and finding a review by an illiterate reader brazenly scrawled on the front piece. 'This is a piece of...'. Graham picked up another of his books and this one had heavy ballpoint under many of his sentences, with exclamation marks! Hideous, outrageous. He stormed from the library and remembering Old Jacks story returned to his unit and hunted out his box of charcoal crayons.

It wasn't so much a fictional piece, as a story of his time in the mountains and the folk he had met. The crayons wrote smoothly in the warmth of his room. Occasionally he would make an error both in spelling and grammar. Sometimes forgetting a stop or a coma. When he finished he bagged it up for his publisher attaching a note.

The note said 'no changes were to be made to the text'.

His publisher called and said they had found twelve errors.

"Leave them there," said Graham, "How's your manuscript reader?"

'Funny thing Graham she's covered all over in insect bites.' Came the reply. 'Still we have changed the text and the printers have got it now.'

The book was printed and Graham was sent a copy. He was elated none of errors had been affected. His publisher called him.

'Sorry about this but the printer says they printed exactly what they received; apparently our own changes didn't take. The run was massive so do you have any objection if we release them as they are.'

"None whatsoever." Graham smiled. He opened the cover of his book and read, "This book is dedicated to the memory of Rocky Moondance whose wisdom permeates these pages - so beware!" He packed it up and mailed it with a note to Old Jack Fleeting Horse, with an invitation for his friend to come and stay.

'And Jack' he had written, 'we will write another but this time together, with those fantastic crayons so bring some charcoal with you

when you come.'

That book was later published as well; you 'll find it under Stourton-Fleeting Horse.

Old Jack provided most of the dialog.

CRASH copyright P.Audcent

I wrote this when I was in my early twenties. A rather nasty automobile accident had occurred not far from where I lived near London. The crash affected me since I was also both young and a driver myself. I felt at the time great sorrow for the loss of young lives, and I hope the story carries a message, as well as a plea for safer and careful driving.

The offside wheels were now stilled, and the steam had subsided though a trickle of water from the radiator could still be heard faintly against the silence of the peaceful night. She had stood there in a dumb stupor for an eternity, unable to move, incapable of sobbing; her eyes mesmerised by the savage wreck before her. Her feet by instinct moved her toward the car - John's car - and as the image of his face edged into the dizzy cavities of her mind she cried out his name. Once, twice, and yet again she pulled at the driver's door - John's door - but her strength seemed sapped, and his body lay completely caged by the crumpled steel of the chassis. She climbed onto the bonnet and in a frustrated fury pitched herself through the shattered windscreen to try to catch the lapels of his coat, but she had no strength to pull him free. She saw his faint gasps for breath; a welling of blood beneath his forehead had begun to weep from a gash above his eye. His pulse was slowing; she could almost feel his life slowly ebbing away. She climbed back up to bank, she must get help, he must live, for her he must, he will live.

She ran on to the road, in which direction she did not care, as long as she got help. She was in one piece at least, but John? She must get to a telephone and quick. It was now raining but she felt no discomfort, for the determination to help him had sealed all passages to pain save the underlying dread that her efforts might be too late. Without his love she would feel lost forever; her life would be joyless, it would become a world without meaning. She would die with eternal grief. Each terrible thought speared into her mind as she plunged headlong down that dark and lonely road. Her eyes had now become accustomed to the blackness and as she glanced around she could clearly see the high forest on either side rearing upwards toward the sky. Gradually her senses had cleared and all were strained for the slightest sound, the faintest blink of light that could, or would, mean help.

Suddenly through the darkness of the wood's she spied a chink of yellow light that flashed momentary behind trees each time she took a step. She stopped and gazed steadfastly at that dim beam of hope for some seconds, as if surprised by its sudden appearance. Further up the road there stood two gateposts, sentry-like, on either side of a driveway, and in a twinkling her feet had reached the gravel where they once again paused to check her bearings. With her eyes searching the dim track

ahead she launched her body forward through the leaning pines, their scent thick and brisk, their closeness to the driveway shielding the night from her pensive eye. She kept as well as she was able to the middle of the curving drive which wended its way toward the back of the distant building until the pines gave way to lower shrubs. To save time she opted to use the better light conditions and take a direct path through the shrubbery where she could see a sizeable mansion surrounded by lawn. The building was halloped by two large arc lights which stood beaming at each end, whilst each window was gaily lit on two floors. In a large square forecourt she passed countless cars, but she hurried on. Now she could hear music and voices. Her pace quickened, she heard them so clearly, shouts of laughter and chattering. She stepped on the first step, she visualised smiling faces laughter and gaiety, then concern for herself and John, and eventual rescue by these strangers within. The mahogany door was before her, on the left a large white bell push. Her hand leapt to push. In a few moments she would tell them, she would break down perhaps, but she would get John help. The long seconds ticked by, her hand again flew to the bell push and prodded several times in quick succession. She could not hear it ring. The music was loud. The band was playing a quickstep. He loved dancing. She felt the music calm her mind, but she steadied herself and reached for the large bronze knocker above her head. She could not move it. It seemed pinned solidly to the door; angrily she wondered why people put such ornaments up that were entirely useless. She then ran to the bay window on her left. Through the net curtains she could see a hoard of well-dressed people dining and dancing. The air inside was hazy with smoke, but their mouths chattered and were wreathed in smiles.

