

For Lesley, Pudsey and Ricky

With thanks to my English tutor Howard Whitworth-Nish for his kind advice and encouragement.

Locations and names have been altered to protect arseholes, friends and clients.

1 THE FIRST CASE

There I sat, chewing my teeth, fed up with the rain, half-watching some old western, when my mobile phone went - (I'd downloaded a special ringtone - the Posthorn Gallop which slows down and ends on a very, very sad note - (I'm a LCFC fan, ain't I?)).

"Hello - *youwantpayne(?)(!).com*. Private detective, Intimidator, Fixer, Steamy-car-in-layby-spotter, drive-your-enemy-thirty-mile, make-him-strip-n-walk-back-in-t'-rain-service. Can I be of assistance?"

Here spoke my first customer! And an odd one. He'd seen my little advert tied to a lamppost, with my face on it - the most grim and cantankerous version of it that I, a big softy at heart, could pull. Anyway, he told me he had lost his suitcase and a Kiss-Me-Quick hat but the police weren't interested. I told him they were fed up with stag-party pranksters who had the ingenious, unoriginal idea of slinging the groom-to-be's clothes and case - and then the groom - in the sea.

"There's more washed up on the beach here than donkey do, mate. What's your name?"

"Accrington,. Stanley Accrington."

"This a wind-up?"

"No. Me father were a life-long fan.....the *twat*. It says 'ere you do a special rate for Chavs."

"That must be graffiti some moron's written on it...Mmmm. Okay, if it says so...Trades Description Act and all that.....You wearing a baseball cap and trainers?"

"I am."

"Tattooed?"

"Neck and arms, pal. EDL For Ever."

"Read The Star?"

"Yep."

"Then you qualify. I'll be down. Stay there."

This would no doubt be a minor matter, but I ended the call in anticipation of at last cutting my teeth on a real case after a number of daft hoaxes. For instance, I'd been half-way to the Tower when the name of the person I was to rendezvous with - a Mr Richard Head - caused me to do an emergency stop. Other ingenious hoaxes included (in no particular order of merit)

- We've dismantled the Tower and now there's a piece missing. Can you help?
- Help! Somebody's towing the pier away!
- I've just bought a stick of rock with Blockpool running through it, and I can't get me money back!
- My sister's just lost her virginity - can you help look for it?
- I've hired this bloody donkey and it won't budge. Can you come and give it a push?

And only the other day, my mate Denis had phoned me with a hanky over his mouth and asked if I could do Mission Impossible.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept, is to get Ray Large's sister to keep her gob shut for ten seconds..."

So I looked round for my keys, feeling sure, because this Stanley had sounded so desperate, that he'd be waiting in the spot he'd described. This would turn out to be the beginning of a very

strange and ultimately tricky case, if you'll excuse the play on words. I finished my Vimto - I'm a Vimto Totaller - and jumped into my specially modified Montego GT, *gunned* it into life, like, and drove like the clappers south to the Golden Mile, dodging the fat hen parties rolling and puking in the puddles as the Tower loomed larger. It was only three twenty in the afternoon and they had the rest of the day to recover, and suffer all over again. As prearranged, Stanley waved his cap at me when he saw my mauve car, the last such model on the Fylde coast – and the galaxy for all I knew. He was gaunt and pale and bent, like something out of a Lowry painting. Almost in tears, he got in and told me his story.

He had been waiting in the shelter over yonder, waiting for a tram to Bispham, when a girl with straggly fake blonde hair had slouched over and asked him for a light. She started giving him the glad-eye and said she had won a bingo voucher for two at Burger Paradise. Was he interested? She just needed to go for a pee in the toilet across the road and she'd be back. Of course, when he went to pick up his case it had gone. Her accomplice had crept in on his blind side and nicked it. I asked him how long ago this had happened and he said about half-an-hour. I put down my notepad and shook my head. He was lying about the police. If the Pope got shot tangoing in the Tower ballroom, it would be at least an hour before the police showed up. If I was going to find the case, he'd have to tell me the truth. What was in the case? Slowly, and not without a sniffle or two, he began to tell me about Big Ollie.

I'd lived in Blackpool most of my life - since being dragged up north wailing from my beloved Leicestershire when my mum and dad, hopeless blackpudliophiles, decided to open a rock stall by the South Pier. Big Ollie was news to me - even though I took a pride in keeping my ear to the ground. The youth told me that Oliver Oliphant (I kid you not) was the new local hard man, five foot tall by five foot wide, who had muscled - or rather belly-rammed his way into the local underworld, selling protection to local street traders - whelk and cockle men, balloon sellers, hat sellers, anything-tacky-sellers, you name it, Big Ollie was taking his cut. *Do you want a pin in them helium balloons? No? Well cough up then.....Hey, how would you like it if I pissed in your candy floss machine? You wouldn't? A tenner says I don't.....Them whelks wouldn't taste so nice if I gobbed in 'em would they? Nor the cockles. Twenty a day and I go away.....* This damp youth Stanley, who smelt of salt and vinegar and stale fags, was his collector and now he was doing bricks because the case with the loot in had gone. He couldn't understand why anybody would nick a tiny old brown case, specially chosen because it was so battered. He was scared to death, seeing as Ollie would be in a particularly foul mood anyway for the rest of the week.

“ ‘Is team got a drubbing last night by a r-really little team” he blubbed.

“What? A team of dwarves?”

“No. Bury. And he was there.”

“What? He's a Leicester fan???????”

I'd been at Bury too. The thought that I'd maybe sat within a few yards of Big Ollie made me go cold. I tried to recall seeing a grossly obese man munching one burger after the other but in vain. I'd even broken my resolution never to leave a game if my team were losing, departing after seventy minutes when their sixth goal had gone in - and therefore missing their other three. The new Bury manager, Sven Goren Erikson, seemed to be looking round and grinning in my direction as I went.

So, there I sat watching the grey waves hammering the beach, feeling pretty low. Instead of a job I had a dilemma. How could I take on a case against a fellow fan? *But, hold on, he's a villain.* Should I hand the whole thing over to the police? *But this poor lad next to me might suffer.* Should I risk my neck for a tiny or no fee? *But this poor lad is trembling with fear.* As I said, I'm a big softy. Slowly I began to see a way out. I asked him how much was in the case.

"About two 'undred and sixty quid. A morning's takings."

"Hardly a mega-income."

"E's on Invalidity Benefit as well!"

"Bloody scrounger."

Then an obvious thought hit me.

"But the girl and her pal will open the case, see the money and that will be that. Enough for a couple of season tickets at the Pleasure Beach. Case dumped, case over. You're in the brown and sticky stuff, sunshine."

"No. The case has got a false bottom with the notes in."

"So it looks empty."

"No. In case I were stopped, it 'ad a clown outfit in it - mask, big boots, plastic flower with a water pistol... I were supposed to tell the cops I were on a stag-do."

"Then it'll probably just get slung when they open it. Do you have any idea which way they went?"

He didn't. He began to tell me what a cruel man Ollie could be. A shellfish seller had told him to get lost, so Ollie had followed him home, sat on him and made him eat one whelk after another until he submitted.

"I duln't want that to 'appen to me" he whined. "I can't stand effin shellfish..."

"Right. If we get the case back, I'll take my fee out of it - twenty quid plus petrol - and then once Ollie's got his case, I'll phone Crimestoppers and have him nicked. Everybody wins."

"But 'e'll know 'ow much there should be. If it's twenty quid light- plus your petrol - me cut is the least I'll lose! And I *like* Ollie when 'e's in a good mood.. And if you're 'onest, 'ow can you take stolen money?"

"Look, son, it's not a perfect world. Them helium balloons go down after an hour, so I don't feel sorry for them. And they're giving whelks *away* in Fleetwood. Candyfloss is crap for your teeth. This is the only deal on the table. You could always try looking for yourself."

I had a hunch they had gone down the Starr Gate end, so off we drove slowly, looking out for a phoney blonde and a companion, for a suitcase, stopping at every waste bin to check inside. The rain was easing and the pavements filling, so it began to look more promising.

"There!" he said. "That's 'er! And 'im wiv her - 'e's carrying a case."

But as we drew level he shook his head. The case was too big. There are lots of phoney blondes and crappy cases in Blackpool. Further along, prodded by two suited bouncers, a group of giggling young men were cascading out of a pub. They were dressed in plastic, as condoms with a white teat on their heads. And, given a leg-and-wing, there now came hurtling out - knocking them over like skittles - a *clown*. Accrington Stanley yelled at me to stop the car and sprang out. When I caught up, he was shaking the clown. The mask was laughing but the man within was howling.

"Pariss!" he sobbed. "Please come back - I can't stand it. I'm sorry.."

Stanley tore off the laughing mask and revealed a red face which was a picture of ugly misery. His partner Pariss had evidently seen a kind of light and dumped him. One of the condom-heads came over and told him to shut up.

“Twat got us banned, puking on the table. He’s nowt to do with us an’ all. Just tagged on.” Stanley shook him again and demanded to know where he’d found the clown suit. When he didn’t respond I turned the clown over and put his face gently in a puddle. This seemed to shock him out of his drunken grief and he gargled and swore. Stanley was on him like a ferret on a rabbit

“This suit, you knob’ead. Where did you find it? If you duln’t tell me, I’ll give you SUCH an effin slap!”

The real knobheads now began to take an interest in their adopted clown and surrounded us ominously. He was turning out to be a wonderful friend of theirs after all. God, how I hated this glitzy town sometimes, with its vulgar pleasures, fleeting allegiances and moronic drunken fistfights. A punch-up with a load of pretend condoms was the last thing I wanted on a wet Wednesday afternoon, so I smacked one of them on the teat as gently as I could and, standing erect all of my six foot three, and sucking in my gut, told them to back off.

“It’s a police matter, lads. Don’t get involved.”

We half-carried the clown to my car and pushed him in. He said he had fallen out with his girlfriend at lunchtime over how long they should play bingo, she’d gone off in a monk and he had gone off on a bender. On coming out of one pub, he had looked down an entry and seen a suitcase, and inside it, discovered the suit. Being soaking wet, he had gone back into the boozier, changed in the toilets and emerged as a clown.

“Then these lads come in, and they told me to cheer ’em up. They were Leeds fans and they’d lost to bloody Blackpool the night before. Anyway, after a bit, the barman refused to serve us, so we left that dump and went into this pub here....Then I felt sick and couldn’t get to the bogs in time.....and then...”

“Shurrrup!” yelled Stanley. “Where’s my effin suitcase? And me Kiss-Me-Quick ‘at?”

He said he’d left the case in the toilet but couldn’t remember which pub it was. I felt quite embarrassed with my arms round a clown, helping him down the road, but it had to be done. For one thing, he said he felt queasy again and I didn’t want sick in my Montego. Eventually, we stood looking up at a huge pub with twenty bars and the clown reckoned that this was the one. We let him totter off in the direction of the Tower to find his precious Parissssssss and that was the last we saw of him.

As well as twenty bars, there were quite a few toilets but there was no sign of a suitcase in any. The clown had been so drunk, how could he be sure which of thirty pubs on the Mile was the right one? Poor Stanley was getting desperate, so I advised him just to get on a bus and clear out. I would waive the fee, not that I expected him to have any cash anyway. As we sat, me over a Vimto, him over a Coke, in another huge bar feeling pretty low, a bored barman opened the end hatch to walk thirty yards and collect a solitary glass.....and in the corner tucked away I spotted a small, brown, battered suitcase.

“I think your troubles are over, young Stanley. Go and ask at the bar if they’ve found a suitcase in the bogs.”

Within a few seconds a row was breaking out between him and the barmaid. Back he came.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Fat cow’s suspicious. Wuln’t gie it me.”

“Bumchucks.....Why?”

“Asked me what it was doing in the bog. I couldn’t fink of a sensible answer. Can you?”

“Did you leave school before your GSCEs? Just tell her you went in for a dump and left it in

there.”

He got up and went back. Still there was a row and back he came again.

“Now what’s up?”

“I described it perfickt, but she still wuln’t ’ave it. *Why is it empty if I’m ’ere on ’oliday?* Nosy cow.”

“Tell her the truth. Look horrified and say there was a clown suit in it - you’ve got a new job at the Tower Circus...Ask her if she saw anybody in here wearing a clown suit with a red carnation, and she’ll remember him and the Condoms for certain. Then she’ll believe you.”

It worked! He came back with the case, eyes glistening with tears of gratitude. I told him to check, under the table, if the money was still in the bottom. He felt around, his eyes closed with relief and he let out the long breath he’d been holding. He offered me a note under the table and I nearly took it.

“Look, Stanley, you’ve obviously had a pretty hard life so far...How old are you?”

“Nineteen. I got bullied at school for me name. We lived in Burnley, you see. I hated me dad. Me mam were a tart. I left home at fourteen.”

He told me how Big Ollie had been the only one to take an interest in him, finding him sleeping in the doorway of his pizza takeaway in Ormchurch.

“I used to deliver on a moped for ‘im - till he got burnt out - flame-grilled, like - by a rival. Weren’t insured. It sort of turned ‘is ‘ead and ‘e ‘ad it in for everybody. Become a bit of a villain, if you know worra mean. Nice bloke sometimes, but gorra nasty temper.”

“Well, he *is* a Leicester fan.”

I asked him what he wanted me to do for him now.

“Forgerraboutit.”

“But he’s a parasite.”

“So am I.”

He had to get going to meet Ollie and take him his cash. He would have to tell him - and it worried him - that it was short.

“Tell him the candyfloss and balloon men weren’t there cos of the weather. It’s not far off the truth. If you’re in a pickle, you know how to find me.”

God, I should have been a bleeding counsellor, not a dick.

“You won’t shop us, Mr Payne?”

I knew I should have done really, but his eyes were like a dog’s - pleading. He had nowhere else to go and Ollie *was* a City fan - an enduring punishment enough - so in the end I decided to keep quiet.

I drove back and pinched myself at a red light in Cleveleys to make sure I was really awake and had not been dreaming. What a queer couple of hours! Normally, my life was as predictable and as uneventful as the tide. Bloody Golden Mile! None of its lucre had rubbed off on me, though, but - in fact, after the Vimto, the Coke and the petrol I was out of pocket.

