

# ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY AFTERNOON: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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MISS CARRIAGE

SPYING

ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY MORNING

BREAKDOWN

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ART BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE

MICHAEL AND THE BOSS

WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

LIKE FATHER

INTO THE CAVE

GOING HOME

BUDGET

TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE GRAVY

SPYING THREE YEARS ON

## MISS CARRIAGE

This is a strange dream. I'm lying in a cat scanner surrounded by beeping noises. Despite working in a hospital for twelve years I've never had a medical dream before.

Oh, I think I'm waking up.

What's happened to the scanner, where's the ceiling going?

Where the hell did this train come from?

Someone switch off that fucking dalek.

Oh brilliant, now I'm having a heart attack as well.

No, what's that on my chest? Oh, it's my phone. How do you open this bloody thing? What does this button do?

Stop beeping you bloody... beeping bastard.

*Hello? Come on, Keith!*

Who said that?

*Put the phone to your mouth, Keith.*

Who are you? What are you doing in my bedroom?

*You're on a train, Keith.*

Aren't I supposed to say that?

*Get it together, Keith, I know she didn't leave you any money but you've got to sort yourself out. You can't spend every Saturday night in a railway sidings. We need you here now.*

Where are you?

*I'm at the hospital, where you should have been hours ago. Obviously you can't administer the anesthetic but you're the only person in a forty mile radius who knows how to turn the machine on.*

What's that noise, it sounds like an exploding bee?

*That was me telling you the patients name, the forty seven year old Polish woman who'll probably die if you don't get here soon.*

She had loads of money, a few grand isn't much to expect. Not even mentioning my name in the will. Ungrateful

bitch.

Bloody hell, I'm thirsty, I wonder if there's a buffet car on this train?

What the fuck? Where did this field come from? How long have I been standing here? What's that light over there?  
A cafe!

Sorry? How much? Oh, I've had seven coffees and three bacon sarnies, have I? In that case that's quite reasonable.  
There you go, keep the change.

Right, better phone work now. When did I switch this off? Oh yes, that exploding bee was annoying me.

Hello? Okay, I've sobered up and I'm fighting fit now. Let's deliver this baby.

*It's too late now Keith, we don't need you any more.*

Hey, the birds are singing, it must be morning.

*Goodbye, Keith.*

Excuse me – can I have another coffee, please?

## SPYING

Matt knocked at the door. Julia opened it after a long pause and looked distinctly displeased to see him. A puzzled look flitted across his face before he gathered his thoughts.

"Hi, I'm back."

"I can see that," she said frostily.

He went to kiss her on the lips but she pulled away and went back into the flat. He shrugged and followed her in. He paused in the living room, looking at some home made rugs which hung over the back of the sofa. He waited for her to speak. She didn't. Nor did she meet his eye.

"I see you've been hard at work again. What's this one - dead man's trousers, old syringes, soiled bandages and catheters?"

"Don't be obtuse, Matt, I use recycled hospital waste but not *that*. I couldn't make a rug from catheters. Or syringes; trust you."

"Is that another regional stereotype?"

"What?"

"Syringes - I'm from Dundee not Glasgow."

Julia busied herself with tidying the rugs into a slightly neater pile, still avoiding his eye.

"Hmm. This wasn't exactly the welcome home I was expecting. She can't know, can she? Of course not. So why is she being so frosty? I was rather hoping for a shag after a hard week away."

"Coffee?"

"What? Oh. Please."

He followed her into the kitchen where she began a prolonged routine of collecting a tray, mugs and biscuits - anything to avoid talking. He watched her, wondering what on earth was the matter.

"Milk?"

"How long have you known me, Julia?"

"Sorry, I forgot, if you have milk your head falls off and your knees explode."

"It's a dairy intolerance, not a..."

She shot him a sharp look and he lapsed into silence.

"Is it her period? I'd better not ask, not when she has access to cutlery."

As the kettle boiled and punctured the awkward silence she fastidiously rearranged her fridge magnets. Turning back to the kettle she caught him watching her.

"Stop looking at my arse!"

"It's hard not to, those jeans are tighter than an Edinburgh accountant. Anyway, I've seen your arse, and your..."

"Don't you dare!"

She looked flustered and turned away to pour the coffee.

"I was going to use an artistic term, not a gynecological one! Anyway you can't regret posing for 'naked primary school teacher by moonlight'? It was big hit at my art school."

"That was years ago. Anyway, that's *not* what it was called."

"In my head it is!"

"You can forget any thoughts like that tonight."

"I see," thought Matt, "that's how things are. But why, for fuck's sake, what's the matter with her? Everything was fine a week ago."

Julia finished arranging a mountain of biscuits on a tray and took it into the other room, leaving Matt's coffee by the kettle. He sighed inwardly and picked up the mug, following her into the living room. She stood by the sofa as if looking for something else to do to further avoid conversation.

He sat down. This seemed to annoy her.

"So, how was Ghent?"

"Oh, you know, like Brouge only more... Dutch."

"Did your group manage to focus on anything in particular?"

"Not after a crate of elephant beer - it's 11%! I felt like Keith Richards after an epidural. Besides it was just boring art stuff, nothing to interest you."

"What was the name of the hotel?"

"I can't remember, the... Phlegmingberg Hoidergurder Hotel, why?"

"Oh, *no reason*." There was no mistaking the venom in her voice.

"There's clearly a reason but what the hell is it?" he thought irritably. "Maybe I'll just finish my coffee, say nothing and leave, try again tomorrow."

Julia, who was still standing with the tray in her hand, put it down and went through to the bedroom. Matt watched in confusion through the open door as she opened the wardrobe and took out the Hoover, followed by an ironing board."

"Is she going to iron the Hoover?" he thought.

"Do you want a hand?"

"I can manage perfectly fine, thank you," she bristled.

"Pardon me for breathing. What the fuck is wrong with her?"

She unfolded the ironing board with great difficulty, almost trapping her fingers. She then marched back into the kitchen, filled the iron and strode back into the bedroom with a single tea-towel which she proceeded to iron vigorously for more than a minute.

"I bet that's a poor substitute for my face. Okay, Sherlock, she's pissed off at me for some reason. There's no way she can know where I've really been, so why is she interrogating me about Ghent? I didn't think I needed a cover story for my girlfriend."

Julia finished scorching the tea towel, folding it up and putting it on top of the wardrobe, before folding up the board with equal anger and placing it back in the wardrobe. She reluctantly came back into the living room, sat down and took a sip of coffee.

"Yuk, it's lukewarm."

"You should have ironed it."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"So, what have you been up to lately?" he asked in a final act of desperation.

"Oh, not much - keeping up with your meanderings via a private detective."

"Oh fucking arsing fuckballs! You stupid, stupid bitch. If he's found *anything* then we're in the shit up to our scalps."

He picked up his coffee absentmindedly and grimaced.

"God, that's stone cold."

"You should have blown some of your hot air on it then!"

He stood up, all humour gone from his demeanour.

"What was the name of this detective and where did you find him?"

"Ken Prenderghast. I found him online."

"Did you go to an office to see him?"

"Of course, I'm not stupid enough to give someone money without meeting them face to face."

"If he's really been following me then this is the stupidest thing you've ever done, not to mention him. I have to make a phone call."

