

## A FUNERAL

### 1. To Go or Not To Go

I hesitated to go to Frank's funeral. I suppose that many people, loosely or distantly connected with the deceased, do hesitate for a number of reasons. There might be quizzical looks from close friends or relatives. Might a stranger attending be seen as intrusive or presumptuous - and resented? Would other colleagues linked to me and the deceased fail to turn up, leaving me isolated - and disappointed? Frank had been my teacher in the early sixties, and later, when I had qualified, briefly my colleague and Head of Department. I had heard that he retired a little prematurely in the nineties, a Gulliver hampered, needled and frustrated by the tiny harpoons and snares of those malicious Lilliputians who swelled in numbers under misguided head teachers.

*Pace.*

Scattered around the front of the crematorium chapel are people I do not recognize. The only thing which tells me that I have come to the right place on the right day is a Leicester Tigers rugby shirt worn by a balding, rather tubby, bespectacled man. The obituary requested people to choose rugby colours rather than mourning apparel, Frank having been a rugger fanatic. As a Foxes fan I could not comply and had gone through my rail of tee shirts to find a hooped one which might do. Here, compared to the real thing, it looks bloody silly and I am tempted to flee. With a quarter of an hour left before the service is due to begin, the twenty or so people, many looking as uncomfortable as I feel, strikes me as a miserable turn-out for a very nice, well respected man. Yes, Frank had been many years retired and had suffered from dementia, and, yes, it is August and holiday time. But where were all those colleagues I had imagined milling around? Moved away or passed away? Indifferent or unaware?

The city cemetery is extensive with the ranks of the dead. In a curious way they have, it occurs to me, a strange affinity with us bystanders. Each one of us present, living and dead, had or have been diverted from their various courses, near and far, to this appointment with death.

Afterwards, for a little while, the living will go their separate ways while the dead, at least physically, will remain here, with all their secrets, life-journey's end. What horrible secrets do they clutch close to their ribs? How many bring flowers and wreaths, unaware that they have been betrayed or secretly loathed?

Burial is an entrapment. I shall prefer to blow about, like Frank's atoms and spirit, on the four winds. Crosses and gravestones are a good way of bringing cheery aspirations of wealth, comfort and joy down to earth. How I wish I had not come!

I am staring at the gravestones, picturing the complex, unbroken paths which the dead had trod on their ways here, when I become aware of a man approaching me, half-smiling. Should I recognize him? His long face matches none in my gallery and I am going to be embarrassed because I ought to know him from way back.

"Hello. I thought I'd come over and have a word."

"Hello, I'm trying to place you. Were you at Fairley High?"

He frowns. "Fairley High?"

"School in Fairley Parva."

"No, I don't know you, just thought you looked a bit lost and I'm here on my own too. Are you saying that Frank was a teacher?"

"You didn't know? He taught French."

"Really? I had no idea. I played chess with him for years at the chess club. He never mentioned

his job.”

“I never knew he played chess. I played bridge with him.”

“He played bridge? He kept that quiet. Was he a good teacher?”

“Very good, but he had a temper, his Achilles heel.”

“Temper? He was never anything but gracious, even when he lost, which was seldom.....You know, I suppose we’d all have to sit down together.....to reconstruct the whole man.....even then there’d be a massive area.....if you know what I mean.....”

“.....which would be marked secret?”

“Quite.”

He senses I wish to be left alone and moves away. I turn to look at the wide pathway which will bring the funeral cortege. Behind me I hear tuneless whistling which instantly conjures up a strange, unpleasant feeling - and suddenly the world turns black. Someone has crept up and placed a large, smelly hand over my eyes.

“Hey up, Simmo! Fancy seeing you here, dead centre of town.”

That bloody stupid whistle! That voice! Brummie. 1970s. Fairley High School. I turn. It turns out to be the tubby fellow in the rugger shirt - but minus the shock of black hair which I suddenly recall. What is his damn name?

“Well, haven’t you changed, hardly knew you at first,” he says, clapping me on my arthritic shoulder. “Put on a bit of timber, like Yours Truly. Still married to what’s-her-face?”

“No.”

“No? Nor me. Swapped mine for a newer sooped up model. Wears me out. You?”

None of your damn business.

“I thought there would more of the staff here than this. I don’t recognize a soul.”

“Well,” he says, “Frank’d been retired twenty years. Old Howard died - and Ted the Testube.

Dick’s housebound. I never dreamt you’d be here. You were only at Fairley three or four years.”

“Two. Frank taught me in the sixties.”

“Never knew that.”

“I expect there’s lots you don’t know.”

What’s your damned name?

He laughs. “Same old Simmo, tongue sharp enough to cut yoursen.”

“Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that. Just following up on something that bloke over there said.”

Like many people full of themselves, it never occurs to him that he might have been forgotten.

“Shall we have a pint after? It’s your round if my memory serves me. Wake’s at the rugger club in Forest East.”

I am not intending to hang around. “I might do. I’m driving though.”

This unwelcome and futile conversation is interrupted by the approach of the hearse and its two black family-carrying twins. My ex-colleague moves away, whistling.