My dog Pudsey’s sad eyes seemed to sum my afternoon up, as if he knew I was miserable and why. Drubbed 9-1 at Gigg Lane, and now this...He wagged his tail slowly and fetched his lead. Ours was an uncomplicated and silent relationship, built on trust - not like those lunatic, frantic, hypocritical, dishonest and alcoholic goings-on three miles away.

We went out along the estuary, him snuffling in the grass, me hoping my next case would be more straightforward and rewarding. I did occur to me, as I was picking up one of Pud’s record-

breaking turds, that I'd not asked Stanley *why* and *how* Big Ollie had become a Leicester fan. I had a feeling that I would eventually find out.....

2 FALSE TEETH

There's a song I like by the late Kirsty McColl. It's called From A Distance. I forget how it goes exactly but I like the idea. Do you know the song? Basically it says that from outer space it's a beautiful, peaceful world. She's right. There are blues and greens and greys and golds and white; and of course, on the dark side the cities are lit up like diamonds - or like fireworks.....as if the invisible beings below are celebrating their good fortune to be alive on such a planet.

Blackpool's a bit like that. My first view of it, or at least the first view of it I can remember, was magical. We were up the Tower one autumn night looking down on the prom lights and the glittering trams moving along like fabulous creepie-crawlies.

Ah well. The closer in you get, the more disappointing, of course, the reality is. The police and casualty nurses probably see those invisible beings at their least appealing; but not far behind them are people like me - taxi drivers. Particularly at midnight when the evil alcohol has worked its spells. I sold my fleet of three taxis a couple of years ago and it was the best move I ever made. Even so, I reckon I did miss my true vocation - though Blackpool lads tend not to become priests or philosophers. There's not much call for them, you see, this far north. Taxi-ing would be the next best thing - or so I thought. In my humble opinion, a kind hand or word of welcome - and sound advice - are the first requirements of new arrivals in a strange town and I took a pride in giving plenty. But gradually experience began to harden me, and I emerged from my black taxi chrysalis not quite a paragon of virtue. More than a few knowalls and knobheads were treated to the scenic route, although I did draw the line at taking families and old folks out of their way. The other aspect I still feel a bit guilty about is lost property. No joke - I could have opened a shop with the stuff left in the back.

What would you say were the most frequent objects dropped or forgotten in Blackpool taxis? Brollies? Sticks of rock? Coats? Cowboy hats? Nope. Cigarette lighters. In my glove compartment I used to have a load of them and you might be surprised (or maybe you wouldn't) at how many of my late-late lifts had left their matches or lighters in pools of lager and were craving for a smoke. Was a quid too much to ask for a lighter? Maybe, but they didn't argue. Once, when everywhere had shut for the night, I was hailed down by a drunken punter who didn't need a lift but a light. No kidding, he offered me a fiver for the lighter I took out. Of course, the next morning he'd have been regretting it, but my conscience argued that it would be only one regret amongst many as he sat staring at his egg, sausage and bacon wondering whether it would go down and stay down.

The most surprising things I found on the back seat were - in no particular order - an oxygen cylinder, a used condom, a chess set, a dead goldfish, a tutuBut I must tell you the tale of the porcelain statuette. It was of a startingly beautiful woman in a swirling gown, maybe a Greek or Roman goddess. When I found her I went hot and cold. I knew it would be dishonest to keep her, but to hand her in at the copshop - where she would have gone the way of all decent lost property - was out of the question. Anyway, I called in at the only posh hotel where I'd dropped off folk that night but drew a blank. Then my conscience came up with the ideal solution. My goddess would stand on my sideboard until her grieving owner, finally remembering which taxi firm he or she had used, gave me a call. And she'd be standing there still, had I not picked up a fare at the Pleasure Beach one afternoon and seen a replica of my lovely antique in the chubby hands of a real blurter. Her bloke had won it at a shooting booth for twenty tickets. It certainly had me

fooled. Twat. I gave it to my sister for Christmas. She loved it.

By now you might be wondering about the title of this case, perhaps jumping to the (wrong) conclusion that I once found some dentures on the back seat. But there again, if I hadn't had my wits about me, you'd be right. Taxi drivers like to boast about the celebrities they've had in the back, and I'm no exception. I've had minor actors from the soaps and clapped out singers, ventriloquists and comedians from the pier shows. Perhaps *the* most famous fellow was.....no, no, I can't say - in the unlikely event this gets published one day and he sues the bum off me. All I'll tell you is that he was a northern comic who had as much respect for political correctness as Blackpool has for fine art and culture. When I picked him up at gone two in the morning he was so blind drunk he thought he was in Scarborough. And when he puked up and started howling I did an emergency stop. The stink and the mess...well you don't need me to describe it. He was sobbing something which sounded a bit like *handerchief* without the first syllable. So I gave him mine and he shouted NO. Then the funny word came out even louder and he pointed at his gob - which resembled a red rubber ring we used to play catch with in PE at Juniors. That's when I twigged. His *teeth* had bailed out, and there they were, grinning up at me in a multi-coloured pat of I daren't think what. I picked them up and he wiped them with my hankie and stuck them back in, transforming that gummy cavern into something like a human mouth. He offered me the hankie back but I shook my head.

"Ah'm really sorry" he spluttered, looking down. By his sicky foot was a teddy which somebody had won at the fair and left behind, so he smiled weakly and chuckled.

"Jesus Christ - I had no idea I were so pissed. When the fuck did I eat that?"

Well, if he thought a stale gag and his fame were going to save him, he was wrong. I never did much care for the fat git anyhow.

"Tain't funny. I've got a busy Saturday morning with change-overs. I'll have to spend the rest of the night cleaning up. So the fare just went up by fifty quid."

I thought he'd tell me to do one, but instead, out came his wallet and his fat, kippered fingers held out *five* twenties. He apologized again for the mess and inconvenience and said he'd appreciate my keeping quiet about it - The Sun had been hounding him over something else. It's a good job the seats were leather and I had plenty of rubber mats down (from experience). Half-an-hour after dropping the fat twat off at the swankiest hotel on the north shore, my lovely London taxi was clean and disinfected and I was in bed.

No, the reason for the title is that my second case involved a dentist. I'm sure sharper folk than me have come up with reasons why so many dentists are Aussies, so I won't try. Mine, from Sydney, was called Nummy, which I suppose must have mapped out his career from earliest childhood as some kind of anaesthetist (I needed my spellchecker for that one). I have a theory that your name can have a big impact on your life. Mine, Payne, contributed a great deal to a less than ecstatic time at school. Insults such as Paynebox, Payne-in-the-arse and -neck and just plain PAYNE spat out with irony and contempt eroded my infantile delight with life and filled my perfect childhood sky with dark clouds. And they were just the teachers. This mournful, cantankerous face I have to shave every morning is the product of years of such disdain. I suppose folks with funny noses, long chins and sticky-out ears go through the same process of demoralization, and when someone says of somebody ugly that he or she is not a very nice person, why can't they see that it's the big hook nose that's the cause and not the symbol? How would they feel if *they*'d been called Big Nose, Chinny, Dumbo or Big Ears their whole life

long? Wouldn't they feel a bit disinclined to love their fellow man? A few millimetres shorter or longer, a slightly different angle or a bit rounder or wider or narrower would have produced - hey presto! - not that miserable old misanthrope in the corner, but the life and soul of the party, the glamorous individual everybody wanted to be friends with. Take my ex-mother-in-law as a case in point. Had she not looked like a cross between a goat, a camel and a dinosaur, what a wonderful person she might have turned out to be. And if I'd have been called Bond, Burton or Blessed then this would not now be my permanent expression - which only creases when I watch old Norman Wisdom films. Me trying to smile is like Wayne Rooney trying not to look like two buttocks. Never mind. Pudsey doesn't know my name is peculiar, and he loves me. And it could have been worse. I could have been called Belcher or Crapper. The nicest thing a woman ever said to me was that I reminded her of the Wooky in Star Wars. She was a couple of bob short of the fare so I let her off. Flatterer. I told you, beneath this forbidding exterior I'm a real soft touch. And it gets me in trouble. One evening I was driving along the promenade when in my headlights I saw a bloke in Y-fronts assaulting a nun. I leapt out to pull him off her and was instantly set on by ten other nuns - one with a moustache and sideburns.

"Keep out of it pal." she yelled in a Glaswegian accent. "Mind yer own focking business!"

It was Scottie week and this was a stag-do. The groom had torn off his wimple and habit and set on the best man after he'd admitted previously shagging the bride. I always wondered whether the wedding went ahead. When I told Ray and Denis down at the Legion that a nun had blacked my eye they laughed for an hour. That was the very last time I went out in Scottie week.

Any-old-how, a few days after my first case the phone rang.

"Can you help me? I think my wife is having an affair with the dentist."

(Don't beat about the bush, pal.)

"I'd like to hire you to find out, Mr Payne."

"Why don't you just ask her, Sir? It'd be far cheaper."

Was he sniffing down the other end? I deduced he was too nice or too shy to ask her, so I agreed to take the case - £250 plus expenses. I told him I'd need a recent photo and he said he'd look one out for me. His wife was shopping and he had to take care of the dog, so he invited me to come over right away to Thornton, as she wouldn't be back till the afternoon.

A quarter of an hour later I pulled up in my Montego. He lived in a house not far short of a mansion and I instantly regretted selling my services so cheap. Tall trees fronted the p(a)lace and the lawns and borders were obviously professionally looked after. The top of the range Landrover in the drive told me *retired businessman*, the kind attractive to younger women who enjoyed spending what had been laboriously earned, and who closed their eyes at night on the pillow, laid back and thought of their treats and luxuries.

Unlike the garden, Mr Capstick had rather gone to seed. When he sat down in his armchair the paunch he practised holding in heaved forward. There was a younger version of him dressed smart with more hair, with less grey in it, smiling at me from the wall, next to a bride, one of the prettiest women I'd ever laid eyes on. I stood up and went to have a closer look. She had a thin, straight nose, clever, grey eyes and dark brown hair. Stunning. When I turned round he held out a recent passport size snap and I saw that, if anything, she now looked even prettier. I wondered how many thousands were spent on beauty therapy to keep her like that.

"She is a lovely woman, Mr Capstick."

"Irenya. Too lovely for her own good...."

"Married how long?"

“Nine years this October.”

Nine years! She had got younger - and in the process aged him! I asked him how they had met, and when he was reluctant to tell me, I insisted he did (not because it was kernel to the case but because I was nosy.) It turned out that she'd been a croupier on board a cruise liner and they'd hit it off straight away. Far be it from me to comment on possible reasons why.

“What did you do for a living, Mr Capstick?”

He was into fish and chips. Benny Fisheries on the front - I remembered it.

“You ran that?”

“Aye, and one in Lytham. Plus there were a few other pies I had my fingers in.”

Had he winked? Out of all the pennies earned on the Mile, how many were untarnished? I looked at his chewed up nails and winced at the thought of them in pies, wondering how wholesome his pies had been. No doubt the odd pig's foreskin had found its way in. And now there was maybe a foreign one in his wife's hairy pie.

“Why do you suspect her, Mr Capstick?”

He wrung his hands and got to his feet, very agitated. He told me about the dreamy, faraway look that had been coming into her eyes just recently, even when she was watching her favourite soap opera.

“But why do you suspect a dentist?”

“Because of all these fillings she's been having.”

“What's the name of the practice?”

“Nummy.”

“Nummy? He's my dentist. You can't suspect him! He must be near retirement - - - no slight intended.”

(Nummy was as straight as a dye. The first time he'd looked into my mouth he'd said *Bladdy hell, Mr Payne. What have you been doing to yer bladdy teeth? Opening beer bottles with 'em?* I explained that a gap between the front two was a family trait - my dad had had one too. I asked him if there was anything could be done and he'd laughed. *You gonna be a newsreader, Mr Payne? No? Well, why bother then? I could cap 'em for you, but do you really wanna look like Bags bladdy Banny?* So I left it at that)

Capstick had worked himself up into a lather

“My wife's teeth were fine until the new bloke came. *Pallet.*”

(You see what I mean about names?)

“Under Nummy, never a problem - just a polish. Now she's having filling after filling. What will she do when she runs out of teeth?”

“And you reckon something else is going on besides fillings?”...(Had I blushed?)

I asked him as solemnly as a vicar if we could discuss a rather personal matter.

“Is your....married life....okay? Any problems?”

At that point he got very angry and said he wanted to hire a detective not a sex-therapist. So I drew my own conclusions. I asked him to tell me the date and time of her next appointment, and five minutes later, very relieved, I was on my way.

*

I do my best thinking when I take Pudsey for a walk. It's quiet where we go by the estuary. Slowly, a plan - a daring plan - began to take shape. To make it work I needed an afternoon appointment close to Mrs Capstick's in seven days time. Nummy was always in demand because

he was so humorous, but it might be possible to get in with Barbara, his hygienist, who had breath like Pudsey's and looked as if she enjoyed nothing better than biting the heads off small reptiles. Had she been born pretty, she might have been jolly. I shouted Pudsey to come from the bushes and we headed for home.

"I need an appointment on the 17th for a polish. I'm going abroad the day after so I want to look my best."

"I'll just have a look f-o-o-o-o-r y-o-o-o-o-u."

I closed my eyes and crossed my fingers. The silence went on so long that I was sure I'd been cut off, but at last the growly, Larry the Lamb voice of the receptionist was back. She was offering me three morning times.

"Have you nothing in the afternoon, Love, say around two? I'm quite busy in the morning."

"I have a space at three twenty?"

Bumchucks. I dithered a while but in the end I took it. I would think of a good reason to be there early. Mrs Capstick's appointment was for two twenty.

The days crept by. The phone hardly rang apart from cold-callers and one old biddy who wanted me to find her cat for twenty quid. She was sure he was in a cage at the Chinese takeaway round the corner and she wanted me to go and ask. I'll tell you about that escapade in the next chapter.....

Then, all of a sudden, the morning of the seventeenth dawned, and all those ages of waiting and waiting felt like no time at all. I rehearsed what I would say and do until I'd convinced myself that my bold plan would work. I rolled up just short of two and parked next to Nummy's old Jag. Straightway, I noticed a flash Porsche in petrol blue with the registration PAL 1. How impressed was I? I looked up at the windows of the building, a large Victorian villa, the sort much loved by solicitors and dentists, wondering where Pallet practised and how much of what he did was dental work. I walked into reception and gave my name.

"Mr Payne?" said the little lamb behind the counter."But your appointment isn't until three tw-e-e-nty."

"Are you sure? I thought two twenty."