He went into the bedroom and shut the door. Julia shrugged petulantly and stormed off to the kitchen.

A few minutes later Matt was sitting on the bed talking on his mobile.

"I don't know what he found, I thought you'd want to pick him up A.S.A.P. I've just found his website and emailed you the link, you should be able to find his home address in a few seconds from that. Of course I won't let her leave. Flat C, 52 Partridge Road, but don't come in mob-handed. He probably found nothing; if so there's no need to complicate my private life any further. Okay, fine."

He ended the call and threw the phone onto the bed. He ran his hand through his hair trying to gather his thoughts. After a few minutes of pacing around the bed he picked up the phone and put it into his shirt pocket. Standing up, he opened the bedroom door and returned to the living room. Julia was stretched out on the sofa with a glass of wine and a half empty bottle on the floor beside her.

"You'd better not have too much of that."

"Piss off, I'll do what I like."

"Clearly. Okay, just tell me why you had me followed and what this Prenderghast man found, if anything."

"You can't even be bothered to *look* guilty, can you?"

"I've nothing on my conscience. Look, Julia, I'm not fucking about, this is potentially deadly serious. Please just tell me what happened."

"I thought you were seeing someone else."

"Why...? Okay it doesn't matter, I'm not and I never have. What did the dick tell you?"

She got up from the sofa and went over to the sideboard. Opening a drawer she removed a manila envelope, threw it at him and slumped back onto the sofa, slurping at her wine. Matt opened the folder and leafed through the contents.

"Is that it? Five photos of me going in and out of various shops?"

"Yes, but that's enough. Doesn't Ghent look just like Basingstoke high street?"

"If you could crawl out of that bottle for a moment and answer one very important question – is all you know that I wasn't in Ghent when I said I was?"

"You lied to me."

"Okay, we'll deal with that, but first I have to make another call."

He took out his phone and pressed a few buttons.

"No it's fine, all she knows is that I wasn't in Ghent. Ghent, it's in Belgium. That's not important, it's all fine because there are only a few photos of me in Basingstoke. No, nobody else, just me going in some shops in the high street... Nobody could possibly work out anything from that.... No, it's fine, I'll deal with it." He paused in disbelief. "What do you mean you've already sent out a team – surely you're joking?"

He glanced at Julia who was half dozing on the sofa, a nearly empty wine bottle cradled in her lap, seemingly oblivious to his conversation.

"Look, she's half pissed, she won't remember a thing. I'll come up with a convincing story, that's my fucking job, remember?"

The sounds of running feet and shouting could be heard on the stairs.

"I'll get you for this you arsehole!" he hissed, dropping the phone on the sofa and reaching into his jacket pocket.

"Don't do the door..." he shouted just as the front door flew off its hinges and five men with machine guns ran in and immediately begin searching the kitchen.

"We're in here, you fuckwits, there's nobody else in the flat."

He held up the ID. in his wallet and the lead gunman screamed into a headset mic.

"Abort search!"

"Thank you, Tony. You can all fuck off now, there is no situation here."

"Pardon me, sir, but what about the woman?"

Matt looked around to see Julia, now very much awake and with an expression that suggested she was quite keen on receiving an explanation of why five armed men have just kicked her door down.

"Ah. Shit. Okay, there wasn't a situation until you clowns turned up. Five of you? For one primary school teacher?"

"Just following orders, sir," said Tony.

"I know; I'll strangle Donaldson when I see him."

"Would you like *me* to do that for you, sir? I've been on a course in strangling."

"I'm sure you have, but that won't be necessary, tempted though I am."

"Excuse me," said Julia in a menacingly quiet tone.

Matt nervously turned his attention back to her.

"I can explain."

She sat up and fixed him with an expectant glance. He looked at Tony and the other four, who were all either staring fixedly at the ground or suddenly finding something of interest in another part of the room. He looked over at the splintered remains of the front door. He looked back at Julia.

"Give me a few minutes."

Ten minutes later he sat on the sofa beside her and took a deep breath.

"You're a primary school teacher and you make rugs as a hobby. Well, being an artist is my hobby, my job is working for... a government agency."

"The paramilitary wing of the Child Support Agency?"

"Look, I know this is a bit much after all these years and you feel I've lied to you, but I work in Intelligence. I've signed the Official Secrets Act. If I tell you anything about my job I'll be in prison faster than you can say 'whoops, there goes my extremely generous pension'".

"Do you carry a gun?"

"Not usually," he laughed. "I don't run around like that lot, it's mostly quite boring: going through phone records, bank accounts, lots of admin. It's not glamorous at all."

"So what happened to my front door?"

"Crossed wires. Believe me, I will be doing some serious shouting when I see the clown responsible for this."

Tony walked in from the kitchen.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you need us anymore. Only it's costing about five grand an hour just for us to be standing here."

"Well go home then."

"Erm... there is just one matter, miss?"

"What?"

"Those tiles in the kitchen. They're just what my wife's looking for, where did you get them?"

"Homebase."

He saluted smartly.

"Thank you very much, miss. Sir. Come on lads."

The five gunmen trooped sheepishly out.

"The replacement door has arrived," shouted Tony from the stairs.

Two very nervous looking young men carrying a door shuffled past the five gunmen.

"And you'd better do a good job," shouted Julia, "or he'll have you killed."

She pointed at Matt then stumbled inelegantly into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Tony tapped one of the men on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, sir, there'll be no killing tonight."

"I wouldn't fucking bet on it!" shouted Julia. "Get in here, Matt."

He looked at the two terrified men, crossed himself and opened the bedroom door.

## ETHELBERT'S SUNDAY MORNING

Ethelbert was past ninety but had never really picked a direction in life, or a gender. He/she had undergone so many sex change operations that he/she couldn't even remember which way they'd started out. Therefore Ethelbert now compromised: a typical daily wardrobe consisted of black trousers and lilac jumper, cream skirt and football shirt, or leg warmers and a lumberjack shirt. A wispy beard was ever present. Time was spent veering randomly between woodwork and knitting, 'Top Gear' and 'Loose Women', 'The Sweeney' and 'Murder She Wrote', Andy McNab and Barbara Cartland. Two cats shared the house, one male one female. There was a vague memory of having been married once or twice but to what was unclear.

Having the first name Ethelbert was unfortunate enough but, such were the vicissitudes of having been born in 1920, that Ethelbert Gaylord had been cursed on both fronts. All thirty six cats over the years had been called Leslie to simplify matters and to use up the job lot of engraved collars Ethelbert had purchased during a drunken afternoon in Brighton in 1951. Recollections of the exact reason for this fortuitous purchase had gone for good now but Ethelbert was still occasionally plagued by random memories of a small shop that only sold pet collars, envelopes and surgical trusses. That would explain why Ethelbert had written four thousand letters during 1952, but not why they had all been addressed to Lord Mountbatten and all contained a vociferous complaint about the lack of toilet facilities on Hampstead Heath.

Ethelbert cleared away the breakfast things, having, on principle, eaten a sumptuous fried breakfast every single morning since the day they abandoned rationing. Once again it would be a running battle between clogged arteries and flatulence, but the flatulence would probably win again today and Ethelbert would live to fry another day. The two Leslie's ate a far healthier breakfast of smoked kippers and exhibited far less flatulence.