I stare at the coffin. The last time I had seen its incumbent he had been racing around refereeing a school rugger match. A motley inter-generational collection emerge from the family cars showing no sign of grief. I had met his wife once - a very handsome, sturdy woman. Surely she is not that reduced old lady with a stick? She is. I will not trouble to describe her relatives - motley will do. Yes, none, now all have emerged, seem particularly mournful. Doubtless it had been said that they had done their grieving a while ago when the man they knew gradually vanished. It just unsettles me that they seem on the wrong side of neutral, indifferent bordering on nonchalant. Certainly the absence of funeral garb contributes to that impression.

*They're going to set fire to your dad and grandad, for God's sake!!*

The undertaker, who has not turned up in a rugby shirt and who is doing his solemn best to maintain decorum, beckons us all forward once the coffin has been wheeled in. I sit down on a bench at the back on the left on my own. Apart from whatshisname, I know nobody. As we stand for the first hymn the door behind me opens and closes. A figure in a black suit appears in the corner of my right eye and shuffles along to stand next to me. It is Celia. In forty years she has not crossed my mind once and yet I remember her instantly and she has hardly changed. She winks, pats my arm and puts her hands on the bench in front.

## **2 Strange**

By a strange coincidence, the friend Paul who had alerted me to Frank's dementia only a few months previous to his death was the very friend who had made me almost curl up in embarrassment when Frank had introduced me to Celia in 1976.

Paul's mother-in-law had been admitted into a care home in Ashby-de-la-Zouch and he was wandering the corridor when he saw Frank Carpenter's name on a door. Frank had taught him too and, intrigued, he had knocked on the door. It was an odd meeting. Frank had not recognized him and when Paul tried to remind him how he knew him it became clear that although Frank was aware he had been a teacher, he had forgotten where and what he had taught.

Paul would have forgotten the incident which I found shaming because he was drunk. I had only been teaching a year and out of the blue I was landed with the responsibility of taking charge of a school trip to Dieppe. Frank should have gone but for a reason I never discovered, he was unable to. Our only other colleague was pregnant and not prepared to endure the rigours of a school trip. Frank had contacted Celia who had been a student teacher, qualifying at Fairley the year before my arrival, and her Head had agreed to her being released for the week on the grounds that, being tasked with taking her own trip to Dieppe later in the term, she would benefit from a preview. Celia would be my overseer although officially I would be in charge. Frank arranged a meeting one evening with her at the Red Lion, the fine old pub opposite the church in the old village. We had asked for the little snug for our privacy and when, after an hour, we had concluded our discussion about organisational matters and the programme, we emerged to find Paul, as I had arranged with him, at the bar. Immediately I could tell that he had been in the pub for far longer than an hour.

"Hello, Mr Carpenter! Paul Ibbotson," he declared, thrusting out his hand. "Remember me?" Somewhat uncomfortably Frank took his hand and adopted a pondering expression.

"Vaguely," he said after a decent pause, "but so many pass through our hands and of course you all alter so much."

A diplomatic way of saying I haven't a bloody clue who you are. Paul immediately latched onto lovely Celia, blessed as she was with lustrous blonde hair, a trim figure, a bust of which she was justly proud and a pair of inviting blue eyes. He stared at her shamelessly but she was not a bit put out. Paul was not a bad looking man himself and she gave him back his stare with a steady one of her own. A glance at Frank told me he was not best pleased.

"This is Celia Mason, Paul." I said with an attempt at nonchalance. "She's coming to Dieppe to show me what's what.....I need someone with experience," I added with an excruciating laugh. "Mmm," said Paul. "You could be in for a good experience there, Simmo."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Celia without a hint of embarrassment. Frank's black hair, handlebar moustache and beard combined with his brow and cheeks glowing red with rage had always been a sight of which naughty children needed to take urgent note. His steely blue eyes

stared a dire warning at Paul and the silence was awful. Paul, tipping back his glass, had no idea how close he was to disaster.

“Oh, better be off,” said Celia looking at her watch.

“Right,” said Frank in a low simmering voice. “See you tomorrow then.....Mr Simpson.”

The formality told me all needed to know about Frank’s opinion of my taste in friends. For Paul there was not a word, not a nod as Frank swept past him. As the door was closing on them both, Paul belched and completed my humiliation by declaring that there were not many of *them* to the pound. Celia heard, held the door, looked around at him and winked.

“Fucking hell, Jim. A lively handful there! Can you handle it?”

“Paul. I can’t believe you fucking said that! They’re my colleagues. You’re pissed.”

What he replied I cannot remember. What happened next I cannot remember. No doubt I got pissed.

Since then, at sixty-seven, Paul has improved, but not much. He said he might come to the funeral but he is not here.

### 3. Upset

Celia’s proximity and affection and that apricot perfume I had forgotten, wrapped up with the surprise of her appearance, bewilder me.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” I say as we stand to sing the first hymn. It is *Swing Low Sweet Charity* and I belt it out lustily, so lustily that the man who approached me first turns to smile at me. Then I look at the coffin and think of all the time that has passed between that early time and this, between the man as he was and the man as he is, between my days of joy and my days of sorrow and I am so choked that I cannot sing another note. She comes closer and puts up her hand around my shoulder. To my annoyance a tear wells out and trickles down my cheek.

“I’m okay,” I stammer. “Funerals! I always get emotional even if it’s a stranger.”

“Frank was a great guy.....” She is crying too.

We sit down and the man in front leans over to tell me that I should be on *X Factor*. I sniff and nod. Now it is the turn of a stout woman to give a speech.

“Debbie, his eldest,” growls Celia. “We met her at *Forte’s* on the way back from *Newhaven*. Remember?”