Her knuckles tapped the windowpane, but no one looked in her direction, no one came. Her hands beat palmwards onto the glass, then quickly leapt to her face to cover the sobs that had welled up inside her and which now burst out in a torrent of frustration, anger and pain. Her hair mingled with her tears as she pressed her tormented face to the cold glass. Venom rose and filled her heart, anger had replaced anticipation and cold hatred rifled her mind. In her anguish she saw only foolish, ugly preening people locked into self-enjoyment, unaware of the sadness outside their circle. Too involved in their petty pleasures to answer the door or to see her sorry stare at their very window. She, a picture of dejection, degraded by their infantile prancing and she fighting to save a loved ones life, he locked in a crushed metal cask, hurt and blood stained. She smacked her fists against the panes.

“I didn’ t know we had been invited to this party, I think we are supposed to be somewhere else my love.”

She turned dumbfounded. Her taut and angry eyes softened as she met John’ s bright steel blue eyes shining from the reflections from the house, a smile of self-amusement playing upon his wonderful unblemished face. She rushed to his embrace and they walked hand in hand softly across the forecourt and down the driveway. They stepped though the shrubs and the rising dew, passed under the sleeping pines, the down onto the lane to welcome the impending dawn, whose amber shafts soon

enclosed them in veils of golden liquid.

The same golden dawn revealed a mail van had stopped by a scarred passageway through the pines along the same lane. On reconnoitring, he found a car badly crushed, lying on its side, its maroon coachwork creased and crumpled. He leaned over the bonnet and peered cautiously inside. He drew back and vomited, for death was such a repugnant end, especially for two as young as these.

DEXTER THOMAS.

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I once spotted such a youth homeward bound, and not at all keen to get there. Through my windscreen I saw him study every tree he passed, and in my mirror he had stopped at a notice and was avidly reading it. The school bus stopped at Tenderfield crossroads discharging three weary passengers; their school coats were the same sky blue, lavender piping stitched around the lapels. With bags slung over their shoulders, they trudged off up their different gravel roads. Dexter's left lapel piping was loose and fluttered gently as he walked the brown gravel, his shoes occasionally kicking up the dusty surface. One sole was slightly loose and gave out a flapping sound as he walked. He turned and waved to Angela, who had taken the road directly opposite to the one he was on, she waved back. He then glanced at Ricky whose head could be seen bobbing over the stone wall along his road. They lived in the county sub-divisions, mostly ten or twenty acre sections. They called them 'hobby farms' but few could make a real living on them except old Mrs. Martin, her raspberries and strawberry patches being an exception. Most of them had grassy fields for their horses, and grew nothing but overly rich and smelly compost heaps. Dexter's sister Belinda made a handsome profit selling plastic bags full of the droppings to passers by for their gardens. Her spot up by the crossroad had only one bag left; he put the thought to the back of his mind to tell her.

Ricky turned and saw Dexter looking in his direction, and shouted that he would ring him tonight about their homework. Dexter replied with his thumb up, then continued walking around a slight bend taking him out of view from the others. He quickened his pace for he had spotted a large white notice pinned to the fifth tree along the roadside, once there he glanced up at it, probably a fair or garage sale he presupposed, but then he read it avidly.

He stood in silent contemplation looking up at it for a full minute. It had been pinned at least a foot above his eleven year old head, but the letters printed upon it stood out crystal clear. 'Um' he said to himself then continued along the road. He soon passed Mr. Sandleson out in his front garden, dead heading roses. Mr. Sandleson looked up as Dexter passed. 'Nice day for September', but Dexter made no reply, Mr. Sandleson continued snipping. He eventually rose up and stretching his back looked around for Dexter who by this time had walked right past the lane leading to his house. Mr. Sandleson shrugged, 'Must be

off to a friends,' and started to pull out the thorns from his garden gloves.

"Where on earth is Dexter Thomas, Belinda?" Dexter's Mother peered out the kitchen window; she had always called her son by his full name.