She shook her blonde curls and I tried to look disappointed - which isn't hard. Did she mind, I asked, if I waited there. I explained that I'd been dropped off by a mate because my car was in for MOT, and so I was stranded. She smiled a lovely smile and invited me to take a seat. I picked up a well-thumbed RSPB magazine and settled down to wait. Opposite me was a very fat man. Even his eyelids were obese, like two foreskins, making his peepers into narrow slits. At two ten we heard the click of high heels and in she breezed and in a low whisper announced who she was. It startled me to realize she was a foreigner. It had not occurred to me to ask Capstick and he had not bothered to tell me. Of course, her name - *Irenya*. Was she Polish? Czech? Romanian? The man opposite gawped at her - his mouth fell open - as she crossed the carpet to sit down two seats away from me. She took longer than necessary to cross her perfect, bronzed legs and began jiggling her long red shoe up and down. I reckon large feet on a woman can be incredibly sexy....though they hadn't done much for my mother-in-law. The fat man's eyes had opened so wide they looked ready to pop out and fall in his lap. Mine I kept glued to an article about great bustards, as if I was too absorbed in it to notice the fabulous bird a yard away on my right - whose perfume was surely the very perfume of heaven, a heady scent of lemon, apple and honey. My scalp and backbone were tingling as if in mild electric shock but I was determined not to

look at her. Now, I reckon there's one thing beautiful people cannot stand, or understand. And that thing is - Being Ignored. Out of the edge of my eye I noticed her face turning increasingly towards me. Her foot increased its jiggling speed. I was dying to look round but kept resisting. Even though I was wearing my specs there was a remote chance that she might recognize me if she'd seen my fly posters. Jesus, now she was leaning towards me and clearing her throat.

"Excuse me, Sir...Please to pass me magaz-y-ine...Home and Garden."

I leant forward and without turning my head and without speaking I held it out for her to take.

"Thank you" she purred, still staring at me, as if to say what the eff is wrong with you, you moron? You a bum-bandit? I'm sure the man opposite shook his head. I shifted my backside left and leant away from her. The silence and tension in the room were almost unbearable and I was starting to sweat. Why didn't the phone ring or a new person arrive? The great bustard was looking at me with a beady eye and saying - what a twat *you* are, and I had to stifle a silly giggle. My neighbour cleared her throat and when the phone did ring, I jumped. That's when I looked at her. My God - she was utterly sensational, and when her puzzlement turned into a broad smile I realized my eyes had told her all she wanted to know. Now the receptionist was speaking

"Mrs Capstick...Mr Pallet will see you now. Upstairs and third door on the left."

"Thank you. I know z-y-is" she said.

Up she flounced and she went to climb the staircase behind me. I followed her progress in the greedy eyes of Fatso. I gave it five minutes and then sent Ray the text. The reception phone rang again and the girl picked up.

"Mr Nummy will see you now, Mr Oliphant."

Oliphant? Big Ollie? I nearly fell off my chair as he struggled to his feet and lumbered to the foot of the stairs, glancing at me again.

"Aven't I seen you somewhere?" he asked.

"Don't think so, pal. I'd have remembered."

"Ne'er mind. It'll cum to meh. It al'ays does."

If I'd closed my eyes it could have been Gary Lineker talking! The stairs, which had so silently and willingly transported Irenya, began to groan and complain as he climbed them, struggling for his breath. In came Ray from my car and placed his bulk between me and the girl, causing a total eclipse of her. Ray could do a great impression of a moron having practised hard all his life.

"Is this a dentist? It doesn't say so outside" he blathered.

"I think it does, Sir. Nummy and Pallet?"

"Nummy? Funny name. This used to be a doctor's when I were a lad, you know."

"Really? How intere-e-e-sting. Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I just thought I'd pop in for a chat. For old times sake. So this is a dentists' practice these days?..."

"It is indeed, Sir."

"Well, I reckon if they're still practising, I'll wait till they've got the hang of it good and proper, like, before I make an appointment. I've only got 32 teeth....."

"Excuse me?"

While she was being distracted by this drivel, I slipped upstairs. It was easy to make a mistake and open the wrong door - the third one on the left.....

"Oh! I'm very sorry. I was looking for the toilet!"

I was holding my mobile and the three of them were so shocked it didn't seem to register with them that they had been snapped. It was nice grouping. Mrs C was recumbent in the dentist's chair as far back as it would go, in the nuddy from the waist down. The dental nurse was wearing

only a cap and about to do something obscene with a buzzing object which reminded me of my vacuum flask. Pallet had the looks of a Hollywood star and when he turned it didn't take me long to spot the main cause of his patient's dreamy, faraway look - as described to me by her old man. The dentist shook off his paralysis and started menacingly towards me, promptly falling flat on his face because he'd forgotten his trousers were round his ankles. I closed the door on that enchanting tableau and left.

"Well done Ray. Here's your twenty. I'll catch up with you later in the Legion for a pint of Vimto."

"How did you like my little speech, Dave?"

"Absolutely inspired, Ray. Shakespeare would have died of envy."

Off he toddled, ever decreasing in size until he turned the far corner and punched the air in a final salute of victory. I sat in the car looking at the photo with mixed feelings - delight that my plan had worked and that I had the proof - sadness when I thought of Capstick's reaction. I tried to deaden my sympathy with the thought that his fish and chips were the greasiest on the Mile, *so serve him right* - but it didn't really work. Rain was threatening and I remembered that one of my wiper blades had come off, so I went to start the car, but stopped. The adulterous wife had just come out and was hurrying to her MG when she spotted me. Over she came, opened the passenger door and plonked herself down on the seat. For a second I thought she was going to land me one - she was staring so angrily. Then she began to cry. Now, when I see somebody cry it makes me cry too - I can't help it. Tears were soon running down my cheeks. After a while she stopped and just sat there staring without hope at the rain trickling miserably down the windscreen. After a sob or two she spoke.

"I remember now - I see your face on lamppost near Morrison's. You are private investigator."

"I'm sorry. Bursting in was the only way I could think of."

"My husband Trevor - he hire you to spy on me. But you do not know truth. Is tyrant. Is possessive man. I am possession not person. He will divorce me now and I must return to Ukraine. Coarse bread and beetroot for ever.....No!"

She began to sniffle again. What could I say?

"Irenya...Can I call you Irenya? Is Trevor not, you know - oh God this is hard for me - is he not doing his job between the sheets?"

She shook her head. "Is not very good for two years now...too soft....before was fine... nearly as good as dentist....but is very stubborn...will not go to doctor. Is ashamed, I think."

That's when I thought of Denis's penis pump. One night at the Legion he had had one too many and had told us how he'd been a bit floppy for a while, and so had answered an advert in The Star for a penis pump. When it had come, the picture had told him to put his John Thomas through the hole in the rubber base into the plastic cylinder and squeeze out the air through the attached tube by pressing the little rubber ball at the end. How I managed to keep a straight face, God knows. The second picture, he said, showed a JT doubled in size, but no matter how long Denis squeezed, his own appendage stubbornly resisted the vacuum and just flopped there, smiling at him. In the end he had got so mad he had hurled it at the wall. Ray asked him in all innocence whether he'd taken his knob out first - and that's when I started to laugh. When we had all calmed down and dried our eyes, he said it was the best thing he'd ever sent for - because, as he was looking in the box it had come in for the invoice - so he could sue the supplier - he found a plastic envelope bearing the words **Free Gift**. Inside was a small rubber ring with a tickler attached. As soon as he slid it down to the base of his dick, a magical transformation

began to take place. Please use your imagination. Weeks later, the rubber ring had eventually split after overuse, but Denis reasoned that if a rubber ring would work so would elastic bands. And now I explained to Irenya what Trevor ought to try. As I told her as delicately as I could what he should do, she seemed to revive and even smiled through her tears. No kidding, at that very instant the sun came out. The front door of the surgery opened and out stormed Pallet. He reversed the Porsche straight into the low wall and jumped out to look, gesticulating and shouting like John Cleese - cursing the rain, cursing the heavens and cursing the wall. Not made for public consumption, his expression was ugly and ridiculous, and Irenya began to laugh until more tears - tears of something like joy - were running down her cheeks.

“He’s a twat, Irenya. Can’t you see that? Know what a twat is?”

She nodded and said “I am twat too. Trevor was very kind man, but is now bitter, *very* angry. I would love to tell him about rubber band - but how to? Out of blue?”

Pallet jumped into his car and drove away with a roar. I had a feeling Nummy and Pallet would soon be reverting to Nummy.

“Pallet thought you took photograph.....To show Trevor?”

The rain came again, heavier, beating on the roof and dancing on the tarmac. The light went. I suddenly felt so sorry for this beautiful but very vulnerable person. Perhaps being ugly was preferable after all - life was less exhilarating but a lot less complicated.

“I give you hundred, two hundred, any hundred if you promise to erase photo. Please! I love Trevor. Tell him I am good girl. Please.....”

What would you have done? I took out my mobile and we watched the dirty picture turn to snow and vanish. She laughed. She cried.

“I don’t want your hundred quid, Irenya. Just be a good girl from now. Tell Trevor you were in the waiting room and found the elastic band idea in an article in a celeb magazine. I’ll tell him there’s no evidence of an affair.”

She came close and I put my arm around her. She was delicious.

“You are good man. A very good man. Thank you.”

“Just get new dentist - a new dentist. Like I’m going to have to.”

I phoned Capstick and assured him his wife was innocent. It felt great to receive my first cheque - for £295 - a couple of days later.

*

“You know, lads, I had a peculiar thought last night. You know how we judge folk by how they look - *Oh, he looks a nice person.....Doesn’t she have a lovely smile?...Well, say we could expose everybody’s brain and get rid of the face, they’d all look the same. Ugly. And then we’d have to judge everybody by what they thought and said and did. How else could you do it? Take her over there - her by the bar - she looks really nice but I’ve heard she can be a real nasty piece of work. Drink up....”*

“You’ve made a fair point there, Dave,” said Denis. “Take Ray here. He looks quite dim - shows how appearances can deceive. And if some scumbag from Fleetwood started talking like the Duke of Edinburgh rather than - err - a scumbag from Fleetwood, then you’d form a different opinion of ‘em.”

“And who would vote for anybody who sounded soft in the head?” commented Ray. “Or somebody who did a party political in overalls? Could you imagine Prince Philip in overalls?”

“I expect he wears overalls when he services his jeep,” said Denis.

Ray thought this over. “I wonder if the queen ever goes round in her scruff - in old cardies and stuff. And does she ever talk more like...*normal*.....it must be hard to talk like she’s doing the queen’s speech all the while.”

“I bet she gives Philip a mouthful if he gets engine oil on the settee.”

“What? Effs and blinds?”

I could stand it no longer.

“HONEST! Here’s me trying to make a serious point about how you can’t trust nice appearances, and you two are on about the queen bollocking Prince Philip for making a mess. Why, oh why, do I bother? Let’s talk about football...”

They fell silent and I could tell Ray was thinking again. Those two dimples appear on his brow when he does and he feels his chin.

“You know, if she wasn’t wearing posh clothes, and all you could see was a brain, then you wouldn’t know which person the queen was either. How could you tell?”

“Easy” said Denis. She’d be the one with the crown on. She’s not allowed to take it off - not even in bed.”

“Rubbish! She wouldn’t wear it in the shower.”

“RIGHT, that’s it. I’m off.”

I finished my pop, called in for a bag of chips on the way home and gave half to Pudsey.

*

One morning in early summer I was out walking Pudsey when who should come jogging down the estuary path but Trevor Capstick! The paunch was virtually gone and he looked - well - terrific, rosy cheeked and bright eyed. He spotted me in the clearing where I was looking for Pudsey and came through. He grabbed my hand and smiled.

“You’re looking really fit, Mr Capstick.” said I.

“Never better! I’ve had a new lease of life. As soon as I knew Irenya wasn’t...you know...I pulled myself together. Best three hundred quid I ever spent. Cheers!”

I couldn’t ask him about the laggy bands, of course, but my forensic powers of deduction told me they had done the trick. He clapped me on the back and jogged away into the distance, a tinier and tinier figure, until he was invisible, running away with his particular version of the truth, a version that suited him fine.....

Now, where was that great, stupid dog?

“Pudsey! Here boy!”

Out he came out from the bushes and reeds with a big stick in his jaws, wagging his tail in joy and beating the grasses with it. I knelt down and took the stick.

“Puds” I whispered. “You don’t know how lucky you are to be a dog.”

He very rarely barks, does Puds, but now he did, as if to say he couldn’t agree more.

And that would have been the end of it, but for a chance encounter at the supermarket some weeks later throwing all into confusion. I was in the quick checkout queue about ten from the front when a voice attracted my attention, a voice I knew, talking in a broad Cockney accent. It

was Irenya. Or was it a replica - like my cheap statuette? She paid and flounced away, tossing her hair back, knowing she was the star of the show. Then she stopped, turned and looked at me from a distance. Slowly a smile lit up her face....and she waved, gave me an outrageous wink and disappeared.

3 PUSS, PUSS!

Denis is an interesting bloke. I caught him red-handed once, reading The Guardian. He actually started A-Levels then decided he didn't want to stay on. I'm not saying I'm as academic as him, but in the direction our lives went - I'll tell you more later - we're a bit similar. For one thing, like me, he went into the taxi business. Everything was fine in the early days, but gradually, in the nineties, like a lot of things round here, manners and decency went into decline. Being on the weedy side, he couldn't handle the aggression and violence very well, so he enrolled at a gym to do weight training. He bought that shite you have to drink to put on muscle and within six months he looked like a miniature Atlas. He drove round in tight t-shirts and short sleeves so the knobheads could see his biceps and pecs, and it did the trick. But, as with most things, it's the unexpected which catches you out, and when he was badly beaten up by a gangly bird dressed up like a flowerpot man - "*She had bloody knuckles like needles, Dave*" - he decided to call it a day. Experience has scarred him and it didn't help when he sawed his finger clean off. Even so, it didn't prevent him pursuing his second career - long-distance lorry driver. There's one thing however that is guaranteed to put him in a monk for days - not hen parties, not chain saws, not Preston North End winning when Blackpool lose, but Belgium. He was down the Legion grumbling into his shandy last night because he had to go to Cologne and could not avoid Belgium.