“No.”

“Because you were pissed.”

“Was I?”

“You know you were. Those *St Etienne* fans.”

“God, yes! Oh God....So sorry.”

“I forgave you forty years ago.”

We fall silent and listen. I keep expecting the strong, confidant voice of the middle-aged woman to crack in the peroration, once the jokes are out of the way - about Frank’s untidiness, his passion for collecting everything from stamps to wooden offcuts - but it never does.

“She was very.....brave,” I whisper.

“Mmm...I’ve heard people get more emotional over their dead budgie.”

“Didn’t he have two daughters?”

“Tell you after.”

The next hymn - oh no - is *Jerusalem* which I can never sing all through. I manage to belt out the first verse but the image of my sword and shield being thrust into my hand shuts me up

completely as usual. Celia looks up at me in puzzlement.

“You been at the bottle before you came?” As for most teachers, a whisper is beyond her. People turn to look. Whatshisname smiles and has a good gawp at Celia then whistles low and pulls an eyelid down.

Twat.

Now it is the turn of Frank’s wife to come to the pulpit. Celia stiffens.

I cannot record what she said because I barely understood a word. I am half-deaf and she muttered. I sense relief all round when she returns to her place with the help of her daughter. I glance at Celia’s profile. It is set hard and her lower eyelid is red.....

### **3 Because You Were Pissed**

To my utter shame, I was. It is the kind of flash-memory which invades the brain in that half-waking state of unease on cold, dark mornings, to be immediately squashed. Why do we so torture ourselves?

The youth hostel in Dieppe, named Foyer Leo Legrance, after a brave Socialist martyred during the Occupation, was half-way up a steep hill, a busy, hooting road. It was a tall, sprawling building with surprisingly quiet, attractive grounds at the rear with tennis courts and a volleyball net. A tall wall, a large shrubbery and spinney - where mischief would be concocted - enclosed the place. I have no idea how we spent those few days with the group. The memories which remain are of the latter, non-organized part and are unpleasant. Only one pupil’s name has stayed with me, a fat, naughty, blonde boy called Robert. Before our departure, he had received a stern lecture from Frank as to what instruments of torture would be waiting for him in Fairley, should he transgress. Fear remained a sharp weapon in our armoury back then, before the Fall. At the outset, the boy kept his head down. This probably induced in me a false sense of security.

I do remember two scenes before the roof fell in. One involved a teacher in charge of another group. She arrived in time for dinner and was keen to tell us how bad the crossing from Newhaven had been. She had nearly been sick, she said, a little bit of sick had come up into her mouth but she managed, fortunately, to swallow it. Celia stopped chewing, grinned for my benefit and told her effusively how pleased she was for her.

The second scene involved Celia on the first night. We had managed to get the kids into their dormitories and were patrolling the corridors, me in the boys’ wing and Celia in the girls’. We met at the bottom of the stairs which led to our rooms. My heart was racing. She climbed the steps in front of me and I had no choice but to observe her slender legs. At the top she paused, eyed me steadily and smiled. Her room was on the left, mine on the right. I have no idea what expression I wore. She seemed to be making her mind up - or perhaps that was the impression she wanted to create. After an age she said “Night night, Jim” pushed open her door and vanished. Sweet revenge on me for hanging about with Paul!

Over the next few days, I should have paid more attention to the occasional minor explosions on the site. It never occurred to me that they might, in late May, be fireworks.....

The master of ceremonies who is not, as far as I can tell, a vicar, has asked us to stand and bow our heads in prayer in memoriam of our departed friend and loved one. He tells us that the curtains will close on the coffin as we do so. This is it then, the end of the road, the great portal between two dimensions of time and being. Slammed shut.

Or perhaps you get stacked for a while and burnt at night, so as not to upset the neighbours. Do

the ashes get mixed up?

Ethereal music drones soft from a hidden speaker and I watch like everyone else those purple curtains draw slowly to. There are no anguished cries at this moment of significance where visibility becomes invisibility. Frank has finally gone from the purview of his relatives who have seen him off and on for sixty and more years - and the silence is remarkable. Until Celia sobs. She turns and leaves in a hurry pursued by the curious eyes of those who heard.

The ethereal music ends abruptly and Frank Sinatra begins to belt out My Way. The mourners, heads bowed, eyes glancing around, leave from the front, shuffling in time to the music behind the undertaker and his two solemn colleagues. It strikes me then, looking at their miserable faces, that I had missed my proper calling. Double doors have opened up in the corner onto a large area where the family will stand to receive our commiserations. Having no inclination to explain who I am and what Frank was to me, and sensing that this is a chore for both sides, I slip out of the glass doors and into fresh air. Nobody notices.

I look around at the graves, eyes shielded against the lowering sun, and see Celia, back to me, smoking and studying a grave.

“You alright, Celia?”

“Yep. It just got me in the throat he was very good to me. Look here! This guy was a hundred and two. I wonder whether he was glad to die. Perhaps he knew nothing about it. Maybe I wonder if Frank ”

“Frank helped me a lot in my probationary year. I was a right dickhead. Thought I was God’s gift.”

“You did. Forty odd years might have changed you though, a bit.”

“Forty-two. Where to begin? Be honest, you never gave me a second thought after Dieppe.”

“I did.”

I never thought of you.

“Time hasn’t done you much damage.”