The kitchen was unchanged since the day in 1943 that Ethelbert and Leslie's one and two had moved in to the

house. The smell of washing up liquid and Gin mingled with the dense cigar smoke that swirled around the room; the cats were very lucky to be at ground level with only the smell of damp slippers and mothballs to distract them from their opulent daily diet. Indeed, bearing in mind the amount of cigar smoke, fried-bacon- meets-burnt-saucepan smoke, and the occasional Gin spill ending up in their water bowl, it was surprising that the average lifespan of all thirty four previous Leslies was nineteen. This meant that, at their peak, there were seventeen Leslies resident at once – that was when Ethelbert bought the trunk.

Colin yawned expansively and looked at his watch but the hands had stopped – so had the feet. The decision to buy a watch that was also an eighteen inch scale model of Arthur Mullard was one he had seldom regretted during the last seventeen years but he had to now admit that, as the battery had run out eight years ago, it may be time to invest in a more practical timepiece. Nevertheless he estimated that about seven hours had passed so it was probably safe to come out from under the kitchen table.

Gingerly and pedantically he stood up, banging his head on the kitchen table.

“Thatcher!” he exclaimed, which was the generic, all purpose swear word he now employed in all situations since an unfortunate episode in a Basingstoke crematorium in 1987 had forced him to fore go all foul language.

Pressing himself to the wall he crept inexorably and tangentially towards the hallway. He knew that possible evil lurked in the hallway, or that evil possibly lurked in the hallway, or that possibly lurking in the hallway was some evil, but there's a limit to how long you can play 'count the kitchen chairs' and Colin had reached that limit after three hours.

He didn't have any kitchen chairs. He ate breakfast standing up to avoid the onset of piles. He also ate breakfast by pouring alternate mouthfuls of cornflakes and milk into his mouth to avoid wear and tear on crockery and save on washing up liquid. Colin saved up all the money he would otherwise have spent on washing up liquid in a special jar. Once a month he used the money to treat himself to a new ball bearing.

Colin had lots of special jars. In fact he had a special room in which to keep all his special jars in. One of the jars contained two hundred and twenty eight ball bearings. Another contained the wrapping from a pork pie he'd particularly enjoyed in Buddleigh Salterton in March 1992. Another contained the condom which had aided him in losing his virginity in 1983, along with a variety of as yet unidentified lifeforms and a primitive prototype for some sort of farming implement. Next to this jar was one containing his mothers ashes and the spleen of an old school friend, which Colin arranged next to each other to illustrate the juxtaposition between life, death and having your spleen removed with a spatula by a defrocked archdeacon.

Passing by his special room Colin couldn't help noting with satisfaction that the hand-engraved sign reading 'Colin's special room, no trespassers, hawkers or anthropologists' was glinting nicely in the sun. It had definitely been worth the effort in moving his kitchen three feet to the left in order to allow the sun to properly penetrate the hallway.

Colin settled in front of the television and took out his Snooker Audience Bingo card. There was no prize because it was a game of his own devising that only one other person in the world was allowed to play.

As this was a World Championship quarter-final it should be plain sailing, although he and his competitor had each chosen one of the days matches to watch on the red button by rolling a dice so a full house was highly unlikely.

Over the next half an hour Colin enthusiastically ticked off many familiar faces. The dice had been kind to him today. There was the bloke who looks a bit like the bloke who used to be Nigel in 'Eastenders'; the woman who dresses like a mayor; the woman who sits next to the woman who dresses like a mayor; the bloke who looks like Ritchie Benaud would have looked in 1978 if he'd been a pub landlord in Caerphilly; the bloke who looks like he's wearing a wig from an 'Absolutely' sketch; the bloke who looks like Darren Gough but confusingly wears football shirts; the nice looking woman with the glasses; the bloke with Kenneth Kendal's nose, Peter Wyngard's eyebrows, William Woolard's teeth, Brian Cant's elbows, Terry Scott's knees, Jenny Agutter's toes and Felicity Kendall's handkerchief; the bloke with the tie who looks as if he's about to spontaneously combust; the bloke who looks like the actor Nicholas Grace; the bloke who looks like Stuart Hall; the bloke who doesn't look like Tony Wilson.

During the mid-session interval Colin made himself an extra strong cup of tea to celebrate his success. It was only then that he noticed an opal fruit pile up in his kitchen cupboard. This required immediate attention.

Colin had formed the habit of going for an afternoon walk every day since July 1991. However, he did not take any water with him due to the total lack of public toilets within a five mile radius of his house. It was therefore his penchant to partake of opal fruits to quench his thirst during these perambulations.

He removed the five packets of 'starburst' from the cupboard, crossing himself as he did so, conducted the ceremonial burning and flushing of the wrappers and set to work replacing them with his own facsimile of the original wrapping emblazoned with the correct nomenclature. He also did this with Marathons and Jif.

After the daily ritual of a video episode of 'Murder She Wrote' Ethelbert went out to the garden. It was a generous plot of land with an enormous bordering hedge that obscured all but the roof of the house from view from the road. This was probably a good thing considering some of the things that had happened in the garden over the years.

Ethelbert ensured that this was the exact spot requiring weeding before kneeling down. Although very sprightly for ninety one it would nevertheless take a while to get down and then back up again so precision was the order of the day. Okay, it wasn't exactly weeding per se, just digging, but it involved the same cranking up of motor-cortex and knee joints. The garden didn't really need weeding but Leslie had been looking a bit peaky over breakfast so preparations had to be made.

Normally, of course, Leslie would be embalmed and go in the trunk in the attic with all the previous Leslies but after thirty eight years the trunk was now packed to capacity. Indeed Ethelbert has been mildly perturbed upon closing the trunk on Leslie number 34 when, due to the unexpectedly springy nature of thirty three other embalmed cats, Leslie number 34 had half popped out of the trunk, causing two paws to be chopped off when the lid was closed.

As always on these occasions, Ethelbert fell to pondering his/her own mortality. Despite years of assiduous research it appeared that self-embalming was physically impossible – who could Ethelbert possibly trust to do the job properly? Cremation was not an option because Ethelbert's body contained so many steel pins and other paraphernalia that the casket would in all probability explode like a faulty firework.

After preparing a suitably feline-sized hole, the idea of Sunday lunch suddenly popped into Ethelbert's mind like an MP. popping into a bush on Hampstead Heath. A tedious leftwards shuffling motion eventually brought into proximity the cabbage patch. As the digging progressed, Ethelbert was momentarily startled to strike something hard. Just a stone probably but no, this object was far too big for that. As more earth was moved aside it revealed a thigh bone and three fingers. From the general size and condition of the bones Ethelbert estimated that they had lain there for about fifty years and belonged to a man of roughly six feet two inches with a penchant for cravats, pickled onions and snooker.

"Of course," exclaimed Ethelbert, "it's Terry! I can't remember putting him *there*."

With a shrug Ethelbert began to cover the bones and look for a better spot for Leslie number 36. It would be inconvenient for 36 to go before 35 because it spoiled the pattern but so be it. Patting down the earth Ethelbert experienced a few dislocated memories of Terry in a church with a top hat and a flower in his buttonhole, but their significance remained elusive.