"Maybe the bus was late, maybe he was run over, or eaten by ants. He's only ten minutes late." Shouted Belinda from her bedroom. "Or maybe he's crept into the shed?"

Dexter lived in the outhouse, their house only having two bedrooms.

"Go and see doll, we must leave soon, the supermarket shuts at five. We need him to wheel the trolley and carry the bags."

Belinda marched out the back door and banged on the shed wall.

"If you are hiding in there Dexter get out here quick, it's shopping day unless you had forgotten."

No answer, so she pushed the door open and glanced inside. The mattress on the floor yielded nothing except a few magazines on aircraft. These she picked and threw close to an old warped bookcase. Except for a bare light bulb strung from the roof this was the sum total of furniture and fittings. In the corner on the concrete floor Dexter had arranged his spare shirt and trousers next to a low pile of shorts and socks.

"Dexter" Belinda screamed at their back orchard as she came out, "Its SHOPPING DAY."

"Did you find him?" asked Mrs.Thomas. Belinda shook her head.

"He's only fifteen minutes late, maybe he and Ricky Trent are skylarking."

"If he is he'll...he'll, DARN HIM he KNOWS WHAT DAY IT IS. Skylarking well we'll see about that. Give Mrs.Trent a ring Belinda now we must go soon, they'll all be shut."

Belinda did as she was told but she returned shaking her head.

"Ricky was there but not Dex, anyhow Mrs. Trent says they've changed the closing hours to nine at night so we do have time Mum."

"Thank the Lord, you wait Dexter Thomas when your Father gets home, just you wait." Mrs. Thomas sat heavily down on a barstool.

"Get us a drink pet." She sighed to Belinda.

Mr.Thomas arrived home at seven and was confronted by one furious wife and daughter.

"Wrecked our whole evening Dad." Belinda spat out.

"Better go shopping now, we'll worry about Dexter Thomas later."

Mrs.Thomas grabbed both her handbag and husband and walked him to the door.

Mr. Thomas turned.

"You best stay behind Belinda, its getting dark, keep the porch light on."

"Why should I, you know Mum and I love shopping, just to get out of this hellhole once a week."

"You should find yourself a job missy or a boy friend then you might get out a bit more. Sides you have the horses for company, you used to really enjoy that. Now stay here for Dex and don't give him a hard

time when he turns up. He's probably got a rational explanation, did you think of ringing the school? Maybe he's got detention, stayed late."

"He came home with Ricky Trent, now come on Jim, shopping now." Mrs. Thomas hauled her husband to his utility. Belinda switched on the porch light and there it would gleam until her parents return.

"OK, time we called the police." Said Mr. Thomas, he looked at his watch it had gone ten.

It was pitch black outside, no moon, heavy cloud, and a rainstorm in the air. That is what the Duty Sergeant told him, 'We'll send someone up tomorrow morning, in the meantime he was on foot, so he can't have gone far.'

"Helicopter with the searchlight?" asked a worried Mr. Thomas.

'On duty elsewhere, not back till tomorrow.'

"As tax payers we are entitled to receive better attention than this Stanley Crabtree." Mrs. Thomas shouted over her husband's shoulder.

'Why if it isn't Flora Thomas herself, well I can't do better than that Jim, but I will ask the night patrols to look out for Dexter, his blue school uniform you say. Hang on Jeff Kehoe says there plenty of hay ricks around this time of the year, he could hide in to get out of the cold night, Your Dexter's a real bright kid, maybe he's run away from home?'

Mrs. Thomas grabbed the phone from her husbands hand, and shouting

'Nonsense you bludger Stanley Crabtree!' she smashed the phone down. Jim Thomas looked at her.

"I knew the bludger at school." Was all she was prepared to say.

Half an hour later Jeff Kehoe drew up in his patrol car. He checked first with the Thomas's in case Dexter had returned. He collected Jim Thomas and they both went back to the bus drop off point.

"We'll check your neighbor's first Jim," the patrolman nodded at the Sandleson's place as he slowed down by the house.

"Yep, expected him to say his usual hello, but not a word from him, just kept walking on by, quickly too, as he had the wind behind him. Went right on pass your turnoff Jim, seemed to be heading down toward the river, then Mrs. Sandleson called me so I saw no more. Maybe Missy Martin saw him, she being on higher ground. She was out amongst her canes about that time."

"How'd you know it was Dexter if he didn't look at you, you only glanced at him side on, or at his back as he passed, could have been someone else from his school." Jim Thomas said. "There's a couple of the junior lads live along here as well."

"No Jim, it was your Dexter alright, recognized the lapel piping flapping in the wind, and that damn flapping shoe he's got. About time your missus sewed it up, and you got out your glue gun, both been like that since goodness knows when."