“Oh, come on. Your chat-up lines still leave a lot to be desired.”

“No. It’s true.”

“Well, you look your age. Whatever happened to that mass of blonde hair?”

Celia looks behind me and narrows her eyes. A whistle - a huge clap on my arthritic shoulder.

“Ain’t you gonna introduce me, Simmo? Keeping the lovely lady all to yourself.”

“Hey! Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me,” she says. “Celia Mason,”

He is so taken aback, he can neither whistle nor say a word.

“I was on TP at Fairley. For a whole term. Don’t tell me this “lovely lady” didn’t register with you. I’d be most put out.”

She is relishing this as much as Whatshisname is hating it.

“Er...vaguely. A lot of water and all that...I never went into the staffroom much then.....running around getting out games kit.....putting up team sheets....”

“Oh, I remember *you* in the staffroom, flirting with that dark-haired girl who looked a bit like Sandie Shaw, tall and from the north...taught English? Carol, Caroline?”

He is blushing and Celia is loving it. Then he puts his hand lovingly on my arm.

“*That* was the gel our Simmo married. Carol? Carolyn? I forget.”

Regretfully I nod. “Carolyn. She did teach English and some French. My wife for seven miserable years.”

Celia puts her hands to her face and sniggers. “God, how embarrassing. I had no idea.”

“Why should you? We got married in 77, long after our paths crossed.”

Whatshisname is suddenly anxious to excuse himself, making a big thing of spotting someone in the crowd he says he recognizes. He hurries away.

“Caro couldn’t stick him. It would be sexual harassment in this day and age.”

“I could tell,” she says, looking away from me. “Some men have no idea of the revulsion they inspire.”

O Carolyn, on what distant and remote path do you wander?

“What split you up?”

She wanted children and I did not.

“To be perfectly candid to such a direct question, I developed this odd body odour which none of the doctors could get to the bottom of.”

Let’s see you blush now.

“So did I, but my bloke lost his sense of smell so it didn’t matter. It was my frigidity which finally called time on us.”

The mourners are standing around in little groups. The undertakers are looking a little more sprightly, collapsing the trolley and shoving it into the back of the hearse. A few people are heading for their cars. I look at my watch.

“Somebody expecting you home?” she asks.

“No. You?”

“No. Going to the do?”

“I wasn’t intending to. Driving.”

“Me too. Just one drink?”

“Okay. Just one. Where you parked?”

She points. I point to my old banger. She says she will follow me.....

It was late Friday afternoon. We had an hour before dinner and Celia had offered to go on the prowl in the grounds and games room while I had a bit of a rest. My back had been playing up - first sign of the arthritis which will plague me - and I had not been sleeping well. I was dozing when an urgent knock startled me.

“Please Sir, Miss Mason says come quick. Robert Wilbur has had an accident.”

I hurried down in time to see Celia carrying the sobbing boy into the games room. His eye was blackened and my first thought was that he had been - probably not unjustifiably - punched.

“Firework,” she gasped. “Go to Madame and ask her to phone an ambulance.”

The stupid idiot had picked up and examined a banger which had failed to go off. I could see paper embedded in his swollen eye. He looked at me imploring forgiveness but I could only scowl. Celia went off with him in the ambulance leaving me to launch an enquiry amongst his crestfallen mates. Within ten minutes I had a table full of bangers. Celia’s last word of advice had been to call the Head. Now he had been a second world war Spitfire ace and was guaranteed to put the wind up the occupants of any room he entered - and they were just the teachers. He was known affectionately as Bomber.

“Mr Baxter....”

“Yes?”

“This is James Simpson in Dieppe. I’m sorry to have to tell you that one of our boys, Robert Wilbur, has had to be taken to hospital.”

Silence.

“It’s his eye.....A banger went off near his eye and -”

“A banger? A SAUSAGE??”

This furious and unexpected question left me bewildered.

“A banger, you know. A firework.”

“What’s the lad doing with a firework? In June?”

“There’s a joke shop here we knew nothing about. Wilbur’s mates just told me he knew about it before we came.”

“Then why didn’t you?? Why didn’t you make enquiries?”

I could hardly reply that there were thousands of unlikely hazards I could have worried about, ranging from charging escaped elephants to sharks in the sea. To my surprise he calmed down.

He gave me his home number to update him and told me he would phone the parents.

When Celia returned without Wilbur and with a dark expression I feared the worst. He would not lose the eye but it was very sore and even though all the scraps of paper and muck had been washed out he might not be discharged in the morning. One of us might have to stay and bring him home on the Sunday or Monday. Being the more experienced, Celia should accompany the group. The thought of hanging about on my own and having to organize tickets, not to mention suffering the company of Wilbur - as well as my aching back - meant that I did not get a wink of sleep.

After breakfast, Celia phoned the hospital. What a relief when she told me he could come home with us.....

“You mentioned Frank’s younger daughter.....as if she was.....”

“A difficult girl? Yes and no.” She sips her white wine. We are in quite a low room in a rigger club just off the main Earlstone road. There is an ample buffet with all the usual unappetizing items and we are little tempted. Around thirty guests with paper plates are standing and talking low in small groups. The widow and her entourage are seated in a corner farthest from us.

Whatshisname has been hovering indecisively in our vicinity and Celia has been glaring at him. I have bought him and myself a pint but have refused his gestured offer of another. Celia is taking quite frequent sips which are becoming slurps. I begin to worry where this might be heading when she tries to get me to drink up.