An hour later and the cabbage was steaming away horribly. Nobody in the house liked cabbage at all but Ethelbert tried to eat something green at least once a week; it was a penance of a sort, but it would take several million cabbages to wipe out all the sins committed in the house and garden since 1943.

Elevesens meant homemade cake and Darjeeling for Ethelbert, Pepperami and milk for Leslie and Leslie.

The cats settled down by the fire and went to sleep, Ethelbert switched on 'Granada Men and Motors'.

Colin slid along the hallway like a hamster on boxing day, in other words with a sense of increasing terror and a small buzzing sound in his right knee.

He used his ninja training to approach the porch with the required stealthiness; when he was sure the coast was next to the sea, he quickly opened the door and retrieved the evil piece of small card from the special 'things that come in through the letter box collection device' mat he had knitted from the embalmed remains of a family dog.

"I thought so," he grimaced as he read the words written in language on the card: *you could save yourself money by switching your oxygen supply to us*. He threw the card into his special 'disinfecting evil' wastebasket and went to wash his hands fourteen times.

Putting on his balaclava and blond wig, Colin went out to the back garden to feed his pet hedgehog Dinsdale. It was costing him rather a lot these days as Dinsdale was now 800 yards long. He'd struck it lucky this week though when he'd had the good fortune to accidentally run over 17 cows while test driving a steam roller. That would see Dinsdale through to the weekend and all it had cost Colin was the price of the sesame seed baps and gherkins, without which, for some reason, Dinsdale would refuse any meal and kick off big time, which was something Colin always tried to avoid when dealing with 800 yard long hedgehogs.

Going back inside the house Colin removed the balaclava and wig he always wore in the back garden to confuse the watching MI5 operatives into thinking that there were in fact 2 people living in the house. He had been conducting this charade for 17 years, ever since returning from Buddleigh Salterton though it was nothing to do with the pork pie. It was an exhausting charade to have kept up for 17 years but Colin was confident that it would soon pay dividends and give him precious seconds in which to destroy the evidence when MI5 finally raided the house. From tuning into their radio broadcasts he knew that it would be weeks rather than months so he was already planning his escape, indeed the tunnel was nearly finished.

Colin looked at his shopping list as he waited for the coast to become clear:

Pickle some skepticism

invalidate a biscuit

counteract a magnetic field with Lego

follow Nick Clegg around for a few days shaking my head and muttering quietly to myself until he gets the message

butter no parsnips

hear no evil but see loads of it

amplify the concept of infinity until it becomes so huge it actually becomes really small and then try to sell it to Pakistan as an alternative Test ground

belatedly wave goodbye to a tryst

Marmite

bin bags

hedgehog toothpaste

Ten minutes passed fairly uneventfully, then they completely stopped doing so.

At first it seemed as if the sound of the front door being battered down was coming from the episode of 'The Sweeney' currently playing on the television. As the noise became louder, Leslie 36 woke up and looked around the room with an expression of mild interest.

After a few seconds the battering ram finally won the fight and the door which had withstood all manner of weather and other more painful stresses for sixty eight years crashed to the floor, to be immediately trampled over by eight men with machine guns.

Four of them burst into the living room like overexcited puppies in a biscuit factory. The rest ran upstairs and began tearing apart the various bedrooms.

"Nobody move!" screamed the first man to enter the room, pointing his gun at Ethelbert's head while the other three searched the room and then trained their guns on the two cats watching languidly from the fireplace.

Ethelbert impassively took another sip of tea and very slowly, with exaggerated effort placed it down on the table before picking up the remote control and muting the sound on the television.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you!" screamed the man with his gun trained on Ethelbert's head.

"Cake? It's an old sponge recipe I picked up in Brighton in 1951."

Ethelbert began the process of leaning forward to pick up the cake tray.

"Move away from the cake!"

"I'm afraid that would take up the greater part of an hour. Now then, what can I do for you gentlemen?" Ethelbert's posture shifted imperceptibly and a million thoughts began to jostle for priority. "I don't think that the cats are going to give you any problems, do you?"

The two men who had Leslie and Leslie held in a pincer movement shuffled nervously and looked rather sheepishly at the other one.

"Go and help upstairs!" he hissed at them.

As the two men left the room Ethelbert tried very hard not to break into a smile and also to calculate how long it was since one of the men had opened her bedroom door. About ninety seconds, time to concentrate.

"So," said Ethelbert, drawing out the words deliberately slowly with the timing perfection of a seasoned newsreader, "are you going to tell me why your friends are currently trampling their muddy boots all over my house and disturbing my cats?"

The line was times to the millisecond.

Just as the man's eyes flickered slightly to indicate that he was forming the answer in his mind, Ethelbert's spare wardrobe exploded, releasing plumes of CS. gas and nicely distracting the one man left downstairs. With practiced efficiency Ethelbert removed the Gloch pistol from behind the sofa cushion and shot the man in the side of the head. Then, pausing to pat Leslie and Leslie reassuringly the 91 year old picked up the machine gun and crept slowly towards the living room door. Three sets of footsteps could be heard thumping down the stairs, then three bodies fell in a heap at the bottom.

"Five down, three to go," thought Ethelbert, steadying the gun. "Now where did I put that spade, this is going to require a *really* big hole."

Before commencing the shopping operation, Colin had a couple of errands to run.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, how can I help you, sir?" said the man with an air of heavy resignation.

"This *is* the tourist information center?" asked Colin.

"Yes it is," said the man, glancing sideways at the massive sign proclaiming the booths purpose.

"Good," said Colin, "just checking. It always pays to be accurate in these matters – I once accidentally bought some crack when I thought I was in a shoe shop. That's five months I won't get back. Anyway, I'm looking for some information."

"Regarding what?"

"What I should do about my hedgehog."

"That's not the sort of information we carry."

"I'm a tourist, I demand that you inform me or else I shall sue you under the Trades Contradictions Act."

"That is a made up act, sir."

"Like homosexuality?"

"...No."

"Well, you say that, but have you ever actually *seen* a gay? I've heard they don't show up on film."

"That's vampires."

"What about gay vampires?"

"*What* about gay vampires?"

"Perhaps that's a double negative and they cancel each other out."

"What?"

"Perhaps you *can* photograph gay vampires but not normal vampires or gay non-vampires."

"*Normal* vampires?"

"Yes, you know, the ones that don't perform acts of immoral anal-based behaviour on each other. Perhaps you can photograph them."

"Perhaps *you* can, sir, I however do not have a camera."

"That's very careless of you my good man or boy, one never knows when the necessity may arise to photographically capture an incident involving a celebrity bumming in order that one may inform the authorities."

"I really will have to discontinue this transaction with the utmost haste."

"Would you care to tell me why?"

"I don't care but I'll tell you anyway, you've been coming here every day for the last three years and I really must insist that you piss off and don't come back."

"Well done, you have passed the test. I shall immediately inform the squirrels that live under my bath. You can expect a visit from them in about three thousand years."

Colin ticked the item off his list and then proceeded with the utmost haste towards the newsagents.

"Hello newsagent style servant, I'd like to buy a mars bar, please."

"To eat? Well, all the chocolate bars are right there in front of you."

"Yes, I am currently locating them via the method of refracting light through my eyes and optic nerves."

"So you're not *completely* stupid?"