"Crappest country in the EU," he moaned. "The E40 - main motorway - well Ray's drive has a better surface. They spend sod all on infrastructure. Drive like prats - make the Eye-Ties look like angels....Fuck knows why they have indicators on their cars....Lane discipline? Never heard of it. And last time I went into Brussels by mistake. Ever been? Not one effing road sign - I'm not joking - not one road sign anywhere to help you get out....As if it never occurred to 'em that anybody would ever want to leave....Two hours driving round and round....Got out by sheer luck.....What the F are you staring at me like a moron for, Ray?"

"What's infrastructure?"

"God help us."

Poor Denis. His main crop of early spuds had all got blight into the bargain, and he was in such a bad mood, I decided to cheer him up with the story of my third case.

I'm not a cat person. Apparently, the reason they jump up on cat-haters' laps is because cat-haters *don't* look at them. No kidding. Cats hate to be stared at, though not one, as far as I know, has ever said so. If the moral of the last case is that you never can be sure of the truth, then the moral of this one might be - if you hate that cat, and you don't want the damned thing all over you, look away now. Why would anybody want to steal a chuffing cat? They're all false affection. Pudsey is loyal, honest and loving. If he could talk, he'd never tell a lie. We're best pals. How can you be best pals with a cat?

Mrs Sharkey was at her wits' end over her Colin - (Couldn't she think of a better name? Denis called his ginger cat Swoop - there used to be a wild bird food called Swoop. He'd scatter it on the lawn, chuck the cat out and wait. Cruel streak has Denis. Sawing his finger off, Belgium and

being put in casualty by a flowerpot bird have conspired to send him a bit funny.)

Did I do special rates for pensioners? had asked this old lady over the phone.

“Only my sister Mildred saw your advert in a tram shelter and took your number. It said special rate for...Chavs? She said you had a nice teddy bear face...”

Here we go again, I thought.

“I’m not a Chav, whatever one of them is, but I am eighty-one though. Do I qualify?”

“What do you want doing, Love?”

Her cat, Colin, had been kidnapped, she said. It was the Chinese takeaway two streets away.

“Everybody says so....Next to the beauty parlour. . My neighbour’s Fanny went off last month. She told the police it were the Chinkie that had her. But they just laughed.”

“Hold on...I’m going to sneeze...Excuse me a sec.”

I covered the receiver and got a good snigger out of my system.

“And when did your Colin go off, Love?”

“Last Thursday. He always comes in for his cod - a van delivers from Fleetwood on Thursdays - but he never came home. Oh dear....”

She sniffled for a bit and a tear came into my eye. I asked her where she lived and went round.

*

Her lawn was a jungle. Her pots under the window were cracked and I reckoned that what had once grown there - now they were brown, straggly stems - had been planted when Leicester had last been in the Premiership. Other houses in the terrace had smart white plastic doors but this one was a faded, flaky green effort with two tulip glass panes for eyes and a grim letter box for a mouth. When she opened the door, I was startled that it resembled her. She wore thick lens glasses and looked as if she had last smiled when those flowers went in. A grey cat was nuzzling her ankle and she bent down painfully to pick it up. She had an uncanny resemblance to Michael Foot.

“Maisie’s missing Colin terrible,” she said. “Please come in.”

“Hold on, Mrs Sharkey. You should ask for ID. Here’s mine.”

She took it and did a strange face, as if to say she couldn’t care less.

“Well, if you’re planning to rob me, you’ll be disappointed. Nowt here but old photos and old clothes...Come through.”

In her living room - the room that time forgot - I asked her if she had a photo of Colin. She didn’t.

“Pity,” I said “I could have blown it up on my printer and tied copies to lampposts like folk do - you know - *Have you seen Tiddles? Reward.*”

She shook her head. “No point. People are always doing that round here. The Chinks have got ’em all. Colin’s in a cage waiting his turn. He might have been in rice and noodles already...Oh dear.” She blew her nose.

“Mrs Sharkey...It’s an urban myth. Cat don’t taste like chicken. More like rabbit.”

“There you are, you see! If cats don’t get eaten, how do you know what they taste like?”

She had me there. I asked her to describe Colin. It wasn’t much to go on. He was black with white feet – only like a million others. The only odd thing was his mouth. One of his teeth had fallen out on the right side, making him look like he was smiling.

“He looks a bit like that man on tellyoh, what’s his name? Does a chat show, you know...Always smiling....”

“Michael Parkinson?”

“No.....little man.“

“Bill Oddie?“

“NO!!.....Used to be a gardener.....Cleared up all the mess....You know.. ”

“Alan Titchmarsh?“

“That’s him!“

“Your cat looks like Alan Titchmarsh?“

I closed my eyes and wished myself away.

“Just call in at the Chinese and ask. It’d put our minds at rest...Wouldn’t it Maisie?“

She meowed.

“And Robert’s. Wouldn’t it Robert?“

Robert was a budgie. And of course, as soon as she mentioned him, he chirruped and fluttered at the bars of his cage. As fruity as a nut cake. She told me, when she brought me a jittery cup of tea, that she had been a widow nearly ten years. The smiling children and grandchildren in her photos had grown up and grown indifferent. It was a house full of memories to sit and cry over. The pictures, the furniture, the carpets, the curtains were silent memorials of happier times; the chairs, empty now, had been made shiny by wriggling bottoms; the carpets had been worn away by skipping feet and the curtains tugged open by tiny hands to peek through. The still rooms had been noisy with cries, giggles, reprimands and sobs. God, how many folk were living paltry lives with only their pets to talk to? Then I thought of me and Puds and felt even more depressed.

It was only two p.m. Next door to Natalie’s Natty Nails, the takeaway was tight shut. I’m a big bloke at six foot three and Chinamen are tiny, aren’t they? The proprietor would be annoyed, but he’d soon get over it. I rang the bell and kept ringing it till there were signs of life. Suddenly, looking down at me through the glass door was the most enormous Chinaman in the world.

“What you want? Open seven. You come back then please, mate.“

“I’m a reporter - Blackpool Gazette. We’ve had a petition from local cat owners - reckon you’re stealing cats to cook. Listen, there’s not a racist bone in my body, I do assure you - but I’ve got to do my job. Any comment?“

Instead of opening the door and tearing my head off, after five seconds his impassive face erupted in laughter.

“Not that old clap again! You come in!“

He showed me the back yard, his kitchen, the walk-in fridge (brrrr) and even his upstairs. Not a moggy in sight.

“You plint story, mate. I give you our twenty quid takeaway deal. Okay?“

“No need, pal. I’m into Indian food anyway.“

“There’s Indian place in Bispham stealing cat. You ever go there?“

He looked dead serious, then laughed again.

“You should see face! You English make me laugh! You all obese, you eat lubbish! Chip, hamburger, flied egg and bacon - all clap! And you accuse foreigner of killing cat! I HATE fligging cat - tastes like labbit - yuk. You tell local here is NO CAT ZONE - okay mate?“

Just for the (pretend) record, I asked him if he had any idea why so many cats had gone missing on the estate. He stroked his chin and opened his tiny eyes wider.

“Funny you ask.....Mrs Halfpenny. I call her that because she only half there, Mrs Penny. Mad lady.“

He told me she called in now and then to ask if he had any scraps, left-overs, anything too old to

sell. He felt sorry for her because she looked so bad-off and had started to save her fatty bits. It saved him the trouble of disposing of it.

“I only charge her quid - or nothing.”

“So why mention her?”

“Because she was at Richardson’s - butcher four doors down - asking him same thing. Velly thin lady.....so I think she has menagerie to feed.”

My heart leapt. A genuine lead! I asked him where she lived and he promised to ask her and phone me. I gave him my card and he insisted on stuffing his twenty pound voucher in my top pocket. I wasn’t going to argue. He looked past me as he showed me out.

“Old Montego your car? How much you want?”

“Not for sale, pal. At any price.”

I called Mrs Sharkey to assure her that Colin had definitely not ended up in a spring roll and she was relieved. I asked her to give me a few days - I was going to crack the case. I was putting the phone down but she was saying something. She told me that Colin would definitely answer to his name.

As I was out walking Pudsey a bit later, I saw a brown cat on a wall and thought I’d put the theory to the test. I shouted “Colin!” And of course, it stared at me as if I was crazy, and then did one. I looked round and the new woman in the neighbourhood with the Pekinese I quite fancied was staring at me too. (I fancied the woman, not the Pekinese. Can’t stick ‘em.)

Just hold it a sec.....I meant to tell you, my sister Sue’s not very lucky with pets. For years she lived with her husband Norman in one of two post war semis which resemble fat women with those bay windows. She had a white cat which she’d imaginatively called Snowy, and one day, returning from the town, she’d spotted the beast in the front window of her neighbour’s house, a woman she didn’t particularly get on with. Anyway, she knocked the door and asked her if she could have Snowy. The neighbour had looked at her gone out and shaken her head. *Whatever did she mean? Blanche was her cat!* That bloody white fraud had been living in two houses all along. No wonder it was the size of a small horse. In the end they just shared her, but it ran off anyway. They’re just amoral opportunists are cats. Sue and her neighbour became friendlier and when she went on holiday, she asked Sue if she’d mind looking after her youngest’s hamster. By this time Sue had got another cat - a vicious thing that attacked your arm if you let it flop over the side of the settee. I’ve waved it about on my forearm many a time but it wouldn’t let go. Bloody thing. Sue was worried about the hamster and kept it in a bedroom upstairs out of the way of the cat. Well you can probably half-guess what happened. No, the cat didn’t eat it, just snook in and scared the hamster enough to give it heart failure. Sue found it staring at the ceiling one afternoon praying with its little paws together, stiff as a pencil. I’m not telling you one word of a lie, she did no more than put it in an envelope and went round every pet shop within miles looking for an identical hamster, and eventually found one in St Annes. When her neighbour returned she was none the wiser. You couldn’t do that with a dog. Nor a bloody cat.

Any-odd-how, I’d anticipated that if Mr Cheung was right about a menagerie, then Mrs Penny’s house might be a bit whiffy, so I’d brought some Vick along to stick in my nostrils. I pulled up outside the ramshackle old house I’d been given directions to and opened the jar of Vick. I told Pudsey to wait in the front seat and he didn’t argue. It was a very forbidding place, the kind that features on horror films with a permanent thunderstorm over the roof. But the Fylde sky was clear and the westerly which blows permanently from the Irish sea was having a day off. The

woman who came to the door looked a bit like the bad witch from The Wizard Of Oz. And behind her in the hall were cats - scores of them. The Vick worked a bit, but the stink of cat came rushing out like a Force 10 gale. She examined my fake ID while I told her that I was from the Council Tax department.

“You’re from the council? What do you want?”

“Everybody’s getting a call round here. Some residents have got together and complained their banding is too high - they should be a C not a D. So I might be able to do you a bit of good - but I need to look round. Like cats do you?”

I had clipboard and was wearing a crumpled, sat-around-in, municipal suit but she was a wise old bird.

“Look around? Not a chance.” she said. “There was a story in the Gazette about crooks with false credentials robbing old folk. *And* you’ve got trainers on.”

Rumbled. Bumchucks.

“Alright!” I said as she was closing the door. “How would like it if one of your cats went missing?!”

“I’d hate it. Are you threatening to take one with you?”

“No!.....Well, Mrs Sharkey’s cat - Colin - from Mill St has gone missing. It’s not that far away from here. He might be one of these. She’s at her wits’ end. Put yourself in her shoes.”

“What you on about? You’ve come round here for a cat?”

There were cats of every description, some with heads through the stair spindles, others milling about, some rolling around fighting.....It looked a hopeless task.

“Colin!” I shouted, and lots of them looked at me. Another blow against cat intelligence. I tried another tack.

“Mrs Penny, Colin disappeared just over a week ago. I’m not saying you catnapped him, but might he have got wind of a.....a cat paradise and just turned up on your doorstep?”

“You reckon they talk to each other?”

I didn’t know how to answer this.

“They do, you know!” she said. “And they’re all welcome.”

I was about to give in and go when I noticed one black cat struggling to get through the others. He had white socks and a lop-sided gob. But he looked nothing like Alan Titchmarsh.

“Him, for example. Laughing boy. When did he turn up, Mrs Penny? *Colin? Here boy...*”

She looked down. She had to admit he was new. I thought of Sue’s hamster and concluded that this was as close to Colin as I was likely to get. I pulled the most earnest face I could.

“Right, Mrs Penny - here’s the deal.....Cat owners are up in arms on the estate and blaming the takeaway, where you get your offcuts. It’s not fair to Mr Cheung. I take Colin back home and keep quiet about these others. Alright?”

She looked as if she would refuse until I produced the voucher for twenty quid. It would keep them in bits and bobs for ages.

*

Colin hated the cardboard box into which I’d stuffed him, howling all the way home in the car, but unlike that fat comic, he did not disgrace himself. Pudsey was more intrigued than provoked by the noise. I was waiting at the lights when it struck me that the green Meriva behind me had been parked up in Mrs Penny’s road. The rotund face in the driver’s seat looked very familiar. I sped away at the lights and read the number plate. The right way round it read FOX 3S. Could it

be Big Ollie? Yes it was. Big Ollie was following me. At the next junction I slowed right down and as amber went to red, I told Puds to hold tight and shot across, leaving Ollie stranded. Fat git. Just to make absolutely sure I'd lost him, I drove around for a bit, taking the howling Colin on the scenic route.

"Mrs Sharkey? Open up - it's me - David Payne. Got a little surprise for you."

As the door opened, I noticed drips appearing in one corner of the box and falling on my left trainer. Bumchucks. But so what? Mrs S's face was a delight to see when Colin popped his ugly little head out through the opening. She cried for joy.

"Colin! Where have you been? Come and see Maisie and Robert!"

We left the soggy box at the door and went into the lounge. Over a cuppa and a biscuit the lovely old lady began to weep again.

"I'm s-sorry, Mr Payne, but I'm a bit short this week. Everything's getting so dear. Can I pay you in kind?"

I nearly choked on my bicky, and immediately thought of Denis's laggy bands. I'd have needed an inner tube. She disappeared and came back with a pair of shiny black shoes - the sort we used to call beetle crushers.

"They're almost new. I've been looking at your feet. I reckon they'll fit."

I removed a damp trainer and, what do you know, it fitted like a glove. Bert, her husband, she explained had only worn them once before he died.

"He went down the club and lost his balance on the way home - fell under a lorry. A real pity....He never did get the wear out of them."