“Go on,” she says. “It’s mid-afternoon and the police are scarce anyway.”

“One more then.”

She returns with another large glass of wine and my pint.

“You were saying she was difficult.”

“Natasha? Yes. Truth is she fell out with Frank thirty and more years ago. She moved to York to study and never came back.”

“Do you know why?”

She shakes her head. “He refused to tell me.”

I imagine the worst - abuse - and she reads it in my face.

“Oh no! He was never like that. Let’s change the subject,” she says almost angrily.

Well you brought it up.

“I’ll fetch us some sandwiches. If we’re drinking we should eat.”

She walks to the table a little unsteadily and gets involved with Whatshisname.....

We boarded the ferry late morning and gave the children their lecture before letting them loose in their groups. Dieppe to Newhaven would take around four hours and I ought to have got my head down as Celia suggested. Telling me that I looked worn out, she offered to go on patrol.

I went looking for a quiet seat but the boat was busy. Eventually I found a table at the back of the bar and decided to buy a lager to help me get off. Hovering between waking and sleeping, I became aware of four lads heading my way wearing green and white scarves. I considered moving but could not help but listen. They were on their way to Hampden Park in Glasgow to watch their team St Etienne contest the European Cup Final with Bayern Munich. And they were excited. Unwisely, I told them I was a LCFC fan which produced shrugs of bemusement, requiring clarification.

I swear I only had four pints and went to leave them the best of pals when the boat slowed to dock. Upon standing up, I realised that I was too dizzy to walk; fatigue and a sore back exaggerated my stagger. I grabbed hold of tables, pillars and rails in an effort to get down to the disembarkation point where Celia and the group would be waiting. Her face told me straightway that attempts at camouflage were futile. I could only hope that the innocence of childhood would mean my secret would be safe. She announced to the children, as soon as some were eying me curiously, that I was very tired after a sleepless night. Holding onto the stair rail I edged my way down the gangway. Celia surreptitiously slid her arm into mine to steady me as we went through customs. I was almost home and dry - well, not dry - when, about to mount the steps of the coach, I slipped and hit my head against the door rail. The next I knew, I was being dumped onto the front seat by the driver - "Pissed as a rat" - he said, laughing.

Between Newhaven and Toddington on the M1, I slept. When I woke I was pleased to find my balance restored although my tongue was still under the influence, and garrulousness was the consequence. I remembered sitting with Celia and speaking to a woman she had bumped into who eyed me suspiciously - but I never realised it was Frank's elder daughter until later. Feelings of guilt and shame plagued me all day Sunday and I was terrified that Frank would find out. On Monday, however, he had been fine and sympathetic about the firework. The naughty boy was suspended and banned from further school trips. One child, who had not been to Dieppe, had heard a rumour and asked me if I had sobered up. I silenced him with one stare. But on the Friday, Frank came into my room on an urgent mission to persuade me to apply for a late advertised post at the Upperton School in Leicester, a promotion and a great opportunity. It never occurred to me until later that year that my drunkenness had been the secret catalyst in all that. In July I left Fairley for my new post, having had no competition for it except a shy lady with a stain on her skirt.

A few weeks after the ferry crossing, I received a package containing a wallet, some francs and four tickets for the football final. The wallet, I was told, had been found by a crew member in the bar. Inside was a beer mat with my address written on it. I wondered for a long time afterwards if they managed to buy new ones. And their team lost.....

Who has just walked in but Paul Ibbotson, looking flustered but very handsome, in a nice black suit. He has a grown a grey beard since I last saw him which confers upon him the illusion of grace and wisdom. He hurries over to me as Celia manages to tear herself away from her tedious companion. He confesses he had got the time wrong by an hour but had spotted an order of service in a bin which told him where to come for the wake. Celia eyes him with curiosity. I introduce them. Paul says he is charmed. He goes to the bar and returns with a white wine and two pints. I look at mine and frown.

"Jim," says she, putting her hand on mine. "We're on the bus route. We could come back for our cars tomorrow."

Paul says he would give us a lift but he needs to be in Burton by five. He would have to love us and leave us. He evidently has no recollection of Celia and she seems to have none of him. He tells his tale of meeting Frank by accident in the nursing home and she makes an effort to look impressed. He gets up to fill a plate.

“You don’t remember him?”

“Oh, I remember him. Oh yes.”

“Ah.”

He returns with his food and rapidly drinks down his ale. I offer to buy him another but he places his hand over his glass. He looks at his watch and then at Celia more intently.

“Didn’t you use to teach with Simmo?”

“Yes and no.”

“Frank taught me French - or tried to, I wasn’t much interested.”

“Like most English people,” she replies without a hint of malice.

“I was pretty crap.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. The French and English take great delight in speaking each other’s language as badly as possible.”

Five minutes later, with a suppressed belch and a clap on my other arthritic shoulder, Paul has gone. I ask her what she remembered of him.

“That he was pissed and very rude and embarrassing in the pub. Frank would have come back in and belted him one but I stopped him.”

“Bloody hell.”

“On the way back in the car he made me promise I wouldn’t sleep with you.”

“You’re joking!”

She does not reply. She smiles, drinks her wine and looks into the family corner.

“Well,” I mutter, feeling rather hot, “I suppose he was worried about professionalism and all that, but even so, it seems a bit over the top.”