"My stupidity has been officially measured by NASA. and falls well within the safe levels outlined by the safe levels outlining committee. And now I begin my next sentence after this colon: I cannot see anywhere a sign stating clearly and rectangularly that they have been tested."

"I can assure you that there is no listeria, salmonella, e-coli or anything else in our chocolate."

"Yes, that much is beyond the horizon and the pale and my ken and the thunderdome, but have they been tested for drugs?"

"Drugs?" thought the newsagent, "this is a new one."

"What do you mean?" he asked, hoping to expedite matters before the next ice age.

"Drugs. Amphetamines, dope, crack."

"I'm sorry I don't understand."

"Don't change the subject, have they been tested?"

"Tested for what?"

"Muscle building drugs. Have, in short trousers, your current stock of mars bars been tested, thereby to ascertain whether they or whether they do do not in deed or in fact contain muscle building drugs or not?"

"Are you serious?"

"No, you're the serious one and I'm the crazy wacky one, I would have thought that was obvious."

"Geography."

"Don't change the subject, have they been tested?"

"Of course not, why should they have been?"

"To ascertain whether or whether not certain substances have or have whether or have not have been or haven't have not to have been..."

"Yes, we've established that..."

"I'm so pleased."

"Well I'm not, buy something now or leave my shop. Anyway, why would they contain stimulants?"

"Athletes are always failing drug tests and a large number of athletes eat mars bars."

"That's a very tenuous link."

"Thank you, my good man or woman."

"Look, will you, during the next ten seconds before I hit you very hard in the knees and eject you from my shop like a betamax video tape onto a beige carpet, be buying some bloody chocolate?"

"Of course not, if there are no drugs in them what's the point?"

"Because they taste nice?"

"Yeah, and I eat pickled unicorns for breakfast! Disgraceful! Never darken my stools again!"

Colin stormed out, noting with satisfaction the MI5 operative lurking near the greeting cards with what he erroneously thought was a hidden video camera.

After finishing his shopping he perambulated over to the park for a relaxing lunch.

"Excuse me," he asked an unfortunate woman.

"Yes?"

"Do you require the entirety of this bench in order to complete your culinary processes or is there a section of it which I can use for my own masticatory purposes, heretofore the oral consumption of pre-prepared sandwich style sandwiches?"

The woman clutched her bag to her chest and shifted as far away as she could without actually falling off the end of the bench.

"No, it's free."

"You mean they haven't introduced a congestion charge for benches yet?! Excellent! They'll be charging us for breathing next, the crafty fascist bastards!"

"Yes, I suppose so," mumbled the woman, trying to ignore him.

"Really! I was being facetious but you actually think it's going to happen – I'm absolutely astonished! Is there a white paper in the offing?"

"I really couldn't say."

"My god, have they made it subject to the Official Secrets Act! I can't believe the depths to which these scum will sink. Do you think we're being bugged now? Should I put a radio on to drown out our conversation? Perhaps we should communicate in code?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," said the woman, finishing her sandwich as quickly as possible.

"Ah, of course – you've already checked the bushes for MI5 agents and listening devices. Quick thinking, sir. Yes, the last thing I want is for Special Branch to insert a mind-reading probe into my head and rummage through my memories – I still get headaches."

"Oh dear!"

"Thank you for the sympathy, my good sir, but the scar has almost healed now – it used to look like a map of Britain but now it's shrunk to the size of Anglesey. These modern laser probes really are very efficient – even if they do bring back unwanted childhood memories about the cupboard under the stairs. I still get hiccups whenever I hear a dog whistle."

"I really have to go now!" the woman almost shouted.

"Good idea, yes, I'll wait 5 minutes before leaving in case they follow us."

"Excellent idea, *please* ensure that you do," said the woman, all but sprinting away.

"Right," said Colin, "orange alert... orange alert. They won't catch me with my curtains down again!"

Ethelbert managed to clean up most of the blood in time for 'Antiques Roadshow' and a well earned pint of gin.

Leslie and Leslie had observed with their usual detachment as body after body had been rolled down the hill to the bottom of the garden. Having never seen the trunk in the attic, they obviously assumed that that would also be their final resting place and were beginning to wonder if there would be enough room.

This time Ethelbert had also taken the precaution of trying out a new type of acid that had been bubbling away in the spare airing cupboard for a few months. If calculations were correct, it should render the five men down to bones within a fortnight.

After 'Antiques Roadshow' Ethelbert switched over to the snooker and began rummaging around for a fresh bingo card.

It occurred to Colin that it had also been 17 years since he'd last cleared out his loft so he went up to have a look at his non-jar bound archive. Putting the light on he was pleasantly surprised to find only 6 items in the whole loft space – obviously all the others had either been eaten by mice or abducted by aliens so he didn't have to worry about them. He assessed the six items in reverse order of his attachment to them: a life-size plasticine replica of Nicholas Parsons trying to pacify Kenneth Williams in a 1978 edition of *Just a Minute*; a non-life size model of the Post Office tower made from eye lashes, widgets and frozen urine; a map showing the hidden location of Douglas Bader's legs; 163 photographs of Winston Churchill and Clement Atlee, both dressed as Vicars, throwing buckets of fermenting cheese at some squirrels; a shit in a bottle; and finally, his favourite of all, a parody of the Bayeux tapestry made from retread tyres, burnt matches and the hopes and dreams of a thousand disillusioned poets, depicting the finals of the 2005 World Snooker Championships where Mathew Stevens lost to Sean Murphy by recklessly taking on a middle distance blue left handed.

Later that day, Colin was startled but not unprepared when the silent alarm mounted in his hallway began to flash bright red. Shouting a quick goodbye to Dinsdale he drew up the drawbridge, armed the automatic gun turret and hurried down into the tunnel to begin digging the final few feet that would lead him out onto Bodmin Moor. From then he would catch a train to Exeter before passing through Ottery St. Mary, Honiton, Yarcombe and Chard before backtracking down to Lyme Regis, Seaton and Salcombe Regis on his way to the final location of Operation Doomsday.

The following morning Ethelbert was satisfied that the house would now pass all but the most rigorous inspection.

The knock at the door was timed to the second.

"Hello, Colin," said Ethelbert, "it's been a while. How is Dinsdale?"

## BREAKDOWN

"Just my sodding luck to run out of petrol in the middle of nowhere," fumed Bob. "Still, looking on the bright side, the taxi firm *promised* thirty minutes."

Having spent fifteen years driving around persuading people to buy shit they didn't need, his car was always well stocked for emergencies. He opened the boot, taking out a large rucksack and the suitcase he'd need for his hotel stay. He didn't anticipate needing much from the emergency rucksack, but his radio was broken and he wanted the book he kept in there, and a torch.

It was a still night with no wind, so the rustling of leaves caught his ear. He shut the boot and swept the torch around in the direction of the sound.

"Jesus, that's a big dog," he thought, as the shape disappeared into a small wooded area. "Was it a dog? Of course it was, what else could it be?"

The country lane was pitch black except for his pocket torch and the lights on his car. He listened intently for any further sound before getting back in and engaging the central locking.