I gulped. Dead man's shoes. Black. A bad omen? I was thinking of a way out but I'd already said how comfy they were.

"Mmm, wait a minute Mrs S - they *are* starting to pinch a bit. Couldn't they go to the charity shop?"

"I hadn't the heart. And how could I throw them away? Bert loved Colin. If he were here, he'd want you to have 'em."

Her eyes were all self-pity, like Pudsey's when I didn't feel like taking him for a walk. So I thanked her. When she came back with a cardigan with buttons like little brown turds, I pushed out my gut as far as it would go.

"No way I'll get mysen into that, Mrs S."

"Would you like to try some trousers on? Only, his jacket's got tyre marks on it."

It was a relief to get away.

At some point I must have given her my card, because a fortnight or so later an envelope arrived. It contained a scruffy tenner, five pound coins, a fifty pence and a note which read *Please accept - (I have knocked off £4.50 for the shoes.) Poor Colin passed away not long after he came back. He caught something. But he was happy to be with his friends.*

I blubbed like a kid. The next day I sent her a crisp twenty and told her to buy Robert and Maisie a nice treat.

4 How To Make A Prat Of Yourself When You're Really Trying Not To

If there's a moral to this tale, it might be - *Careful how you choose your friends - and - Just because they look dead stupid, don't assume they are.*

Denis picked up his lager and said “Well Dave, I can’t really see the point of this private-eyeing. What a fizzer! Cheer up, for God’s sake! You look as if you’ve lost a pound and found a penny. And stop drinking that muck and get yoursen a proper pint.”

“Denis is right,” said Ray. “You’re too soft to make a go of snooping. You’re losing money. You want to try and find yoursen a good woman rather than lost suitcases and cats!”

“Past it, me old pal.” I muttered. “The last ‘un were one too many.”

“Forty-five ain’t too old.”

“I’m forty-nine, Ray. You know I am. Flatterer. You’re just trying to get me to buy the last round.”

.....Should I tell them? It was out before I could stop it..... (The thing is, you see, just the week before I’d joined a gym - not that I was fat, like...but it would do me no harm to lose a stone, and the doctor had told me my blood pressure needed to come down a bit, and exercise would do the trick. (To my way of thinking, making your ticker tick quicker and sending your blood racing round yoursen would surely have the opposite effect - but what do I know about doctoring?) Any-road-up, I’d taken his advice and I’d been going there a couple of days when this this gorgeous brunette came in and sat on the exercise bike dead opposite, when there were others free further down. Immediately, I pushed my chest out, sat up straighter and pedalled faster. You can’t help it when a nice bird appears - unless you bat for Bumthorpe. After a while I dared to steal a glance at her and my heart nearly stopped when I realised she was looking straight at me, as if I was Adonis. Bloody hell, I thought, I’ve scored here. A quick look in the mirror wall behind her, confirmed what a handsome bloke I was. I pedalled even faster - and then it dawned on me, when she laughed, that she was staring at the TV screen mounted on the wall behind my left shoulder. Bumchucks. You see all these films and adverts where women swoon over a handsome man, like James Bond....oh yeah? - what a load of old cobblers.

Disheartened, I got off the bike and went to the next thing on my circuit, the running machine. If you’ve never been on one, it’s basically a short conveyer belt which you can make go faster - or slower, if it’s too much of a strain - at the touch of a button. And there’s a quick-stop button too. Very clever. I don’t do running, so six kilometres an hour is about my limit - a fast walking pace. Well, I’d been going about two minutes, building up my speed gradually when who should get onto the machine next door to me but that lovely woman, when she could have gone two or three machines further down. What was her game? Was she a teaser?? Her strange decision and closeness sent shivers up my spine and made my scalp tingle. I glanced round and she actually smiled! I knew then that I’d seen her somewhere else, quite recently, but, as you probably know yourself, it can be hard to place people when you see them in a strange setting. She was soon matching me stride for stride with her nice legs and we were actually walking in step. For some reason, this caused me some embarrassment - hard to explain - and I increased my speed to 6.2, almost to a run. To my surprise, she hit the increase button too - several times - until, effortlessly and gracefully, she was jogging, no, running, leaving me feeling - and doubtless looking - like a stupid twat in a silent film. As casually as I could, I went to hit the QUICK STOP button and missed. I stopped but the belt didn’t, throwing me into the lap of the young chap behind me on the rowing machine. Luckily I did him and myself no damage, only my pride. The woman came to my rescue, pulling me up from the floor, asking me if I’d hurt myself. She was trying hard to keep a straight face, but as I left the room, having apologized to the youth, I glanced round and saw the two of them having a good laugh. Bumchucks. Stuff like that only happened to me.

It was two days later that I placed her. She was that woman who had been walking her dog that

time when I'd shouted at the cat. She'd been wearing a raincoat then, not a leotard - wouldn't she have looked daft? Anyway, before I could stop my big gob, the secret was out....)

"Actually, lads, there is a somebody local.....I'm quite keen on. Moved in down the road a while back. Lovely smile, lovely, wavy hair - shines like red gold - a bonny lass....."

While Denis stared at me in wonder, Ray stroked his whiskery chin which he only shaved on Saturdays (Saturday night was his night in, on a promise). This was the only reliable sign he was thinking.

"Does she walk a little dog, about five foot five?" he asked.

"Five foot five? Bloody big dog, if you ask me." smirked Denis.

"Sharp shit! Shurrup. *She's* five foot five, not the friggin' dog."

"She's got a Pekinese." I said.

"That's right! I've seen her about. My Auntie Vera had a Pekinese. I dreaded going round. It kept trying to shag me leg."

Denis looked at his legs. "Well, they are quite attractive, Ray. Plenty of meat on 'em. Can't believe many dogs'd get excited about 'em, though but...."

"No! This was when I were a kid. They were dead thin then. It were real embarrassing. Me uncle had to pull the dog off."

I knew what was coming next.

"Bit of a pervert, were he?" said Denis in mock sympathy.

"No - by it's collar, you knob. Don't be disgusting! Me uncle and auntie were churchgoers..."

I said I couldn't stand little dogs. Denis asked me what the woman's name was and whether she was married. I shrugged.

"How old is she then?"

"About forty. Hard to tell. Anyhow, she thinks I'm effing mad now."

"Why?"

"I went up to a cat and shouted *Colin* at it dead loud. I didn't see her standing behind me."

"What did you go and do that for?" asked Ray.

"On impulse.....I'll get these, then."

It was a bit of a wait at the bar, it being last orders - and when I came back with two lagers and a Vimto, those two had their heads together having a good laugh. On the table were two wrinkled fivers. I told them to put their money away - *my round* - and asked them what was so funny.

"You are," said Ray. "You reckon you're a private eye but you don't even know this bird's name, or nothing. We've decided to hire you. By next Wednesday, you've got to find out all about her, without asking her direct, like....."

"Here, we've written it on this beer mat.....First and second name, is she married, address, and how old she is. Or we have our money back plus a tenner each off you."

"I could just make it up."

"We'll trust you. But no direct questions. Promise?"

"Alright!" I said. "You're on!"

*

You might be thinking such a task would be pretty straightforward, but you can't just go up to strangers and try to wangle personal information out of them. And you can't go knocking on a woman's neighbours' doors to ask stuff- how creepy and suspicious would that be? I couldn't even be sure which number she lived at - it was a house on the left a long way down the road

from me - I hadn't taken that much notice when she'd moved in. I reckoned it was a house number between 40 and 50. She was usually in the street with her dog in the early evening, but of course the next two nights when I hung around down there, she didn't show. It was Friday when I had a break. One of my famed hunches paid off....

Down at the crossroads, bottom of the hill, there's a small parade of shops and one is a swanky hair salon called Loreley's Hair and Beauty, rival of nearby Natalie's Natty Nails. Natalie's was a bit of a chavvy blunter's place, but Loreley's was a cut above. (I googled *Loreley* and it turned out she was a Rhine maiden who lured sailors to catastrophe on the rocks with her songs). Me, I'm very superstitious, and hoping this wasn't a bad omen, I plucked up the nerve to go into Loreley's that afternoon.

"I'm sorry, we only do ladies." said a slip of a girl. The faces under the driers looked up from their magazines, sneered at me and looked down again.

"Oh what a shame," I said deadpan (deadpan is easy) "I only wanted a perm."

This caused absolutely no amusement. I took the girl to one side. I took out a little blue purse I'd found in my taxi years ago - into which I'd stuffed those two tatty old fivers. I told her I was really sure that it belonged to one of her customers.

"She lives around here somewhere. I've seen her walking her dog, a Pekinese. I found the purse on the pavement after I passed her the other day. It has quite a lot of money in it. Thing is, she has such shiny, golden, chestnut hair - really classy - it occurred to me she might have it done in a classy place like this, her being new in the area..."

Flattery always works. The girl's face lit up. "Oh, you must mean Miss Smith! *She* has a dog. Ties it up outside. Yappy thing. Lovely auburn hair. *Her*, I mean."

One to me - no two to me - *Miss*, not Mrs Smith!!! I asked her for an address, but of course she went all wary. Miss Loreley, her boss, would have her guts for garters if she divulged a customer's private details. *Did I want to leave the purse with her?* No. I didn't....The girl looked in the book on the desk and said that Miss Smith had an appointment for the following morning. What should she tell her?

"Here. Give her my card. Tell her I'm the big bloke with the golden Labrador who shouts at cats. And falls off the end of running machines. She'll know."

I thought she'd never phone, but later the next day, after Leicester had lost 0-1 at home again, she did.

"Is that Mr Payne?" she asked.

"Yes it is. Who am I speaking to please?"

My heart was pumping like a bellows.

"My name's Lesley Smith", she said.

Three to me!!!

"Oh aye? You need a private detective?"

"Not at all. Kellie at Loreley's told me you were looking for me. How did you know I went there?"

"I just played a hunch. It's a classy joint and you have such.....well.....unusual, classy hair. I found a blue purse after I passed you in the street not many days ago. I was walking the big golden Labrador. When I went looking for you, you'd gone....You'd probably remember from the gym as well. I fell off the walking machine."

It went quiet at her end while she thought this over. How could I get her address and age?

"There were two fivers in the purse," I added. "I knew you lived somewhere in Bentinck Avenue

down the bottom, but I didn't know which house. Forty or fifty something? Hello?"

Fingers crossed.....

"Well, Mr Payne, it's very kind of you to go out of your way, but I haven't lost a purse.....But can you explain something?"

"I'll try."

"Why did you scream Colin at that cat?"

"Oh, it's a long story. I was testing out a theory. Are you from around here?"

"No. I was born in Yorkshire."

Born! I was *so* close. Come on, come on...give me inspiration, Somebody!

"Err.....I was born as well."

What a bloody stupid thing to say. Ray could do no better. Was she stifling a giggle?

"Were you really? Well, I'm from Pudsey. You know, like the bear."

"I don't believe it. That's the name of my dog!"

"Well, well, well. Quite a coincidence. Anyway, thank you for thinking of me. It's not my purse though. Might see you when you're out for a walk some time. Bye now."

Bumchucks. It was Saturday. I had Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday left to win or lose the wager. At least I had her mobile number. The address shouldn't be a problem - but her age? You just don't meet someone new and say *How old are you by the way?* Especially a woman - and especially one in her thirties or forties. It was against the rules of our bet, anyway.

So there we sat, me and Puds, in the Montego that Sunday not far from where I thought she lived. The last thing I wanted was to make her think I was a stalker, so I kept my head low. My theory that she would walk the Peke that afternoon proved correct. At about half three out she came and walked down the hill. Hers was the pretty house with the rose trees. Number 46. *Four* to me. I waited till she'd turned the corner and then I drove to the estuary.

On Monday morning I woke early, having dreamt that Lesley was walking Puds and me the Peke. Suddenly, the Peke turned round and ate Puds with one bite. No doubt a shrink would have read all sorts into that, but my instant interpretation was - *I'm going bloody mad*. Whatever. Unbelievably, it was just as I was dropping off again, that I had my brainwave. For the next half hour I thought round it from every angle until I was sure it would work. I slept soundly after that till eight, not dreaming once - not even that Puds had been regurgitated. After breakfast, I was looking out at the gathering clouds, wondering whether to chance a walk with him, when my mobile rang.

"Hello? David Payne? Oliver Oliphant. We met at the dentist's. You caused quite a stir...."

Instantly I thought of candy floss and whelks.

"...I told you it'd cum to meh. Never forget a face. You were at Gigg Lane three or four weeks ago. You're a Fox. What a crap defence. I've heard that Martin O' Neill is cumming back."

"And Jesus is as well, they reckon, one day...How can I help you? How did you get this number?"

"That's an easy 'un. It's plastered all uvver Blackpool. And it turns out we have a mutual friend. Stanl-eh Accrington. He told meh about his misfortune with the suitcase. Now I want meh mon-eh back. Hundred notes. I had to give our Stan a bit of a slapping and then, miracoul-eh it all came flooding back to him. Said *you'd* took it - fo' yer *fee*."

"A hundred quid???"

The toe-rag! I was just about to tell him what a sneaky little liar and a thief Stanley was, but the thought of the poor lad sat on by a thirty stone Ollie made me stop.

“So what?” I said. “I can’t live on fresh air. I have to eat as well.”

“Well, I’m heving it back. Nob'dy gets one uvver on Big Ollie. Hundred quid by tomorra - *or* you’ll do a job for me - for note.”

“I don’t respond to threats and I don’t work for crooks.”

“It’s note illegal. Just want you to check somebod-eh out. Can we meet? It might purra lorra business your way if you do a good job fo’ meh.”

“Mmmmm - I’ll think about it.”

“You know them photos of your cheerful boat you’ve got plastered up everywhere?”

“What about ‘em?”

“Do you want um to finish up under the pier?”

And he’d gone. Bumchucks. It looked as if I’d been retiring early. Not that I needed the money...*the mo-neh*. What the heck! Big Ollie was big but I reckoned I could take him - if he overbalanced and fell, he’d never get up again. Forget about him.....

I googled secondary schools in Pudsey and came up with two names - Crawshaw and Grangefield. I reckoned Lesley was about forty but it’s hard to tell with women. Sue’s daughter Vicky, my gorgeous niece, was thirty but looked fifteen.