They thanked him and drove on up to the Martin place, where Missy invited them in for coffee. Missy seemed upset about something. The patrolman

calmed her down,

"Just a few questions Missy, I'm sure nothing untoward has happened so a cup of coffee would go down great, its about Jim's boy Dexter."

"Its Debbie's anniversary, something will happen, I felt it in my bones when Dexter walked past your turnoff Mr. Thomas, it got something to do with the anniversary." She wrung her hands and left the room. Whilst she was out in the kitchen Jeff turned quietly to Jim.

"I'm sure Missy is exaggerating, she's always had a penchant for blowing things up."

"How'd you mean, Dexter was no swimmer and that rivers pretty fast flowing Jeff!"

"I mean you think back to her phone calls telling us her sister Debbie was still alive, I remember Dad when he was in the force telling Mum and I that she was so grief stricken loosing her sister that gave her these premonitions of getting Debbie back. Ultimately she began to see apparitions, and drove Dad and Stan Crabtree up the wall with her incessant calls."

"First I've heard about Mrs. Martin having a sister." Jim looked up as Missy came in with a tray and steaming cups.

"Indeed I still do have a sister and she's just told me Dexter's fine, he's staying over with her. She's fixing his collar or something." Missy's smile was radiant.

Both men looked at one another.

"Well Missy that's just fine but can you tell me when you saw Dexter Thomas walking along the road today. Mr. Sandleson said you were working in your patch."

"I was indeed, nothing grows unless you care for it and new seasons fruit grows on new season wood, and the weeds have to be kept at bay so I dig 'em up and replant them behind the barn over there."

"But about Dexter..." Jim Thomas interrupted.

"Ah yes I did see him as I said before. Oh long before Mr. Sandleson who was in mortal combat with his wife's roses, hacking them he was, and swearing and more hacking and shocking language, it's a wonder they don't up and die with that treatment."

"Dexter?" said Officer Kehoe gently.

"Um. He was reading that white poster on the fifth tree, Its there off and on. Changes colour too. I've seen your Belinda Thomas read it when it was lime green. And others, but only Dexter when it was white. Funny that."

"Did you see any vehicles that could have picked him up at the time?"

"Now you mention it that no good sheep stealer Jonny Lambton, he drove past in his Ute, must have passed Dexter as he headed for the river."

"Why would Dexter head for the river, he certainly didn't like fishing?" Jim Thomas scratched his head.

"Debbie lives there you foolish man, he's gone to visit her, about time your wife sewed his lapel up Mr. Thomas." Missy said as the two of them headed for the door. Jim just grunted.

They drove down to the bridge, and then on up to Jonny Lampton's place where a small wooden cottage surrounded by an assortment of animals sat squarely in the middle of a sloping paddock, there wasn't a sheep in sight. Wood smoke came curling up from the chimney and a door opened as Jim Thomas swung the gate. Jonny came out with shotgun cradled in his arms.

"Put the weapon down Jonny, I want to ask you some questions," Jeff Kehoe called out as he opened the car door. Jonny didn't move.

"Cost yer, ten bucks."

"Dexter Thomas has gone missing, do you know where he might be." Jonny shrugged his shoulders, "Cost yer twenty bucks for that."

"He knows," whispered Jeff Kehoe, "he ups his price if he knows something, ten dollars is his 'know nothing price'."

Jim took twenty dollars from his wallet and placed it on the ground, Jonny motioned them to step back, and he picked it up.

"Saw the kid going down the road, towards the bridge, past him in my Ute."

"Did you stop?"

"Yep, asked if he wanted a lift, but the kid said thank you no. So I drove on up here. You know mister that kid of yours has torn his coat lapel and its still not fixed, you got a useless wife there."

"I'd like to take a look." Jeff Kehoe pointed at the cottage then at the shed. Jonny let him past. Jim Thomas stood glaring at Jonny then followed Jeff. They found nothing, then left.

"I reckon we've done all we can tonight, I'll ask the sergeant to organize a search party early tomorrow. I guess Dexter has never gone missing before Jim?"

"No."

"He hasn't had a spate with Mrs. Thomas or his sister?"

"Not that I'm aware of, he's a quite lad, does as he is told."

"Amazing the number of people who've mentioned your Dexter's coat."

"Meaning."

"Maybe Jim he's not a happy lad, you ever asked him? Still lets ask your Belinda what the poster said, for it sure wasn't there when I came past."

"What Missy Martin had to say about her sister, what was all that about?"

"I keep forgetting you're not local, ask your wife she'll know."

They arrived at the Thomas place and Jim's wife hurried out, but he shook his head, so she started to weep again.