“He was deadly serious.”

“Well, I never expected you to.”

“What?”

“Sleep with me.”

“You weren’t my type, Jim.”

“Nor you mine. Way above my league.”

She throws back her curls and laughs. She is tipsy for sure.

“Am or was?”

“Just good friends who never see each other. I’m sixty-six. Libido on the floor.”

She smiles with a sly wink as if to say she could resurrect it.

“There’s nobody?” she asks.

“Not anymore. Into gardening. Leeks and beetroot. Got an allotment. I’m very safe and boring.”

“I never got married. Enjoyed my freedom too much.”

“Celibate?”

“I never said that. Excuse me a sec - need the loo - had nearly a bottle of wine.”.....

\*

“I don’t like children, Caro.”

“But you’re a teacher.”

“Exactly. I used to like them before.”

“That’s stupid. Why didn’t you say so before we got married?”

“Why didn’t you ask?”

“I just assumed.”

“Well, you assumed wrong.”

I forget how many times we had variants on this exchange. Once she threatened to stop taking the pill and for a while we slept separately. What had begun in hope and joy was becoming stale and sterile. In 1983 she left Fairley High for a promotion in Allingworth. Within six months she had fallen in love with the deputy head and had begun an affair. She wanted a divorce. I offered to change my mind about children because I loved her so much. She was intelligent, pretty and warm. To my utter dismay, she shook her head and burst into tears. The time for change had passed - she was three weeks pregnant.

“That’s why I had to tell you the truth.”

That was Friday night. On Sunday afternoon she moved out and I never saw her again. I did eventually hear that they had moved to his native Cumbria. With my child? I had not demeaned myself by asking for details as to how, when, how often and where. I tried to exorcise my love for her but failed, casting a chill shadow over any other relationship I tried and failed to make.....

\*

“I can tell by the way she looks at me that she’s wondering.”

“Who?”

“Frank’s wife.”

Celia has returned from the toilet which is in the corner near the tables of the family.

“Wondering who you are? She’s bound to want to know how a stranger knew Frank.”

“Oh no. She knows who I am - unless she’s gone completely ga-ga. I saw her a lot when I was Frank’s TP student. Frank asked me round for dinner. I was living in digs round the corner - by chance. He gave me lifts.”

“Then what’s she wondering?”

“Dunno. If I was one of his women?”

My astonishment is put on hold when his hefty daughter approaches.

“Hello Celia. Mum is wondering why you won’t come over.”

“It’s been forty years. Didn’t want to intrude on the family. I’ll be over when I’ve drunk this.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I’ve just come over to make her think I’m asking you to come. I’ll tell her you send her your commiserations. You feel a bit awkward after so many years without a word or a Christmas card. She’ll be thinking of something else in a bit, the way her mind works now.” She turns on her heels with a swift, unpleasant glance at me and stalks back into her corner.

“Oh dear,” whispers Celia. “I know I shouldn’t have come. She really does suspect me.”

She sniffs and takes a good glug of wine. She eyes my glass and tells me to drink up. She is buying. No. I will get them.

Whistling Whatshisname takes my place as soon as I go to the bar. On my return I draw up another chair.

“Keeping this lovely lady all to yourself,” he says with a slur. “You know, I think I do remember you, Cecilia.”

“Celia”.

“You and Frank were very close?”

“He was my mentor and chauffeur. Of course we were close. He taught me all I know. You fancied yourself as Prince Charming.”

“Ooooo! Well, I did have my moments. *Did have* is the key word now with life and love in the past. Poor old Frank. Dragged on for five years without a clue. I’d rather go out like a light.”  
Such sterile, hackneyed drivel.

“I went to see him once in Coalville,” says Celia, taking no notice. “He knew he knew me but didn’t know how. I never went again.”

A tear trickles down her cheek but goes unremarked by our friend who is too busy thinking with what other drivel he can burble on.

“Cruel thing, dementia. Daily Express reckons there’s more about than we thought.”

I seize my chance. “If it’s in the Express, it must be true. Perhaps they’ve done a survey of their own readers, Brexiter Bungaloids.”

“Ah! I knew you were a Remainder, Simmo!”

“It’s to do with internationalism. People who’ve been a bit further than Eastbourne or the Costa Brava have a slightly different perspective on Europe.”

“Too many immigrants,” says he.

“Too many Brexiters,” says she. “Too many Sun readers, too many Tories, too much of you and too many....glasses of wine.”

She hangs her head and sobs.

“What? Me? What have I said?” he protests. He looks at me anxiously and I whisper “It’s a funeral pal. And she’s a bit drunk and upset. Frank meant a lot to her. Capiche?”

“Right.....RIGHT.” He winks, picks up his glass and I watch his fat behind waddle off in the direction of the buffet table where he whistles Rule Britannia and stacks another plate with sausage rolls and chicken drummers. Celia has closed her eyes and, smiling and humming La Mer and waving her wine glass, seems to be reliving her memories.....

\*

I ought to have given up teaching. Technically, I was good but I felt hollow and a fraud for pretending to enjoy it. Once, a very perceptive, outspoken girl actually asked me at the end of a class if I enjoyed teaching.

“Yes!” I blurted out. “No!” I yelled inside.