*

“You’ll *never* believe this, Miss Smith, but I got talking with a holidaymaker yesterday - a *youngish* bloke - who turned out to come from Pudsey - *and* - you’ll call me a liar! - when I dropped your name into the conversation and described you - *he* wondered if you might be the Lesley Smith he knew at (...*ibble-obble;black-bobble*....) I think he said Cranshaw or Crawshaw school in the late eighties. His first name’s John but I forget his last name. He started there in 1985, I think he said...”

We had sat in the car ages, me and Puds, quite a way away from her house, waiting for her to come out and we were both breathless when we finally caught her up.

“I said if I bumped into you, I’d ask....”

Come on, take the bait!

She smiled. Her dog yapped and Pudsey wagged his tail. She smiled even more broadly.

“Oh, I know so many Johns.” she said at last. “Small world!.....Come on Ricky...best get on if we’re going to have an early tea.”

“Yeah - he started the school in 1985 - but I told him it might be a bit before your time....”

Now she tittered.

“I told him you were probably a bit younger than that....”

Now she couldn’t stop herself from bursting out laughing. And kept laughing until Ricky was in a frenzy.....in such a frenzy that he suddenly lost control and started having carnal relations with my right ankle. Miss Smith’s knees gave way and she sat on a low wall, howling, shaking her golden locks and with tears streaming down her fair cheeks. Ricky was as tenacious on my leg as Sue’s vicious cat on my arm. I shook my ankle politely and Pudsey looked up at me as if to say - *You’re not putting up with that sort of behaviour, are you?* She was having a job getting her breath and was holding her ribs in agony, partly, she told me afterwards, because of the look on my face - (due in no small degree to embarrassment at my leg being shagged by a little dog belonging to a woman I fancied.) Then disaster - trying to shake myself free caused me to overbalance, fall on my back and lie there, waving her dog and my leg around in the air.

“Stop it” she yelled. “I can’t stand any more.....”

She yanked her dog away and I struggled to my feet shivering as the water from the puddle soaked through to my backside. I looked at her - and the two other passers-by who stood there doubled up - and said I was really pleased they'd had such good entertainment.

"More than you think," she giggled. "The story about Johnny Somebody at school was really inspired. Why didn't you just come straight out with it and ask me how old I was?"

This so surprised me that I just blurted out *I wasn't allowed to*.

"Not *allowed to*?" she asked. She suddenly looked so serious - I realised what a stupid thing I'd said.

"I mean, it's not a question you can ask of a lady, particularly out of the blue, of a lady you hardly know. Like going up to the queen and asking her for a light."

Another damned silly thing to say. I couldn't chat a bird up to save my life.

She tittered again and asked me if I knew Sharon Pearson. *Of course I did! She was Ray Large's married sister.....*

"I know her from Loreley's. Has her hair done on Saturday mornings like me. Said her brother's a friend of yours."

I was about to say *and so what?* when the scales fell from my eyes. I'd been set up. Denis and Ray - through his fat sister - had set me up! And Lesley - lovely (?) Lesley - had been in on it since Saturday. I looked at her, tried to smile and said to Pudsey "Come on old son, time for your tea."

Me, a private detective? How damned silly! As I stalked home I decided to save Big Ollie a job - I'd get in my Montego the next morning and rip all my adverts down. I'd sell up and move down to Leicester as I had no genuine friends up here. I could get a season ticket for City. Then when I thought of the nine goal thrashing at Gigg Lane and our perilous position in the league, it didn't seem such a good idea after all. I got home and put each crumpled fiver from the stupid purse into a posh envelope with a tenner of my own and wrote DENIS on one and RAY on the other. I'd leave them behind the bar at the Legion early on Wednesday night and just come home to bed. As I was forking Pudsey's dinner out into a bowl my phone rang. It was Miss Smith.

"I didn't mean for you to be upset, Mr Payne."

"I wasn't. Just felt a bit daft, that's all. You laughing at me...and your dog....you know...."

"I just couldn't help laughing at how hard you were trying. To win your bet. How much thought you put into it - quite clever really. To tell you the truth, I was - I mean I am - really flattered."

I had no sensible answer to this. As I said, I'm the world's worst chatter-upper.

"Is your dog alright?" was the best I could come up with.

"None the worse for wear, thanks. A bit fed up with walking the streets, though. Is there not a park anywhere nearby?"

"No, but there's the estuary path. Bags of room for frisky dogs. He's love it there.."

"...And is it easy to get to? Do you have to drive?"

"Yes, but I could give you directions....or show you one evening....could even pick you up if you like....."

I crossed my fingers and shut my eyes as tight as I could.

"That would be lovely.....David..... I was born on January 3rd 1969. I'm forty-two."

Pudsey got half of my steak that night - and he loved dancing round with me on his hind legs to Status Quo as loud as we could stand it.

*

I strode into the Legion on Wednesday and thrust two print-outs under their noses.

First name: Lesley

Surname: Smith

Address: 46 Bentinck Avenue

Marital status: single (yippee!)

Date of Birth: 03 01 1969

Hairdresser: Loreley's

Known Associates: Sharon Pearson, married sister of Ray Large (biggest arsehole in the north-west of England.)

“That makes it 7-0 to me and not one direct question asked!!”

They looked dumbfounded.

“Bloody hell, Ray,” said Denis at last. “He really is a private detective. Jim Rockford eat your heart out! So, are you getting to know each other then?”

He said *know each other* with a filthy wink. I studied the ceiling, looking smug.

“Confidential, Denis. I can't discuss a case.”

“She just told you her birthday without you asking? How the hell did you manage that?”

“Confidential, Ray. You wouldn't ask a magician to explain his tricks. Professional discretion....Same again?”

There was a bit of a crush at the bar, and when I eventually returned with two lagers and my Vimto, Denis was having a real go at Ray and his voice was raised. The Queen seemed to be looking down from her photo in disapproval.

“Where the hell were you in the eighties then, Ray? Un-bloody-believable!”

“What's up, Denis?” I asked. “Everybody's staring at you.”

He stood up to make an announcement to the room.

“Him! The ignoramus. Didn't you have a telly? He's never heard of the chuffin' Rockford Files. He'll be telling me next, he's never seen The Great Escape!”

5 Special Rates for The Family

I'm normally quite a cheerful person in the morning - if cheerful is ever quite the right word to apply to me. Me and Les had had some nice walks and we and our dogs were getting on champion. I hadn't had any new cases for a while but I wasn't bothered. I had a fresh interest in life and it was proving to be a beautiful spring. But that Tuesday I knew it was going to turn out bad when I got up feeling dizzy and put shaving foam on my toothbrush. Then I put my belt on and had to take it off again because I'd missed the second loop on my jeans. As I told you, I'm superstitious and my worst fears that things would go from bad to worse were confirmed just after eleven o' clock. I'll tell you what happened in a bit, but first you need some background on my family.

I have Pudsey, Ray and Denis to talk to - Pudsey making the most sense - and my close family consists of my mum and sister Sue. My cousin, Jonathan, lives south of Leicester in a dismal town called Earlstone. He has every Leicester City programme since the Saturday afternoon of his birth in 1954 when City beat Aston Villa 5-2. You'd look at him and think - no kidding - my God, this bloke is cut out to work as an undertaker. And you'd be spot on - he did! Misery seems to run in our genes and there is a very broad seam of it in him. In case you're rushing to the conclusion that the name Payne was applied to our ancestor because he was such a mardy arse, you would be wrong. Mardy arse he might have been - probably was - but our family name -

and, having once been inclined to jump to the same conclusion as you, I'd researched it - is linked to the word Pagan through the Old English surname Payen. It's an historical fact that the Paynes were Vikings, the last tribe east of the Watling Street to be baptized in the eleventh century. So there. Thrrrrump.

Any-old-how, nevertheless, notwithstanding, Jonathan Payne was one of the most miserable items ever to put pants and socks and shoes on. If you went to a funeral and were struggling to shed a tear for a deceased you hardly knew or liked, one look at his boat race, I'm telling you, would have you in floods. Once, when he came up for a City game against Blackpool at Bloomfield Rd, I suggested to him in jest that we ought to go into business as Party Poopers Ltd. I'm not kidding, he looked up from his programme and said in all seriousness - *Do you think there's any money in it?* City were a goal up at the time but he'd hardly reacted when they scored, and only said we would lose 2 or 3-1 as our left back was crap and eventually their gaffer would realize. In the end we drew 2-2 and he even seemed disappointed we hadn't lost.

And he is *mean*. If he caught a cold, he'd keep it to himself. One Christmas, many moons ago after my wife had cleared off back to her horrible mother, I got invited down to his place. I took my jim-jams expecting to stay the night, but after two large glasses of wine - my wine - he said - *Dave - you ought to slow up a bit if you're driving*. It turned out that he and his wife Janice - who usually looks as if somebody has just dropped an egg one right under her nose - were heading south to stay with their son in London that night and were going to watch City at Fulham on Boxing Day. It was the most depressing Christmas since Herod took a violent dislike to the first born. And the Christmas bird was hardly any bigger than a pigeon.....and there were three or four sprouts each - my favourite vegetable. Miserable sod. If City ever won the Premiership he'd dread it - trying to smile, I mean. The most you could expect would be a slight quiver around the lips.

So why am I telling you about our Jonathan? You might have guessed by now. That morning, just as I was getting my head around a difficult day, out of the blue, he phoned me.

"How are you then?" I asked.

He spoke in such a monotone that, had he not been a professional mourner, it would have made a career for him as a Dalek.

"Not so clever. Janice has buggered off."

"Oh dear. I can't believe it. Are you phoning from home?"

"No. Thornton. Thought I'd come up and surprise you."

"...Oh.....great...."

"It's been such a long time, I'd forgotten the way - I stopped and asked for directions - and it was one of those moments when you have to stop and pinch yourself. I got out of the car and found myself staring at your sour face on a lampost. You, a private eye? You any good?"

"Not bad."

In that case, he said, he wanted to hire me. To find Janice. He was at his wits' end. Poor devil - I never suspected him of having such deep feelings.

"Missing her, are you? I put the flags out when Glenys went back to the Fleetwood Monster. Come round - I'll get the spare room ready."

Spare room! That's all I had, spare rooms. He told me where he was standing and I gave him directions.

“So her going was a bit of a shock, then Jonathan?”

“No.”

“Has she got somebody else?”

“Maybe.....have you got any olives?”

Olives? Up here? Namby-pamby posho crap. I told him no, and said there were some twiglets and pork scratchings, but he turned his nose up, bloody snob. He pushed a pickled onion once around his plate of cheese and ham and put his knife and fork together, sighing. Pudsey looked up, quite interested in what might come his way. Jonathan stared back at him then looked away. “It must be quite expensive to maintain it - food and vet’s bills. A big animal.”

It???? I’m sure Puds knows when folks aren’t keen on him. He went and lay down with his head on his paws, looking up at us, from one to the other, depending on who was speaking.

“So it wasn’t really a shock then, Janice going?”

“Not really. She’s been threatening to for years - she reckons I’m mean...”

“You *mean*?”

I looked at Pudsey and I swear he was raising his eyelids. He understands English better than Ray Large.

“In all probability, if I had to put money on it, I’d say she’s at her mother’s.” he said.

“Well, you’ve found her then - so what’s the problem?”

“The key. She’s got the key.”

We went out to the estuary for Pudsey’s walk and for a long time he was silent. All he’d tell me was that his wife had gone off with the bunch of keys he considered to be his and left him with the other bunch. Both bunches had exactly the same car keys (for their two cars) and house keys, but there were others dangling there whose locks had long been forgotten. There was one key on the bunch she had taken which was special - and he wanted it back. I threw a stick for Puds and he galloped after it into the marsh. Of course, him shaking his wet self all over Jonathan did little to cheer him up. We walked on and I said I thought the solution was simple - he should just ask her to do a swap. He shook his grizzled head. *No- she’d be suspicious.*

“She’s sharp - and besides her mother wouldn’t let me near the house - especially now she’s gone. She thinks I’m plain miserable.”

“I don’t know, Cousin. Some people just judge a book by its cover and never look inside.....”

Over dinner he still did not volunteer why the key was so important, but the wine I kept for guests soon began to loosen his sly old tongue. I could not believe what he eventually confessed to me. For years, as he’d already said, Janice’s departure was expected, and the bright idea had come to him of installing a small safe, hidden behind an old cupboard door in a corner of his garage, where she rarely, if ever, went. Being the spouse in charge of matters financial, he had made occasional withdrawals of small, irregular amounts from various accounts until he had amassed “*a tidy sum*” of which she had no inkling. I must have looked horrified because he slammed his fist down and said “Well dammit man! If we’d ever split up, she’d get half of everything - house, shares, antiques, savings, Audi *and* my pension - and apart from a bit of a temporary job in the office at the funeral parlour - she’s hardly done a stroke. Wouldn’t be fair! It never crossed my mind she’d take *that* bunch of keys. She mainly used the others.”

“Didn’t you get a spare safe key cut?”

He drained his glass and, without a by-your-leave, shakily poured himself another.

“D’you know just how much they charge to cut a key round our way? Thieving buggers!”

Now a wicked thought came to me and I took secret delight in watching the horror spread across his face as what I said sunk in.

“Oh dear, Jonathan. You’d better give some thought to your programme collection. She could force you to give her half of them - or force you to sell ’em and get half the proceeds. They could fetch quite a lot of money...”

“My programmes! WHAT? I’d rather cut an arm off than sell them or give her any. She hates football. I’d set fire to ’em before I gave her a single one!”

“But she’s entitled, Jonathan.”

“Never! I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

Anyway, that aside, it was now down to me to come up with a plan to get the key back. I suggested first that he write to her or text her to ask for reconciliation.

Not on your life! She’d upped and gone. He wasn’t going to abase himself by pleading for her to return....

Then perhaps he ought to wait for her to come back of her own accord. Women often did.....

No chance. The note she had scribbled - on the back of a sodding envelope - had left him in no doubt about that! And he wouldn’t have her, anyhow!

(I was struggling)...Ah! Maybe he should tell her the key opened a padlock he had for a bike he was intending to buy....

No - she’d smell a massive rat. She knew he’d never buy a bike. He hated bloody cyclists.....

I went to bed puzzling over a simple solution and left him with the bottle. At three in the morning my bedroom light went on and he swung around the door and stumbled. He said he’d had a bright idea. I’d got to come back home with him and get hold of the keys somehow.