"Officer Kehoe wants to speak to Belinda." Jim yelled for her. When she came from her room, Jeff Kehoe asked her about the poster.

"I guess it was A4 size, green and printed, probably with a computer." She answered between sniffs; it was obvious from her reddened eyes she had been crying as well.

"Can you remember what it said?"

"Garage Sale this Saturday, 14 Chantry Close, Tockington. Bric-a-brac,

household furniture. Water damaged. I remember because I asked Mum if could go to it.” Her mother nodded.

“The posters gone now, was anyone with you at the time, or do you know anybody who might have stopped to read it?” Belinda shook her head but her mother replied that Ricky Trent’s mother had mentioned it when she rang to check if Dexter was there.

“Seems I best get over there then, I’ve told Jim we’ll organize a search party first thing in the morning, the helicopter will be back as well.” Jeff Kehoe left, leaving Jim to ask his wife about Missy’s sister Debbie.

“Why do you ask Jim, it was a long time ago and surely our missing son is more important,” she said.

“There’s not much more we can do, Jeff and I searched the river bank with his car spotlight, we have to wait until morning, only Missy said Dexter was staying with her sister.”

“That’s nonsense, Debbie was killed in her cottage twenty odd years ago. We had a tremendous storm and the river overflowed its banks, five of the cottages were swept away, Debbie’s was one of them. It was late at night so I guess she was asleep and didn’t hear the wake up call her neighbors say they gave her. They reckoned she must have been staying with Missy. But obviously she wasn’t. They found her drowned and severely beaten by the pounding rocks a day or two later, a mile down river once the flood had subsided.” Mrs. Thomas took a deep breath.

“Missy’s just a strange old bird, she’s been seeing Debbie often, she says. But no one wants her put away, so we all accept she’s strange and leave it that.”

Meanwhile Jeff Kehoe was interviewing Mrs. Trent.

“The poster, yes I remember it well, I was tempted but I saw Belinda coming along the road and she’s been spreading rumors about Ronnie, my husband, and I didn’t want to talk to her.”

“What did the poster say Mrs. Trent.”

“It was a white one, beautiful lettering, sort of gothic like you see in those old prayer books. Illustrated capitals, you know the type of thing?”

Jeff Kehoe nodded, “but what did the words say.”

“You’ll think me a fool but the words kind of spoke to you, in the mind that is. So as you read it you also heard the words spoken in your mind. Really weird but wonderful, like the tinkle of water on a hot day.” She glanced at his upturned eyes. “I thought you wouldn’t believe me. I told Flora Thomas the same thing when she rang looking for Dexter, she thought I was quite mad.”

“What did the text say please.”

“Yes that was it.”

“What was it.”

“It said PLEASE.”

“And?”

“PLEASE HELP ME, and I will help you. Come to the bridge and we will

meet.”

“That’ s all.”

“You will think me quite insane now.”

“Why?”

“The poster had my name on it. Mrs. Susan Trent, at the bottom. I was shocked, I saw Belinda on her way, so I left quickly.”

“You mentioned Belinda was spreading rumors may I ask what they were about?’

“Ronnie has disappeared, he’ s been gone a fortnight, we had a row, several in fact. Belinda has told people around here that we’ ve split up. But I know Ronnie’ s gone to his brothers for some peace and quite. He rang Ricky yesterday night. But I do hope Dexter will be found safe, he’ s such a nice person and I wish his mother and sister would appreciate him. You know Mr. Kehoe there’ s none so blind as those that live with you.”

Jeff Kehoe left totally bewildered.

The following day was taken up by a thorough ground and air search. Dexter’ s school pack was found early on, not far from the riverbank leaning against a gnarled old apple. Jeff Kehoe went straight to the site where one of the volunteers had found it. Jim Thomas came down to check its contents and agreed it was Dexter’ s. So the search concentrated along both banks. The river was only inches deep. No trace of Dexter was found so by the late afternoon after a frustrating negative day, Jeff Kehoe found him self in the Council Chambers studying old survey maps. He then went to the Tax Rates clerk,

“Who lived in this spot please.” He pointed with his finger, at the river bend that Dexter’ s bag had been found.

“No one now, county has built a levee all along there.”

“ There were several cottages washed away some time ago, I remember my father helping.”

“Yes, let me check my Rate notices, that would be about twenty two years ago.” The clerk went to another office and brought with him a leather bound book.

“7 Riverbend, owned by a Miss D. Ramsay.”

“Ramsay?’

“You know Missy Martin up Tenderfield way, before she was married, her name was Ramsay.”

The following day Dexter boarded the school bus. Ricky and Angela were delighted to see him but he said ‘Hi’ and then clammed up. The school advised the Police and Jeff Kehoe was sent to interview him.