He put the torch on the dashboard and tried to read a book but he couldn't concentrate. Something about that dog was bothering him. He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes until the taxi, if their estimate could be believed. He suddenly felt strangely vulnerable sitting in his car; a sitting duck lit up like a Christmas tree. He'd broken down before, of course, but never so far from civilisation.

"Maybe I should get out of the car," he thought, "better than being trapped."

What was the matter with him tonight? He'd never felt anxiety like this before. Something was nagging away at the back of his mind and it wouldn't let go.

He tried to figure it out. He didn't have any more appointments till tomorrow. The hotel was only three miles away, he could walk if the taxi didn't show up, it would just be hassle with the suitcase. There was absolutely nothing to worry about. So why was he now glancing nervously in his rear view mirror?

The dog, that was it. There was something about the...

*Oh fuck, you've really lost it now, Bob.*

He replayed in his mind the sighting of the dog, and his memory told him implicitly and unquestioningly that the dog had a human face.

“That's beyond absurd,” he said aloud, such was his indignation that his own mind had conjured up something so stupid.

To prove to himself that there were no mythical creatures haunting this dreary country lane, he opened his window half way. Within seconds he could hear a faint noise, as if something were scrabbling in the road-side dirt.

“Of course there's *something* out there,” he reasoned, “it'll be a squirrel, a fox, a hedgehog.”

He tried desperately to think of more non-threatening animals as his brain replayed again the fleeting image of the dog with a human face. This time it was even more bizarre and unlikely in appearance.

His attention was drawn to a louder sound: whatever was ferreting around outside was now right next to his open window. Ferrets – were they scary?

He told himself to get a grip and solve this once and for all. Pointing the torch out at where the last sound had come from, he leaned towards the window.

Well, he thought, there it is. Unless I'm dreaming this whole scenario there's no denying what that is. He continued to stare in disbelief at the... well, *thing* would have to do for now until he could consult David Attenborough.

The thing was indeed the size of a large Alsatian, but there all resemblance to anything resulting from natural selection ended. Its fur was patchy, as if several different animals had been hurriedly sewn together. Its hind legs and tail were more like that of a fox or wolf; its torso was – well, Bob had no clue what that was like, certainly not any animal he'd ever clapped eyes on. It had a small, lion type mane on its neck, large, pointy ears and whiskers. Bob was trying very hard not to look at the teeth/fangs.

And yes, he could now confirm that the facial features were human. He was transported back to his childhood, and H.G. Wells' 'The Island of Dr. Moreau'.

He could not take his eyes from the thing, until it finished washing its face and turned its eyes on him. The facial expression was one of childlike curiosity, as if it was pleased to meet a new friend. But the nonsensical appearance was too much for Bob and he hastily closed the window, leaning back inside the car and away from whatever it was.

As the window was an inch from closing, the thing jumped up at the car, gripping the top of the window with its claws. It yelped as its paws were crushed and let go, falling back to the ground.

Before Bob had time to consider just what the fuck was going on, a movement confused him momentarily, until he realised that it was the car tilting to the left. It was as if an asthmatic jack were lifting the car's right rear wheel. What the hell was going on?

In a flash he realised that he had to get out of the car in case it tipped over and trapped him inside. That thing was worryingly strong, and it was now bouncing the car, using the suspension to gain greater lift.

He quickly struggled to put on his rucksack, having first removed a Swiss army knife from an outer pocket. He decided to get out on the opposite side to the creature, despite the risk. Disengaging the lock, he flung the door open on a downward bounce and ran in front of the car, staying in the beam of the headlights.

He unfolded the longest blade of the knife, which he noticed was not nearly fucking long enough for his liking.

As he tried to cautiously move to his left to see the creature, it jumped onto the roof and sprang down onto the bonnet. It crouched there, baring its fangs and hissing at him.

An uncomfortable stalemate continued for a minute or so while both creatures silently regarded each other.

The silence was only broken when the thing clearly thought it had the better of Bob and attacked him. It leapt onto the ground and bounded towards him. As it made its final jump towards his throat, Bob thrust the knife with all his strength into whatever part of the thing happened to be nearest at the time.

It emitted a terrible noise, and slumped to the floor like a sack of dough.

Without waiting to see if it was dead, or to retrieve his suitcase, Bob turned and ran for his life.

After what he estimated to be a five minute mile, he slowed to a halt and listened intently. There was no sound and his torch revealed no sign of the thing, or anything else out of the ordinary.

He stuttered to a halt and tried to catch his breath. Now that the fear had dissipated, he realised how exhausted he was and slumped to the ground.

Collecting his thoughts he remembered the taxi. He'd left his lights on and that was what the driver would be looking for. Should he go back or try to find the hotel? He may never find it in the dark with only a small torch. Bollocks.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a light appeared in the distance. As it drew closer it resolved itself into two headlights. Bob almost cried with relief as the taxi stopped beside him.

“You the one who phoned?” asked the driver.

“Yes, I left my car because...” Bob couldn't even begin to explain. “Could we go back and get my suitcase?”

“Of course, sir, no problem.”

Bob hoped that the creature, whatever it was, was either dead or had crawled away from the road. He was almost asleep when the taxi braked suddenly and he was jolted into action.

“Don't go out there!” he shrieked as the driver went towards the thing that was lying, howling in the middle of the road.

“Don't worry, sir, he's just hungry.”

As Bob was trying to once again work out what the fuck was going on, he almost jumped out of the car as he saw the driver bend down and pat the thing on the head.

“Come on son, your tea's ready.”

Bob's mind spun in disbelief as the canine-lupine-child combo shambled into the back seat of the taxi and curled up in a ball.

“Don't worry, sir, he always has a little sleep in the car.”

Half an hour later, the taxi pulled up and the driver and the creature got out.

“You can put that away, Mary,” said the driver as he entered the house, “he's had his tea.”

## I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ART BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE

Sandra had never had much interest in art until she met Damian. He had thrown every ounce of his award winning charm at her, and she'd fallen for it. The glamour of being in the media spotlight, even vicariously, was too much to resist. At first she had enjoyed watching him building up a canvas, admiring his flair and skill, but all that was long gone now.

As the taxi pulled up to the gallery, she gathered her thoughts and her dress. Damian was preoccupied with a mirror, as usual, arranging and rearranging his hair wax to give the impression that he'd just got out of bed and not done anything with it. Sandra shuddered at the facade she was about to inflict on the world and hoped she'd be able to go through with it long enough to get to the punchline.

Getting out of the cab, she forced herself to hold his hand and smile politely for the flock of paparazzi who descended on them like vultures at a will reading. She smiled and blinked, wondering idly which of the many photos of her they would use tomorrow.

Cautiously fingering the knife in her jacket pocket she smiled to herself. This was going to be fun; naughty, illegal fun, possibly ending up in prison, but nothing more than the prick deserved. To commit this violent act in such a public manner was also engendering it with a surprising amount of added anticipation. Sandra had never thought of herself as a violent person, but then she'd never been so badly betrayed by such an annoying, pretentious dick head as Damian.

She thought about the last time they had engaged in a frenetic public display. That time only three weeks ago when he'd slobbered all over her for the cameras, the perfect portrayal of the glamorous couple, the perfect piece of performance art, the perfect lie. The cameras never saw the aftermath – Damien snorting coke off the breasts of a nineteen year old art student while he thought Sandra was asleep in the next room.