“You can put a balaclava or a stocking on your head and break in round the back. Then get the keys and keal the star! The police would never suspect a cousin in Blackpool. I’d make it worth your while....I’d expect family rates and concession, though...only fair...you wouldn’t overcharge a cousin, would you? I wouldn’t. Love you, you know...you’ve a heart of gold really...everybody knows you have....”

“Go to bed Jonathan. You’re pissed. Sleep it off. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He didn’t get up till eleven, long after me and Pudsey had been to the estuary. Of course he had a hangover and looked like a Frankenstein monster who had lost his bolt. He started talking about doing himself in if he had to give up his savings, *money he had to work hard for, pulling gloomy faces for nearly forty years*. I said nothing and Pudsey looked at me and gave a little whimper which meant *how long is the miserable bugger going to stay?* Jonathan kept on and on and on, and by mid-afternoon I felt so guilty and depressed that I offered to go back with him. He was a man transformed.

“You’ll do it? Break in and get ‘em?”

“I might have something a bit more subtle in mind than that, Jonathan. Come on, we’ll get going before the traffic gets really bad. We’ll take your car but I’d better drive.”

I dropped Pudsey off with Susan, who really loves him, and headed south.

*

Earlstone was kind of my home town too. I’d lived in a village just outside it until being forcibly dislodged by the lure of the northern lights and the smell of the Irish Sea. I hadn’t been back for

nearly fifteen years - in fact since the Xmas mentioned above. The old factories were disappearing to make way for flats and new terraces but the town centre was, like many town centres besieged by supermarkets, undergoing a slow and painful death. Jonathan lived in a posh road on the smart side of town near woods. In 1997 he'd moved into a house - and I'm not exaggerating - which was only a room or two short of being a mansion.

"Well" he said "Make yourself at home. She's not back - not that I thought she would be."

"I never realised you'd done so well for yourself, old pal."

"Did I never tell you? I went into a junior partnership with young Underwood when the father retired. He needed capital and the senile old bugger refused to help. You're never short of business if you're burying or burning folk.....Anyway, I sold out my share last year to a Malaysian. Like you did with your taxis. How much did you make?"

"Enough."

(*Underwood* - - Like I said earlier about Nummy - who you are can decide what you are.)

It was late and I was knackered after the M6. He cooked me up a storm - beans on toast - and soon afterwards we went to bed.

The sun dragged me out of the covers to the window the next morning, a glorious dawn in mid May. As far as the eye could see there was woodland and hedgerows in blossom. Janice must have been desperate to give up this house and view. I'd have put something lethal in the miserable bugger's tea. Still, she probably had schemes and secrets of her own under lock and key and was no more virtuous than him. I thought of tricky Mrs Capstick. As you've gathered, I'm an amateur philosopher and it strikes me that we should be counting our blessings more than our money and possessions. What a view this was! How I would just have loved to spend the whole day exploring those woods with Pudsey. And, of course, Lesley and little Ricky.

"Well, David. Have you come up with something? A plan? Do you want another fried egg?"

"If you can spare one."

"Any sauce?"

He came back with the supermarket's cheapo brand. Mean git. I decided there and then to get this over and done with - I was having a terrible time wrestling with my conscience as it was - and get home as quickly as possible. I began to tell him what I had in mind and his gloomy face began to brighten up, but only a little.

*

Janice's mother lived in a modest bungalow in Hartshill, just on the Warwickshire side of the Watling Street, ancient fiefdom of the Anglo-Saxon foe. Her car, a nice, new runabout, stood in the drive. When she opened the door and saw my boat, she was so surprised, she smiled. And when she smiled, do you know, she was quite decent-looking for a woman in her late fifties. If the pair of them had done more laughing and smiling, who knows, they would never have maybe ended up in this situation. Mind you, hark who's talking.....

"Janice. I'm truly sorry about you and Jonathan. He asked me down because he's so depressed and only family does at a time like this..."

"Bullshit."

"No, please, he is cut up."

(Don't think bad of me, please. No word of a lie, was it??)

“Can I come in and have a chat?”

Now she was really on her guard, looking up and down the road to see if she could spot him. *If he thought*, she said - dead loud in case he was hiding round the corner - *if he thought that she could be persuaded to come back, he was wrong.*

“I’ve put up with it for too long, David...mean bugger.....Putting the dirty cleaning cloths in the washer....Disinfecting the wash-up sponges....Running the cold water off from the hot tap first thing into a plastic bowl to use later....If he could think of a way of recycling the toilet paper, he’d do it.....You can come in, but it’ll do no good.”

Her parents had gone off on a coach tour to Exmouth. While she had her back to me mashing tea and moaning about *him*, I looked over all the kitchen worktops for keys. I felt terrible preferring his cause to hers, but blood is thicker than water. And he had hired me. I was only doing my job.... :- (

“So, what does the miserable sod want then? Here’s your tea....”

The angel in me wanted to tell her the truth but the devil won. “Well, Janice, it’s something and nothing, really. He reckons he left his Leonard Cohen CD in your glove compartment. He’d like it back. It’d help him to - you know - grieve, like....get it out of his system..”

She laughed so much that I nearly joined in. I asked her what was funny.

“Him grieve? I thought he’d be out celebrating.”

“Oh no. I’ve never seen him so upset. Even worse than when City lost 4-3 to Newcastle at St James’s Park after leading 3-1.”

“Is he out there somewhere.....*grieving?*”

“No - well - he’s in a café down the road. Waiting for me. Why don’t you go to him and have a word....*Please.*”

It was obvious that there was more chance of Puds seeing eye-to-eye with Sue’s nasty moggie than of them making it up.

“And that’s all he wants? A crappy CD back? That miserable row - Leonard Cohen - music to slit your wrists to....”

“Okay, okay. I see how it is, Janice. Just give me your keys and *I’ll* have a quick look. He actually is just round the corner. If *you* went out, there might be a bit of a scene.”

I felt really guilty being a party - no, inventor - of such gross deception, and an aider and abetter of what might well be a criminal offence. I went out with her keys, swapped them for his, counted to twenty and went back in. Simple as that. I told her there was no CD and when I gave her the other set of keys back she smiled a dark smile. Giving her a sisterly peck on the cheek, I wished her all the best and went away with a tear in my eye.

His Audi was round the corner. I got in and gave him the keys, telling him how terrible I felt. He made a strange sound - his attempt at laughter - and slapped me on the back, declaring me to be a genius. Who, he asked, could have come up with such a simple, clever plan? He would never forget this! Any time I wanted to come down and stay and watch a match, I could.

“She thinks she’s got me over a barrel! Wants bank statements going back to the year dot... Well, all the withdrawals are linked to business invoices - all fakes of course! *Ho, ho, ho, who’s got the last laugh now?.....They all laughed at Christopher Columbus, when he said the world was round.....They all laughed when Eddison recorded sound.....*”

God, I preferred his suicidal to his gloating self. He said dinner would be on him - his favourite restaurant - and in the morning he’d run me home.

Back at his house, he opened the up-and-over door and kissed the key. Then he seemed to come

to his senses and asked me if I'd mind standing back while he opened the safe.

"I'll just get you your fee. Hundred pounds? Will that be enough? Family favour? While the money's been in the safe, of course, I've lost quite a lot of bank interest on it. You understand, being a businessman yourself."

I nodded. The quicker this was over and done with, the better. I'd ask him to forget dinner that night, just to run me back and stay the night with Pudsey and me. I had another bottle of wine somewhere. Then he'd go, and I might not see him for another five or ten years. There was a bench by the unsmiling garden gnome on the front garden and I sat down in the sun while he did what he had to. It was quite a long wait and I thought I could hear him cursing. All at once a noise between a howl and a shriek, like a fox in a trap, startled me. I went in to see. I expected the safe to be empty, but there were stacks of banknotes and he was holding his head in his hands and rocking backwards and forwards on his knees. What on earth was the matter with him???? He handed me a handwritten note.

...AND IF YOU THINK YOU'RE GETTING AWAY WITH SUCH A SLIMY TRICK, YOU TIGHT BASTARD, FORGET IT. HAVE TAKEN MY HALF, PLUS A THOUSAND FOR MEANNESS RELATED STRESS AND ANXIETY, AND ANOTHER THOUSAND FOR LOSS OF INTEREST. SUE ME!

J.

*

I sat in second class whizzing northwards through Staffordshire. I had fifty quid in my pocket. Out of the goodness of his heart he had run me to Nuneaton Trent Valley station and gone halves with me on a very expensive single ticket to Blackpool. Oh - and he'd put me up a cheese sandwich - gratis - for the journey. After all, what is family for? So I was a few quid and a cheese sandwich in profit - but, as I watched the forests rushing south, I did not feel low. Janice's cunning meant my conscience was clear. And that, friends, was priceless.

6 Another Bad Penny Turns Up

"I must say, Dave, I thought your cousin was a bit of a twat when I met him at the match that time. I didn't like to say though..."

"Well, Denis, he weren't like that when were kids. He was like an elder brother to me. We used to go nesting and scrumping, blackberrying and chestnutting. Sad really, what money does to people. Ruined him. And Janice. Always on the want *her* - spend, spend, spend.....*Him* as tight as a squirrel's fanny."

As I resavoured those precious childhood memories, I felt a prickling in my nose and pretty soon my eyes were brimming over.

"Look at you!" said Ray. "How can you do a proper job if you feel sorry for all your customers?" My dad and my Uncle Ron - Dad's brother and Jonathan's dad - had been exactly the same - sentimental - particularly Ron. A bookmaker in the village, he had let punters off their losing bets when they came out with their sob-stories. Of course, whenever their hosses romped home, they were in to collect their winnings quicker than the hoss, previous mercies forgotten.

"I don't know, old pal." I said. "There's so much bumping and barging, when all along there's room for everybody. So much discontent. Folks want the top of the range motor, the dearest

designer stuff, the most exclusive holiday. And they'll go into huge debt to achieve it. It's no way to live. And then there's folk like Stanley Accrington who'll never get his foot off the bottom rung....If I were in charge, do you know what would be the first thing to go?"

"What?"

"Chuffing advertising. It brainwashes us all to **want.**"

Denis sipped his lager and smiled a sly smile.

"Well, how would you drum up all your valuable business without your little placards?"

Ray laughed and nodded his head vigorously. "He's got you there, Dave!"

"Well it gets me down. I'm finishing this and having an early night."

It was just gone ten when the doorbell went. Bumchucks. I was just getting into my pyjamas. I went down and warily opened the door. Shivering there in the rain, under a grey hood, stood Stanley. A moped leant against the wall. He begged me to let him in - Big Ollie was on the warpath. I asked him how he'd found me. He said he'd just driven round and round until he spotted my car. He apologized for dropping me in it with his boss, but he'd had no choice. When I pointed out that he'd had a choice about taking the hundred out of the suitcase, he looked shame-faced. Pudsey came to the door and I asked him if we should let the varmint in. He whimpered once - which I took to be a yes.

"You were so kind, Mr Payne. I thought you might help me again. I've got nob'dy, nowhere to goo."

"Bloody hell. You're starting to talk like Big Ollie. Look, I've told you. Why don't you go back to Burnley?"

"No chance. Me dad's dead and me mam's alcoholic. Me sister doesn't speak."

"Go and make it up with her. I'll give you a fiver for a bunch of flowers. Never fails."

"No. She doesn't speak. Deaf mute."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Poor lad. As he dried out and warmed up by the gas fire, my nose began to wrinkle. I told him he could stay the night on one condition.

"Go and have a bath and sling your clothes on the landing for me to wash. There's jamas in the airing cupboard."

I did him sausage, egg, beans and chips while he bathed and when he came back downstairs he fell on it like a wolf. I only had Vimto to wash it down with but he said it didn't matter.

"I hate booze. Seen enough to sink the Titanic. Never touch it."

"Wise lad."

Pudsey came and sat by his feet - great long bony efforts - as if to say *Mmm - that's a bit better.* Eventually he got half a sausage for being a good dog. Ollie, it turned out, was on the warpath partly because I'd not got back in touch. He had a problem with what Stanley called "competition". All he knew was that his new rival was big, Scottish and vicious.

"Ollie's bark is usually worse than his bite. But at the minute he's impossible to live wi'. This bloke's muscling in on his operation and he has a sidekick - a midget who specializes in putting the shits up folk. Tony, one of our candy floss men, doesn't mind paying twenty a week to Ollie - well, he does - but anyway, he pays up. The other day, Little and Large turn up, demanding fifty and he tells 'em to do one. In full view of the punters, the dwarf does no more than grab Tony's head and holds it down in his candy floss machine. Came out looking like the Wooky from Star Wars. Everybody's terrified on the Prom - Ollie's income is right down. They won't pay up. Why should they?"

“Sorry, Stan. Not a case for me. Police matter. I’ve got Ollie’s number. I’ll phone him and tell him straight. And I’ll tell him if he bullies you again, I’ll report him.”

“Oh, he’ll kill me” he wailed.

“Look, if you reckon I’m going to get involved with a psychopathic dwarf and giant, you’re very mistaken.”

“All he wants is to know where they live. Ollie knows people. They’ll do the rest.”

“I’d be party to an assault - or worse. No way, José.”

“Well, you told me that you put the wind up folk, mekkin ’em walk home in the nud, like....”

“Not really. I might threaten to if nowt else works. Your best bet, young man, is to get out of Kackpool before you end up hurt - or in the slammer.”

“Can’t you see I’m stuck?” he wailed. “Wish I were bloody dead - or a dog.”

I made him a big mug of Horlicks and sent him to bed, telling him not to worry. I listened at half past midnight at his door and he was sleeping like a baby.

*

“I can’t just goo straight, Mr Payne. Tain’t that simple. This Scottie’s lookin fo’ meh. I need protection. If I can get to ‘im fust - with mates o’ mine - then I’ll be okay. I’d move away if I could, but where do I goo?”

“Why can’t your mates track the guy down?”

“Too thick. They just do the biz.”

“Can’t Stanley go looking?”

“He’s a scared rabbit. And ‘e’s bugged off.”

“Mr Oliphant – he’s upstairs asleep. Exhausted and frit to death.”

I was half suspecting that his plan had been to send him to me all along. When Ollie didn’t reply, I decided to lay into him.

“Shall I tell you something for nothing? You are a right shower, all of you. His life’s going from terrible to critical. He’s kacking hisself.....”

I debated then whether to put my mad proposal to him. I’m glad I did.

Right. Here’s the deal. You were into pizza, right? You got burnt out in Ormchurch - or was that another of Stanley’s fibs?”