There is never a stocktaking at the end of a career as to how much good any of us has done - unless it will be postponed until the Pearly Gates. No pupil ever returned to tell me of their wonderful career using the French I had taught them; no pupil ever sent word to tell me how a school trip had helped to “form” them. Most careers end in a kind of failure. Perhaps the level of personal enjoyment is no guide to efficacy. I contented myself discontently with that.....

\*

She opens an eye and I tell her he has buggered off.

“I don’t think he’ll be back.”

“You know you married Carol?”

“Carolyn. Yes, I remember that. I was sober at the time.”

She smiles through her tears like sunshine through rain. She is lovely.

“Do you still think of her?”

“Only every day. I wonder if she’s still alive....happy...She’s still in here.” I pat my heart. “I think I’ll just have another half.”

“Get me a small glass of wine. I’ll sip.”

As I stand at the bar, I glance back at her. We exchange smiles. We could be good companions. A rumpus in the corner. Some of the younger ones are standing, jabbing fingers.

Ale taking over? Ale’s in, wits are out. I have to pass them to go to the Gents.

“You never went to see him once, you liar!” one of the new generation, a fat girl, is yelling at another. Sisters, Frank’s grandchildren?

“I couldn’t,” wails the accused. “I wanted to remember him as he was.”

The old grandmother is looking bewildered. Frank’s substantial daughter, Debbie, has plonked herself between them. The accuser is not mollified.

“Remember him as he was?” she parrots angrily. “My arse! You were too idle to get on the bus. And you come here as if you were bothered.”

Two muscular, much tattooed partners are acting as seconds. Seeing the likelihood of things getting out of hand, I decide to act as peacemaker.

“Hey, cool it!” I slur with a stagger. “Frank wouldn’t want this.”

As is so often the case, the unsought interference of a third party in a dispute can unite the warring parties in relief - and repugnance at the intruder. All stare at me glassy eyed and shitfaced. Debbie is looking at me with the spitting hatred cats reserve for dogs.

“Who asked you to stick your fat nose in, you bald-headed bastard? This is a family matter. Private. Why you come anyway?” She throws a glance at Celia. “Go back and sit wi’ her.”

“Yeah, eff off yo’”, shouts the angered granddaughter and her blue-armed champion clenches a multi-ringed fist. I go for a piss and when I return they are sitting in a grim arm-folded silence. Blessed are the peacemakers. I smile and pass them by. I have, after all, made a kind of peace. Whatshisname stumbles onto one of the trestle tables, sending sandwiches flying. He is pulled upright, face covered in quiche. I tell Celia I am going out for air.....

\*

“Are you going to pay attention, boy, or do I have to keep stopping the lesson for you?”

“Ahm more of a man than you!” he retorts, causing a ripple of sniggers - this rugged red-neck who looks a couple of years older than he should with his moustache. “Boy” was a bad mistake but I have launched myself on this Cresta Run of disaster and regress is impossible. The nice girls are looking horrified seeing a crash coming; the unnice ones are smirking, relishing the crash. Do wars start due to pride with words beyond recall?

“Stand up *boy*.”

“Er, no. I’ll stay sitting.”

“Get out of the room.”

“Mek meh!”

Giggles. This manly boy is grinning at his allies and I cannot afford to lose. Not again, not this one. Like a toy he has wound up, I stalk over and grab a handful of blazer at his shoulder.

“Hoy, Simpson. That’s an assault.”

“Up and out!”

“No!”

Our simmering mutual detestation had gone on for months and now the boil was bursting - all

over me. His father, grim, round-headed and scornful, had explained very slowly, as if I were an idiot, that his son's respect - like his own - had to be earned. Calmly I had replied that respect ought to be in place in children in the first instance - otherwise we were all at sea. This over-hormoned boy - and I forget his name - was generally loathed by staff for his groundless arrogance and contempt for education. Why did *he* need to do French, when he would inherit the plumbing business of his father - a Ukip councillor for a ward of Bungaloids?

"Do I have to fetch the Head?"

"Yeah, cos you ain't man enough to chuck me out yoursen."

I had no idea what stopped me from smacking his fat ugly face. Instead, I left the room, went to my car and drove home. The next day, I sent in my resignation. I was fifty-nine. I went on the sick and never returned.....

\*

"His younger daughter walked in on us. She would be fifteen? She saw his car in my drive on her way home from netball practice and came into the lounge. She screamed and went into the kitchen. Sobbed her socks off. Frank was crying too. Told her he'd made a big mistake. Didn't mean it - he was sorry. He loved her mum. If she told her, it would break the family up. She had to be grown up and strong. It would never happen again. I told her how lonely I was and unloved. The sex meant nothing. We pulled out all the stops."

She has come outside to stand at my shoulder and she has lit a cigarette.

"Of course it was all a bloody lie. The sex was everything. I remained his mistress until his mind started to go. It all started because my teaching practice wasn't going well. He would pass me or fail me so I put myself on a plate for him. Shameful, I know. But Frank was quite a man. Took my breath away. I was hooked. That's why I never went to bed with you. No need. On the Friday I'd seen him. I could hardly walk after."

"No need for this, Celia. If you weren't pissed now, you'd be keeping it quiet. That poor girl. Fancy burdening her with that."

"She went to York University and never came home. She had gone all Bohemian and fallen out with her mother. Frank went up to see her, but she refused to come out of her room. I reckon the elder one, that Debbie, must have worked it out for herself, unless Natasha told her. So you see, I was his French mistress for years. Do you want to know another secret?"