“ Would you tell me where you’ ve been your parents have been scared out of their minds?”

“I doubt it.” Dexter looked directly at the officer.

“We have been searching for you for over two full days Dexter, now where have you been hiding?”

"I believe you were told, at least I was told you were."

"Exactly what were you told?"

"That you were told I was safe, and not to worry."

There was a knock on the door and a teacher put her head through.

"Officer Kehoe can you contact your station sergeant at once."

Jeff asked Dexter to stay put and went outside to his patrol car and picked up the radio.

"Yes Stan, Jeff here"

"Get anything out of Dexter Thomas yet?"

"No, just started."

"Well just finish will you and get up to the Sandleson's. Seems the poster is back and Mr. Sandleson is missing."

"Could be taking a walk, visiting friends, caught the bus to town."

"Apparently young Dexter paid him a visit before the lad caught the school bus, Mrs. Sandleson saw them talking at the door."

"So"

"She heard them talk about something in the river, about him going there."

"What colour was the poster?"

"What on earth does that matter."

"It does, take my word for it. And find out who lives at 14 Chantry Close, Tockington."

"OK I'll get back to you, I'll ring her and ask, then get onto the county."

Jeff drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited. His mind now picking up what he'd learnt at the training school. A hardened old detective had given a series of lectures on detection. 'Maybe some of you guys will one day come into the department and maybe not, still those skills are just as useful on the beat as in the murder room. A murderer's weapon doesn't have to be a gun or a knife.' A thought made his brow arch. The radio sparked into life.

"Jeff it was white. And Missy parents once owned the house at Chantry Close. By the way its now longer there."

"The poster would have had Mr.Sandleson's name on it. Strangely the house seems to fit, I bet it burnt down or something."

"You what!"

'Wet furnishings for sale. Stan would you recommend a busy body in the neighborhood?"

"You mean someone who's nosy enough to know everything?"

"Exactly."

"Me and Missy Martin I guess."

"You maybe Stan, but not that poor stupid Mrs. Martin who sees apparitions all the time."

"She still seeing Debbie then."

"Apparently, don't tell me my old station sergeant believes that rubbish."

"Jeff you asked me who, and I told you, now get on up to the Sandleson's,

I' ll ring Jim Thomas to pick up his son. Over and out."

Jeff Kehoe returned to the room Dexter was in.

"Sergeant Crabtree is arranging for your father to take you home," Jeff paused, "Dexter Mr. Sandleson has gone missing so I' ve been ordered to go and find him. Do you have any idea where he might be?"

"I suppose he must have plucked up courage and read the notice, I expect it was the white one. The colored ones are for jumble or garage sales you know."

"Yes I did," said Jeff quietly.

Dexter frowned but continued,

"I presume you also checked where I left my bag."

"Miss Debbie Ramsay' s cottage."

"Swept away in the flood." Dexter sounded extraordinary sad.

Jeff looked up and stared at Dexter' s face, then he glanced at his coat. He rose from his chair and came closer.

"Dexter who mended the piping on your coat, it couldn' t have been your mother as you boarded the bus directly, so you haven' t been home."

"I' ve asked and asked, I even volunteered to sew it myself but she always refused, not a mans job she' d say, get Belinda to do it, but Belinda never would and so..." the words poured out of Dexter, but Jeff put his hand up.

"And presumably Debbie Ramsay did"

"Yes"

"And you have been with Debbie in her cottage these past few days?"

"Miss. Ramsay, I wouldn' t presume to call her by her Christian name, Miss Ramsay."

Jeff smiled at Dexter' s deference. But Dexter went on.

"She doesn' t exist Mr. Kehoe, not in real terms."

"And that' s where Mr. Sandleson has gone today."

"I think so, Miss Ramsay wanted a conduit to encourage Mr. Sandleson to visit her."

"Do you know why."

"She said she hoped you would find out, detect it, I think she said."

"Thank you Dexter, now wait here for your father. Thank you very much. By the way both your parents and your sister were deeply affected at your disappearance."

"I doubt that Mr. Kehoe."

"What did Miss Ramsay have to say?"

"She said they were crying."

"Things will change for you young Dexter, bye for now, you' ve helped me a great deal."

"Will you help Miss Ramsay?"

"Indeed I will, there is still a missing piece in this jigsaw, but why she would not tell you is beyond me."

"I' m only eleven."

"True, goodbye for now."

Jeff found Sergeant Crabtree sitting at his desk eating a hamburger.

"Did you go up to the Sandleson's Jeff?"

"No its you I want, the same nosy cop who can tap into everyone's problems."

"Alright try me but Missy Martin's better than me, she gets her info from a reliable source."