Nobody knew about that yet. Nobody knew anything. The poor student had been so out of her tiny mind and now even tinier nose that she didn't even remember the disgusting things he did to her, in her, on her.

Nobody knew about all the other things Sandra had discovered from the private detective she'd paid to follow him for a week.

Nobody knew.

Except of course the two people at the News of the World she'd sold the exclusive story and photos to three days ago. They were holding back, more than Damien had ever managed, until the day after the exhibition on Sandra's insistence. A hideously delicious scandal published the day after the public humiliation of Britain's leading young artist at his very own exhibition was too much to resist. The fact that they had been given two dozen highly graphic photos of a completely naked, nubile, pretty young art student was just the sort of trouser-bulging prospect tabloid journalists simply had to learn to live with.

Anyone less self-absorbed and coke-addled than Damien would have noticed her distance over the last three weeks, but Sandra was confident that he didn't have a clue as to the fate that was about to befall him. She felt the knife again and half opened the zip on her jacket pocket for easy, quick access to the weapon of her revenge.

The time was drawing near, and so was the end for Damien and his sham of a career, his sham of a putrid, repulsive life. This poor girl hadn't been the first, Sandra knew that; the same inexplicable powerlessness that befalls so many

women had landed on Sandra and, for reasons she still couldn't understand, she'd stuck with Damien through all his coke hazes and drink binges, his not-so-secret affairs, the orgies, the prostitutes, anything he could get his hands or his dick on. However, Sandra knew, with a finality that sadly gave her little pleasure, that she would be the last. The final act in a career and a life that would doubtless continue to fascinate the prurient and the simple minded for decades to come.

Sandra briefly wondered who would play her in the film that some unfeeling bastard would one day doubtless make of today's events.

She was woken from her melancholic reverie by a limp-wristed clapping of hands. That meant the gallery owner was about to make his speech.

Sandra switched off for most of it, as she'd been switched off from reality for most of the last three weeks.

All too soon it was time for her and Damien, arm in lying, cheating arm, to approach the, she could hardly bring herself to even think the word, *masterpiece*.

Being the egotist he was, Damien of course unveiled the painting himself. It had already been bought by a Japanese collector for nearly two million pounds and he had promised Sandra a luxury cruise on the proceeds but she now knew that his promises were emptier than his prodigious testicles.

She waited for what she adjudged to be the right amount of time – fifteen seconds – before producing the knife and slashing the painting to pieces. Strangely enough everyone present was so surprised at her actions that nobody thought to try and stop her. Some undoubtedly thought it was a piece of performance art.

Even when she then calmly unzipped her other jacket pocket and pulled out the gun, nobody tried to stop her, so she had no problems at all in shooting Damien in the head, his brains and blood spraying themselves over the slashed canvas. It would undoubtedly sell for twenty million now.

Sandra put the gun down on the floor and waited for somebody to say something.

## MICHAEL AND THE BOSS

The lift seemed to take an age – an ice age. In some ways this was a welcome illusion: curious as I was to ascertain the reason behind this unexpected summons, I was equally as fearful and keen to delay it as long as possible. In the eighteen months I'd worked for the company nothing like this had ever happened to me. To be honest, I was beginning to wonder if any of the supervisors had even noticed my existence.

Nothing about the manner in which I'd been summoned gave any indication as to the reason my presence was required this morning.

I straightened by tie, checked my flies, adjusted my cuffs, took a deep breath and knocked on the door. I'd never been summoned to the seventeenth floor before and it could only mean very good or very bad news. It wasn't *my* boss I was meeting, it was *the* boss, the head of international operations. He had a mysterious reputation: most employees never met him and he was considered a recluse. Even his first name was a mystery.

I had no idea what the offices were like up here but it's safe to say I wasn't expecting the site that greeted me when I was eventually ushered in.

The room was in darkness, lit only by the muted daylight forcing its way in through the windows that occupied the whole of the far wall.

Standing at the window with his back to me, looking out over the city landscape, was a man bathed in shadow. He appeared to have his arms folded but I couldn't be sure – the room was enormous and I was at least 60 feet away from him.

“Take a seat,” said the boss. He spoke so softly I would have missed it completely had I not been concentrating so keenly.

I looked helplessly around. The room took up about half of this floor so it was at least 300 feet wide. There were no tables or desks, no filing cabinets or computers, no office equipment of any kind, no kettle, nothing on the walls, not even any carpet. The only non human object in the room was a small plastic chair of the sort we had in infants school. It had been placed, rather too deliberately for my liking, in the very epicentre of the room. As I as gingerly and noiselessly as possible sat down I couldn't help looking up at the ceiling to see if there was a Monty Python style 15 tonne weight suspended from it. I felt like a cow in an abattoir who's just worked out what the big cross bow thing is for.

I nervously crossed my legs, causing the impracticably lightweight chair to scrape about two feet across the floor. In the ominous silence it sounded like a combine harvester scraping down a blackboard.

“Sorry,” I muttered, so quietly I'm not sure he even heard me. I was about to repeat myself more loudly but then it

occurred to me that that would seem weak and I really didn't need to give of that impression any more than I already was.

After a while I realised that it was now about two minutes since he had told me to take a seat and that, thunderous chair scraping aside, nothing further had happened. My throat felt dry and I wanted to cough but that would have sounded like a jet engine coughing in this place.

"Do you like snooker?" he suddenly asked.

"What the fuck?" I said, thankfully to myself. Was this some sort of corporate mind game? Or worse still, was 'liking snooker' some sort of public school euphemism? I tried very hard not to think about all the possible ramifications of a pink nudging into a brown.

I became grotesquely aware of myself not replying. On balance I considered it far more likely that the boss had a liking for snooker rather than a disliking as he had introduced the subject so I went for it.

"Yes, I quite like it."

Name a player, I thought, and not an obvious one. Come on, I thought, I've seen it on the telly often enough, name any player outside the top six.

"I like Stephen Lee," I blurted out. Okay, he may have been a top six player a few years ago but that should get me some sort of kudos if the boss likes snooker. Of course, if he hates it then I've fallen into his trap, whatever a trap that was baited with pretending-to-like-snooker could possibly involve.

He swung around suddenly to face me.

"He should have won a world title ten years ago," he said.

"Yes, he should," I agreed.

More uncomfortable silence followed.

"Michael," he said, almost imperceptibly.

I waited for the rest of the sentence for twenty seconds, but nothing materialised.

"Yes?" I squeaked pathetically. This was the corporate equivalent of water-boarding – I noticed with horror that I was wearing an orange shirt. I began to tremble uncontrollably. This wasn't why I went into insurance. My mother was right, I should have become an estate agent.

"Michael, I have some bad news..."

## WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

"Travelling overland to Morocco... would be infinitely preferable to this," thought Peter as he squatted over the public urinal in Newport town center. Others thought his personal standards had dropped alarmingly, but this was one task he just couldn't give up.

"What I wouldn't give for a pair of rubber gloves," he muttered, extracting another cigarette butt from the urinal. His knees ached from sustaining the crouch and he felt an overwhelming urge to run through a field of wheat with Bamber Gasgoine. He gritted his teeth, before putting them back in his mouth and refocusing his attention on the task before him.