"Go on."

"You might not like it."

"Go on."

"That PE teacher - your mate. Whatshisname?"

"I don't know."

"He had it off with your Carol, when I was on TP."

I almost fall over. How did she know?

"I overheard her talking in the toilet to somebody. I was sat on the bog. She didn't realise. She was saying what a washout he was - if that's any comfort."

I take a deep breath. Traffic zooms past. It was a big mistake to come to this funeral.

"Her name was Carolyn, not bloody Carol. I fancy another drink."

"Come on, My round. Come on, it's not worth upsetting yourself about it all these years later."

I stare at the pint and know I should not drink it and wonder even if I can.

“Are you certain? It’s not the wine? How can you be sure all these years later? You heard voices. Did you hear his name mentioned? Was it definitely her voice?”

“She came from Yorkshire, I remember. Dark sexy voice -”

“Stop it! Did she mention his fucking name?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“Can’t remember.”

I stand up and get my balance. “I’m going to ask the bastard.”

“His name?”

“No, if he shagged her.”

“No, there’ll be a fight. Not at Frank’s funeral. Why did I tell you?”

“Because you’re pissed. I’ll have him outside.”

He is sitting on a chair, legs splayed, eating stuff from a plate on his lap, his belly hanging down over it like a large balloon. He can’t whistle because his mouth is full. The man who played chess with Frank is next to him drinking orange juice.

“Can we have a word outside?”

He totters, whistling, after me through the toilet corridor and out onto the rugger pitch where two youngsters are kicking a ball to each other.

“A little bird tells me,” I begin pleasantly “that you and my ex-wife were an item in 75. That right?”

“Ah no not really.”

“Liar! I can see it in your face. Come on, I was her husband.”

“You weren’t in 75! It was something and nothing.”

“So says my little bird.”

“Well then -”

“Out with it! Chapter and verse.”

“Let’s discuss it over a drink - my round.”

“No, here.”

He looks around to see how near the boys are and then puffs himself up a little, looking down on me.

“Okay, you wanted to know so don’t blame me....it was a Friday afternoon after the kids had gone home. I went looking for my kitbag. I’d done a cover for that waster Compton - ”

“Comson. Phil Compson. English, bad breath, armpits.”

“Yeah, him. Next room to Caroline.”

“CAROLYN”.

“Alright. Give me a chance. I went looking for my kitbag in *his* room and there was Carolyn next door marking books. I went in for a quick chat me in my tight shorts a bit, you know well, me lunchbox a bit paunchy saw her looking and well it all sort of kicked off table-ender three minutes, tops. Cleaner nearly caught us. ”

“No, you bastard. She wasn’t like that!”

“She was then! It had been a warm day -”

“Twat!”

I push him and he falls. I fall too on top of him and we wrestle weakly like crabs until he groans that he is going to be sick. He rolls over and brings up a pot-pourri of drummers, sandwiches and

beer. The two boys, one with the rigger ball under his arm, have come to look.

“Why have you come to grandad’s funeral?” asks one while the other stares in horror and amazement at the sick.

My adversary sits up, coughing. I turn my back and retreat.

“And you can ask my mate Phil Evans about her at Allingworth.” he shouts. “He was PE there. It was an open secret about her and the deputy, whassisname, Everybody knew!”

Apart from me.

I stop.

“Then you must have known that she went off with him. So why then fuck did you still ask if we were still together if you knew we weren’t?”

“I’d forgotten then. Why the hell would you think I think you’re important enough to remember and care about?”

He staggers past me and I plonk myself down on an old bench missing a spar. The two boys come up to me. Except that one isn’t a boy, but a stern girl; she stands staring at me with steely blue eyes. Celia has just sat down beside me.

“You’re Frank’s great-granddaughter, aren’t you?” she whispers. “God. You have his eyes.”

“Granddad Frank loved me,” she says simply - and instantly I can tell that she is strange. “He told me he loved me more than all the leaves on the trees and all the stars in the sky.”

She says this proudly but without a trace of emotion. Celia goes red and bursts into helpless tears, then rushes back into the clubhouse.

“Is she going to be sick as well?” asks the girl. “Why did you hit that fat man? Did you come to Granddad Frank’s funeral just to have a fight? Why does Grandma Debbie hate that lady? I heard her call her something bad.”

Her brother, uncomfortable, tugs at her sleeve. He wants her to come away to play with the ball. I watch them run out to the goalposts then go back in.

I grab my pint and drink a good third of it. I had come to Frank’s funeral to pay my respects. What a mistake not to just drive home after the service as I had resolved! Suddenly I see Frank fold his arms across his chest and toss back his head in delirious laughter as I had forgotten he used to do - when, for example, an irritated Bridge opponent had been forced to lead into his strength and award him a dodgy contract. He was a mixture of sternness and joviality and I imagine him laughing now at this absurd gathering.

“Are you alright, Celia?”

“It’s what he said to me once,” says she, weeping. “Exactly what he told the little girl.”

“I think it’s time we went.”

“Okay. Look, if you want to see me again, wait in your car tomorrow till I come for mine.”

I pick up our glasses and return them to the bar. I put my arm through hers and help her up the drive to the road.

We sit on benches in separate bus-shelters across the road from each other. Her bus arrives first and suddenly she is there no more.

The next day, when I return for my car hers has gone.