"Her sister."

"Um perhaps, I never did entirely believe her, a part of me does, but the cop inside doesn't, that make sense?"

"How about this. The coroners report on Debbie's battered body."

"Meaning?"

"It could have been bashed prior to reaching the water."

"Murder? Who could tell, Jeff, the flood was a massive wall of water cascading over the rocky bed."

"The tragedy was laid to rest though Stan, at a guess it was felt expedient to close the a tragic case."

"You have any idea who it might be?"

"Yes, and Dexter knows I'm sure."

"Where had he been all this time."

"Down at Riverbend with Debbie, I mean Miss Ramsay."

"Now I know you're taking the water out of me Jeff, pull the other one."

"Stan give me a clue, was she pretty?"

"Very, there was talk she and..."

"Mr. Sandleson and she were sweet on one another." Jeff interrupted.

"Now listen, there was talk of an engagement ring being handed over."

"So?"

"Sandleson was also sweet on his future wife the present Mrs. Sandleson. Which reminds me you are supposed to be going up to Tenderfield to find him."

"At a guess I don't think we will find him, least not for two days or so, he'll be where Dexter's been."

"Just to please me, just go and have a look Jeff."

So Jeff Kehoe stopped for a belated lunch, then drove up to the bridge road and parked on the nature strip where No 7 Riverbend used to stand, the apple tree was loosing its leaves. The afternoon was still light and he could make out a figure walking towards him, in a sky blue school coat. Dexter pointed up river.

"He's up here in the river Mr. Kehoe."

"How come you are here."

"I was a bit worried for Mr. Sandleson so I came down here to see if I could help. To find the ring that is."

They proceeded up the narrow path through scrub and bramble and Jeff spotted Mr. Sandleson's body stretched out in the river as the water gushed and gurgled over his head drawing out hair in long silver strands. Dexter helped him pull the body to the bank. They checked his pulse, there was none.

“Best not move him anymore until the doctor gets here. Hello, what’s he clutching?” Jeff gently prised the old mans fingers apart. In his palm lay a battered diamond ring.

“Oh, he did find it after all.” Said Dexter softly. Jeff placed Mr.Sandleson’s fingers back over his palm and they both walked back to the patrol car.

The report said heart attack. But Jeff Kehoe had his doubts, the apple tree had also died. Maybe she had planted it when they had got engaged? Missy would know. Missy didn’t, Debbie had gone as well. But at least now Dexter’s life had changed for the better.

Pennington’s garden. © Paul Audcent 2001

My father often liked to drive out to the country most Sunday afternoons. If the sun was shining and he had sufficient fuel for the excursion we would be rounded up from our weeding duties, washed and cleaned for an early lunch. Then we would be packed into the van like proverbial sardines. Father would not say where he was going; it was to be a surprise. Often or not Mother would pack a picnic, and this was a clue how far we would likely travel. Short distances did not merit a picnic basket, and invariably led to friends or a cousin living close by.

That Sunday in May was no different from any other. A belated April shower drenched our weeding excursion and we all landed up in the greenhouse with the patter of raindrops on the glass. Father then broached the subject of our intended excursion whether it rained or not.

‘We’ve been invited to visit my old lecturer Professor Pennington and he has told me a most delightful garden. We are to have tea there on condition we all do a little weeding.’

We all moaned. This was not a trip out of the ordinary, no beach, nor windy ancient monument, indeed no visit to an old established manor. A trip to do some weeding, none of us were the least bit excited and we rather dragged our feet to put away our trowels and gloves. There was no urgent rush for the washbasin and certainly no picnic basket with raspberry vinegar cordial. But Mother was there in a flower print dress and rearing to go. So we dressed, rushed downstairs to a lunch that had not been laid on the table. Mother smiled.

‘Your Father says the Pennington’s are some distance away and it’s a cheese sandwich for you all as we drive there.’

We embarked clutching our sandwich, whilst Father drove smoothly and quickly down to the Rosepoint crossroads where we were to meet the Professor.

‘He said it’s a bit of a trial to find them as there are lots of little lanes dotted about so we meet him there in an hour.’

I looked at my watch it was twelve noon and I asked Father how long were we to drive?

‘About an hour or two.’

I wondered which. Then with a leap of my heart I said we had forgotten our gloves and trowels and surely we are too well dressed to weed?

'Not a bit of it, I'm sure the Professor has arranged for the proper implements to be available.' I subsided into my sandwich.