It was a hot, sticky afternoon, like elbows congealing in a frying pan, and the job was made more arduous by the stench which assailed his nostrils like an Australian with a cricket bat. A carefully arranged copy of 'Caravaning Bi-Annually For Bi-Sexuals' now contained three sodden dog-ends - one more would be enough. He applied himself anew with a vigour normally found only among thirty year old Polish virgins.

"I hope I never see another toilet as long as I live," he thought, before realising that this would make life rather difficult, not to say...

Eventually he had the toilet requisittttt. With more care than a nun drowning gerbils, he let them fall into a polythene bag and sealed it against further contamination, tampering or communist subterfuge.

Emerging blinkingly and sarcastically into the vibrant sunshine, Peter Talbot took in a lungfull of air - his other lung was busy with the crossword.

"All done, sir?" inquired Sergeant Johnson.

Inspector Talbot nodded.

They headed off in search of their unmarked car as a junior officer pulled up his trousers and removed the barrier of police tape that had prevented members of the public from entering the convenience and interrupting Talbot's work by pissing on his head.

The crossed the road, which was futile as the road wasn't catholic, and got into the car. Inspector Talbot held up the polythene bag for inspection. Turning on the heater full blast he dried out the contents. In the unrelenting heat, Johnson

fanned himself with a small orphan.

Talbot reached into his inside pocket and produced a packet of rizzlas. Johnson watched with his usual level of distaste as his superior dug the tobacco from the dog-ends with a match and began to roll up. Opening the sunroof, he lit the urine flavoured cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"Right, now we'll go and investigate that murder."

Johnson sighed with relief and replaced the orphan in the glove compartment. As he accelerated away the car was filled with the smell of burning urine. Talbot coughed, spraying the windscreen with phlegm. Johnson turned on the wipers but they made no difference.

"Stop at the station on the way," said Talbot, "there's something I have to do first."

Talbot sat at his desk picking his teeth. He reached for the phone and dialled.

"Hello, can you deliver today? Good." he looked down at the brochure on his desk. "Yes, I'll have one molar and three incisors."

He hung up and smiled. Tomorrow he would pick his nose, providing the new brochure from California had arrived. He opened a desk drawer and stroked his beard - it purred gently. He dropped in some food and a fresh batch of straw and closed the drawer.

Glancing up at the ceiling, he wondered why flies always went around light bulbs in a triangular flight path.

"Can't you see it's round, you've got enough eyes," he shouted at the geometrically challenged insect. "What can they be teaching them in borstal these days?"

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts as surely as Sian Lloyd always tells us it's going to rain.

"Come in."

"I'm sorry, sir, it's this murder," said Johnson.

"Another!" exclaimed Talbot. "How many's that now?"

"One."

"One! And it's only November - damn this hell-hole of a town!"

"It's July, sir."

"Never mind that, what about this murder?"

"It's a man. He's been blinded, decapitated, set on fire, harpooned and eviscerated. Probably a domestic."

"Well done, Sergeant, we'll make a Constable of you yet. Come and help me tie my shoelaces."

"I can't, the door won't open."

"Use the handle."

Johnson opened the door.

"That was fun, I'll do that next time. Are you ready?"

"In a minute, I've got to hear the results."

He switched on the radio.

And as they approach the finish line it's Nicholas Parson's Indigestion Remedy in the lead having just overtaken a horse. Not far behind in this congested smorgasboard of horses are Where Have All The Flowers Gone, Cartesian Dualism, Newton's Gay Laboratory Assistant, Frozen Caravan Gas Bottle, Peter Mandleson's Lucky Moustache Comb and Portugese Arse paper. Labour Election Promise was, of course, a non-starter.

Talbot switched off the radio.

"Any luck, sir?"

"No," he sighed, "my money was on Ronnie O'Sullivan."

"So, what was the cause of death?"

Johnson looked down at the man lying on the living room carpet, the samurai swords still in embedded in his legs and the pneumatic drill in his back.

"Hard to say, he could have tripped over a rug."

"Right, I'm going upstairs."

"Why, sir, forensic have already done the whole house?"

"I know, I just want to get away from this fucking corpse."

He left the room and ascended the stairs fourteen at a time.

"This sort of case chills me to the core of my apple," he muttered.

After a difficult few minutes wedged in the airing cupboard, Talbot finally found the toilet.

"That's a relief," he sighed, taking out his tobacco.

Ten minutes later, Johnson handcuffed the dead man's wife and lead her out of the front door.

"But how did you know it was me?" she asked.

"Well," said Johnson, "if I go into the whole exposition routine then this will cease to be a short story, won't it?"

He lead her down the path, nodding to Talbot who was leaning on the gate post smoking a cigarette.

"Jesus," said the woman, "what's that smell?"

## LIKE FATHER

"Piss off mum, I'm thirteen not three." I slammed the door in her face and returned to my laptop. School's for gypos and mental cases.

Lighting another spliff, I logged onto facebook. The best thing about finding out last year that I had a half-brother was that he can get proper strong dope really cheap - and he got me this Macbook for forty quid. Gettin' phones and money and shit off people is piss easy but you gotta be clever to get someone's laptop without them seein' you. Unless you get a gun and that's too much hassle. Look at all the trouble dad got for shootin' those people; I ain't doin' time, no way.

"Tea's ready, come and eat your greens."

"I'm not eating no veg, mum. I've had fruit pastels, some of them's green."

"Wait till Trevor gets home."

"Fuck him, he ain't my real dad. He touches me I'll call the pigs."

Ha, Smithy's goin' to see Take That tonight - what a twat!

What's Phil up to? New tatoo, cool.

And what about Jenny? Lieing bitch, I never done that.

New message.

What the fuck? Who's that from? I don't know them. An anonymous tip off? Surely it can't be true.

Then I seen it. The post from a few hours ago. The photo of my dad standing outside the prison gates giving the thumbs up. That parole board must have been more gullable than Tracey Watkins. I wonder if mum knows, she hasn't said? I 'spose he'll come here eventually. I wonder if he'll bring me a decent present?

'Course he doesn't know me at all now. I didn't have dreads and a wicked diamond studded earring when I was two. He never got me nothing.

What do you want Trev? And don't ever come in without knocking again you dirty perv.

"Turn that racket down, please."

"It's not a racket, it's Public Enemy - I'm doin' you a favour and bringin' you the noize."

"We've just had a call from the police. Your *father* has been released."

"Yeah, I know, so what?"

"So we'd better leave in case he shows up here."

"Don't be such a wimp." I reached into my school bag and took out my best knife. "If he kicks off I'll just cut him a bit, no worries."

"Margaret, what's all that commotion?"

Oh good, cardigan man has fucked off.

"Oi, who the... oh, hello, dad."

## INTO THE CAVE

I was the first to pass the test and go through the cave entrance, the rest of our party were held up. The interior of the cave was dimly lit and there appeared to be a few indigenous occupants. In the corner was a rectangular structure covered in thin grass with 6 holes around the edge and some small, multicoloured spherical objects roaming around on the surface. Some natives were gathered around it and pointing at a small pile of flat, shiny, silver objects on the edge of the rectangle. This appeared to be part of some primitive ritual.

I threaded my way through, careful not to disturb the ritual or brush against any of the plumage emanating from some of the natives; some form of local head dress no doubt.

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