The journey was uneventful and the showers turned away giving us blue sky and a shiny tarmac road to follow. I sat at the back and lazily watched the road markings disappear into the distance. Some two and a half hours later we arrived at the crossroads, to be honest we were all likewise. Cross that is. But there was a wild old gentleman in a green blazer and red waistcoat waving to attract Father's attention. He scrambled into an old Utility and beckoned us to follow. By now we children were quite fed up with the whole charade of an entertaining afternoon out. But we livened up when we swept through a substantial gate and driveway to arrive at the Pennington's abode. There was much fussing about as Mrs. Pennington welcomed us all and took us into their enormous lounge. Here we sat whilst the adults chortled away. Then the Professor turned to us and said shyly.

'Your Father has kindly offered you services as labourers in the garden and there are aprons and gloves for you all in the conservatory. I have placed there a gas mask for each of you. They do come in various sizes so I expect you select the correct fit yourselves.'

There was a stunned silence.

'May'nt we smell the flowers then?' asked my sister.

'You may of course, and in fact you need only wear the gas masks in the exotic's garden. You see our garden is divided up into, well outdoors rooms, with a hedge or wall as a boundary. The exotic garden has plants in it which have an intense perfume.'

'Overpowering.' said his wife.

'So please only use the masks when you are in that section, it has two entrances and both have warning notices advising use of the gas mask.'

I was immediately aware of his use of the word 'advise', and wondered what could possibly occur by not using the mask. I was soon to find out.

We put on aprons and gloves and were each given a small fork with a little lever welded to the back. We picked up a gas mask and a basket and then proceeded into the garden. What a delight, there were trees and shrubs and hedges and glorious places to hide. But Jonathon said we should weed for an hour first, and then perhaps if time allowed, have a game after.

'But first we should see the layout of the garden, so we don't get lost.' said I eager to try the gas mask on at the appropriate garden room.

Jonathon agreed and we retraced our steps and took a more cautious walk through the various courtyards that we came across. Occasionally we would cross our paths. Eventually after twenty minutes or so we returned to the conservatory.

'Strange,' said I 'We saw no gas mask notices, I wonder if we have seen every corner?'

Jonathon looked at the map the Professor had given us.

'No we have been to every garden, look I've ticked them as we went

through them, and perhaps he's mistaken.'

'In his own garden?' said my sister.

'Well nevertheless we are losing time and each of us will select an area and fill their baskets with weeds. Now only pick out those plants you know are weeds, leave anything else alone.' Jonathon then directed us to our positions. I had a centre left courtyard filled with white roses and the remnants of daffodils. Indeed my patch was very easy, as the gardener had already dug where the daffodils had been and had started to plant a herbaceous border. The ground around the roses was heavily mulched and after a quarter of an hour I had finished. Thus I looked around me and decided to go and help our little one. As I turned I spied a tall pole by the side of a green metal gate, so I walked up to it and read 'Gas Mask area through the gate.'

I gently lifted my gas mask over my head, and with trembling fingers unlatched the gate and entered. What greeted me stunned my eyes, for everywhere shrub upon shrub spilled over themselves and into the trees. Truly I could not identify one, most were in flower and I cheated a little by sliding my finger under the rubber mask to take a quick sniff. Around me the garden seemed to grow and as I walked along the stone path I felt I was walking on air. I clasped the mask closer to my face and looked up to see a magnificent date palm with a huge bunch of dates hanging way above me. I had just passed an oriental stone seat and I seemed to float back down onto it. I gazed up to the dates and found the cheese sandwich had not stilled my appetite one iota. How I would have loved to sample those juicy dates. I was suddenly aware of rising upwards across the path and thence up the trunk. I clutched it so that I might stop the movement but to no avail, my hands merely slipped after the trunk body until my hands themselves reached the date frond, and there I picked several. I said time to go down to myself, and gently I returned to the seat where I gorged upon the succulent fruit. I rose and determined to try an experiment. Walking further on I turned a corner and to my amazement came upon a pristine rain forest. The trees were enormous and appeared to be the fig type with long hanging roots. Now my experiment let me rise up again and see if I can spot the others. So I concentrated and nothing happened. Once again I slipped my finger into the side of the mask and sniffed the sweet scent of the air. Once again I rose seemingly by my will power, to look over the forest top story, only to find nothing but a wilderness that went on and on.

'Ah there now in the far distance I saw the house and yes, a group of children! I lowered myself quickly and retreated back along the path until I came to the green gate. I past through and shut it diligently behind me, then took the mask off. There were my gloves and basket by the new planting, which I collected and scurried off to the house.

I wondered where the others were then remembered they were by the house. It took me only five minutes to return where I met my father with a very cross face.

'We've been looking everywhere for you, its past six.' he said angrily.

'You've missed a glorious tea as well.' said Jonathan.

'I don't think it will bother him too much somehow, I think he's been very well fed.'

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