“Yeah, I got burnt out. Why?”

I told him about an empty premises on that parade of shops near me. The nearest pizzeria was crap - soggy bases. I asked him what his were like.....it went quiet.....and then, you know, it was as if a different bloke had come on the line. He began to tell me of his ancestry. He came originally from the outskirts of our fair city of Leicester, son of an Italian mother and a Anglo-Indian father. She made the most wonderful pizza outside of Naples, and he had her secret recipes. They used to go out of his shop, he said, like ‘*ot cakes* - (which, I suppose, in a way, they were...) Any-old-how, I’d been thinking over all night the business proposition I now put to him.

“If I can get them two clowns off your back and put you in the clear, will you give up petty crime? You’re better than that, Ollie. I’m not a poor man. I’m willing to take a chance investing in you, a fellow Fox, if your pizza is as good as you say.”

“Right.....”

“But you’ll have to come round here and bake us your Special. If it’s crap, no deal. You on?”

“You bet!”

“And one more thing... You’ve got to be nice to Stanley.”

Ollie came round later with a bewildering array of utensils and containers. It surprised me to see how agile and well coordinated in the kitchen he was for a big man. He beat his dough in a machine - we were not allowed in the kitchen to witness his secret recipe being put together - and he let me smell the result. It was fragrant, herby and yeasty. Once it had risen, I watched him roll it out with total assurance, until it was about a half of a centimetre thick. He winked and pulled off the lid of a plastic container and let me smell the sauce - a rich tomato puree - so intense that I felt light-headed. Using a spatula he spread it on and round with a flourish before building up his topping - first a sprinkle of herbs, followed by olives, yellow and red mini tomatoes, prawns, chillies, mussels, spring onion bulbs - all of which he had marinated in his secret combination of olive oil, garlic and balsamic vinegar - and *something special* he referred to with another slow wink. Finally, with kitchen scissors he snipped mozerella cheese over it, sprinkled it with more herbs, and when the thing had risen back a little, put it into the furnace of my oven, squatting down to observe it bake with his eye on the clock. He ordered us to sit in the dining room where the fragrance of the pizza had already preceded us. I tell you, it turned out to be the most delicious food I’d ever tasted. Pudsey got his share as well - there was just too much. When we had finished, Ollie gave me the bill - that is to say the total cost of his ingredients. Less than two quid.

“That would feed four. Or three o’ meh” he said. “You could charge a tenner. After overheads, around four hundred percent profit. Easiest way to make money I know.....*legally*.”

“Well, Ollie. You’ve got mine and Pud’s vote. Leave them troubles of yours with me. I’ll think of a way round ‘em.”

He had found out a name for me from one of his “clients”. The giant’s name was Norman.

“Stormin’ Norman they call ‘im. Git’s gorra front teggie missing - and a funny bald head like a dome.”

Stanley helped him clear away and pretty soon they were gone, leaving me to think up a cunning plan on a nice, full stomach, using Pudsey as a well-contented footstool.

It’s strange how different events can come together. The next day I got a phone call from someone who described himself as a booter. It took me a while to cotton on. He meant car-booter. He said he was being pressurized by two men into giving them protection money.

“One big, one little?” I asked.

“That’s right!”

He gave me his address and I went round to see him.

“I go to car-boots all over West Lancs and never had any trouble till now. Last Sunday at the local junior school, on the field, these two buggers turn up and one, the giant, picks up a statuette of a Greek goddess, drops it and the midget catches it. *That was lucky, Desmond*, says the giant - (bugger towered above me!) - *Indeed*, says the other, *It’s a good job I can catch, Norman*. Me, I’m looking round for help, but everybody’s melted away, as if they sense bother. Anyway, the little ‘un carries on, never taking his snake eyes off me.... *Wouldn’t it be a pity to break such a lovely objet d’art* - - - (Frigging objet d’art?? I buy ‘em direct from the firm that supplies the stalls at the Pleasure Beach - “Buy one, get a hundred free”. But that ain’t the point, is it?) *Being so fragile*, says the big bloke, *It stands in such great danger of being broken, that it ought really to be insured*. Proper rehearsed double-act, they were, like a nasty version of Little and Large. Of

course, it turns out that they sell that very insurance I'm so in need of."

For a mere thirty notes they guaranteed that...

"No yobs.."

"..No kids..."

"...No dogs..."

"...No acts of God..."

"... Would endanger such an array of precious objects....."

They had told him to think it over while they had a stroll round. He had watched them go through the same routine all over the field.

"So, you paid up, like..."

"Did I buggery. I packed me junk away and went. Ritchie Appleton phones me later to say that they'd rammed an onyx ball up his exhaust when he'd argued with 'em."

"That must have taken some getting out."

"Dead right. Had to take a hacksaw to it."

I asked him if he had any idea where these two hung out, where they lived, and he shook his head. He told me the local booters had rung round and emailed each other and decided - on Mr Appleton's recommendation, to have a whip-round - a tenner each - and hire me to get these *bloody parasites* of their backs.

"It'd amount to £530 if you managed it."

My eyes must have looked ready to pop out onto his rug because he laughed.

"Mr Appleton?" I said. "Don't know him. Why did he mention my name?"

"You come recommended. Bloke at the Chinky in Thornton. Ritchie goes there. Loves his pussy chow mein."

"Mr Cheung! God bless him.....or Confucius bless him..."

I frowned for a second because something had just occurred to me. I asked him why they hadn't been to the police. He put his hands behind his head. He'd tell me a story.... Over at Fleetwood, a big row had broken out between a booter and a punter, almost a brawl. Over a music box.

"Turned out the thing had been nicked in a burglary years ago from the punter's house and he recognised it.....Best we keep the Law out of it - in case they start looking a bit too hard at some of our gear. You know what I mean."

Alas! Show me an honest trader and I'll show you Lord Lucan riding Shergar.....

I thought it over for the best part of five seconds and asked him where the next big car boot event would be taking place, and when he told me, I decided I'd go in deep - under cover, like....

But before I tell you about that crazy string of events, I need to mention a case which landed on my untidy desk the very next day from a totally unexpected quarter.

7 The Case Of The Vengeful Office Junior

I'd arranged to pick Lesley up at six thirty to go to the estuary, and I was so much looking forward to it. I was planning to ask her out for a first meal at The Kicking Donkey, a favourite pub of mine in the wilds. But I couldn't see a chance to ask that evening because she was unusually silent, so silent that I began to wonder if I'd offended her in some way. I'm afraid I might be a bit insensitive where women are concerned - perhaps I don't compliment them like you should. My ex wife Glenys said in her parting speech that I had the charm of a gorilla. I racked my brains in vain for something tactless I might have said in the car on the way over. I'd wanted to tell her how lovely she was, how friendly, how fragrant, how golden, but how creepy

might she have found that? So I hadn't. Bumchucks. Any-way-round, while Ricky and Pudsey were chasing about for a ball in the reeds, we went to a bench and sat down. In the end I did ask her if there was anything the matter and she began to tell me about some queer goings-on she'd been experiencing which had started the Tuesday previous. Lesley worked in Human Resources at the local authority and had been on a panel investigating charges of sexual harassment of a female employee by a young man in the Council Tax office. The allegations had been found proven and the young man had been dismissed for gross professional misconduct.

"It was an open and shut case, David, but I did feel sorry for him. I knew him from chatting in the canteen occasionally. When I was new in the job he bought me a cup of tea once. He was a bit of a loner - not fashionable, if you know what I mean - and he tried too hard to be friendly. Since last Monday, when we held the disciplinary hearing, peculiar things have been happening to me. My phone went in the middle of the night and then stopped after a few rings. Then on Tuesday morning, while I was in the shower the same thing happened. It rang and stopped. I pressed 1471 but the number had been withheld. Since then I've had five more calls and I suddenly realised yesterday that the number of rings was getting shorter - as if - Oh God, it sends me cold to say it - as if it's a countdown."

She put her hand to her mouth and - I couldn't help it - I put my arm round her shoulder and patted her.

The calls were not the only worry. With mounting anger, I listened to her telling me how she was sure she'd been followed the night before while out walking Ricky.

"I thought it was my imagination for a start...but when I looked round a third time I just knew the car which had been parked behind me when I came out of home had moved up the road and stopped. Like a kerb-crawler."

"Did you get the make and number?"

"No. I was too scared to have a proper look. I panicked - turned left by Lorely's and put on a bit of a spurt. I looked round and there was no sign. I stopped for Rick to do his biz and after I'd picked it up I looked, and there he was again. A brown car. Brown, that's all I know!"

She sobbed and I rubbed her shoulder.

"So, you think it might be the bloke you had to sack?"

"Well it fits - sexual harassment. I'll tell you as much as I dare. It's confidential."

She told me that Mr X was about thirty and had worked in the Council Tax department. Women had generally found his attentions and back-handed compliments embarrassing but had put up with it because he was a bit pathetic.

"But then this really pretty Asian girl joined the staff and he just wouldn't leave her be. In the end he was informally warned that if he carried on hanging around her, he'd be in trouble. That was nothing to do with me - his boss had him into his office and told him straight. Then, the very next week, he was in the lift - pretty crowded - and he fondled her behind. In front of witnesses! That was that. Suspended a month ago then out on his ear this week. He furiously denied it - and I did feel sorry for him - he said he couldn't avoid being up close to her because of the crush - but we took the view that he used that as cover to touch her."

I told her she should contact the police but, no, she wanted it sorted out unofficially.

"He needs help, not a court case. I don't want the hassle of making statements and going to court. I want to hire you.....to get the weasly little bastard off my back!"

To hear her to say this shocked me not a little, but she was upset. I hardly dared make my next suggestion, in case she thought I was being forward or taking advantage.

"Lesley...You ought not to stay at home tonight...I have a spare room...and a spare basket for

Ricky....”

I felt I'd gone red. She looked up at me and smiled through her tears....and told me she dared not leave her house empty....that she had a room for me and a basket for Puds - until it was cleared up.

“I'll cook you my special, if you'll come. Blade steak in red wine with mushrooms and peppers...and herby dumplings....Rick loves it.”

The dumplings sealed it.

There were no calls that Saturday night. We watched the film after her wonderful meal and Lesley fell asleep. I went upstairs and looked out of the dark window while Pudsey and Ricky were lapping at their bowls. The street was wet and deserted. I came back down, thought about waking her, covered her with a blanket and went to bed.

The sun came streaming in and woke me early. I went down to make a cup of tea and saw that the sofa where Lesley had been snoozing was empty. I listened at her door and the soft sounds of her asleep put my mind at rest. The birds had started giving it all they'd got, and I was just stretching out and going back to sleep when the phone rang. It stopped after three rings while I was almost tumbling down the stairs and when I tried to get the number I was told it had been withheld.....

While I was frying some bacon to take upstairs, it rang again - twice - and stopped. *Right, sunshine*, I thought..... Folks, I'll tell you now, a violent guy I am *not* - and I would much rather lose face in a confrontation than risk a punch-up and a bloody nose. But this bloke needed sorting - and I was just in the right mood to do it! I sat down with the tea pot, my bacon sandwich smothered in red sauce and the solution came to me within a minute.

“Les, you take Ricky out for a walk in a bit, and I'll be right behind. I have a hunch that bloke will be turning up. There's no need to worry. I'm watching your back.”

She said she trusted me and put her dog's lead on. As the front door closed, I went upstairs. I'd told Lesley to keep calm and act normal. I was gambling that our friend would not be suspecting that he had already been rumbled. That being the case, he'd have no reason to think that anyone would be looking out for him - in a crappy old brown car.....an old brown Toyota which, even at that very moment when I was doubting that he might dare to appear, was already slouching out of a side street to creep into position and stop not fifty yards behind Lesley as she hurried downhill. I ran downstairs and told Pudsey that this was a job for me alone, and though he whimpered, he told me he understood, settled down on his paws and spread out his hind legs like he was diving.

Lesley was already a tiny figure in the distance nearing the crossroads when I came out of her house and walked past that car -which even my Montego would put to shame - looking around, up and about me as if I was lost. As the car eased forward I opened the passenger door and jumped in. The driver had very prominent teeth and a peeled down, floppy mouth - out of which a number of oaths and urgent enquiries issued. I put my left hand over his face and my right hand onto the gear lever to keep it in neutral. *Who was I ???* - I was a friend of the person he was harassing and I told him to give me his map book. He looked at me as if I was mad and I told him again to get it. He took it from the seat pocket behind me. I opened it.

“Okay, this is the page of our area. Close your eyes and stick a finger on it.....you... just.....DO IT!”

As he did as he was told, I smiled. “Okay. That's just south of Morecambe. Now listen. If you

ring up a certain lady once more - or do this shit once more - or intimidate her in any way - that's where I'll drop you in the middle of the night and leave you to find your own way home in your birthday suit. Understand?"

He sniffled. He nodded. He sobbed. (*Oh no.... Why couldn't investigating bastards be straightforward just for once?*)

"I know you blame her for you getting the push, but you should have had more sense. Women give out signals - and *you* can't read 'em. Listen! Stop blarney. If a woman's not interested, her body language lets you know in a split second, and she ain't gonna change her mind. There's plenty I've fancied but once I've had the old *get lost* look, I get lost! If this teaches you that lesson, you'll go far."

As he wept and wept I began to feel sorrier for him. God had dealt him few high cards in the game of beauty, in fact none. I wondered, as he struggled for words, what hard luck story I was about to hear. Sometimes I see us all as jigsaw pieces which don't fit. I told him that his victim did not intend to contact the police - in case he was worrying she would.

"Worried?" he wailed. "Who'll give me a job now, with this on my CV? I live with me mum, and she's right poorly. I daren't tell her I've had the sack - I go out in the morning in my suit as if I'm off to w-work...."

"Hear me out...it looks bad now, but you'll get over it. You mustn't blame my client. What's the point of getting back at her? She was only one on a panel of three. She only applied the rules. If she hadn't, *she'd* be the one in trouble."

"I didn't touch Kuldip Kalsi! She made it up..."

"Forget it. It can't be changed. Move on."

I softened even more towards him and made a rash promise. If he guaranteed to leave my friend in peace, I might be able to put some work his way. I gave him my card and told him to take his mum away for a few days, and tell her he was changing jobs for better pay.

"Give me a ring in a month. I'll try to help you."

He looked at me and something like hope shone through his tears. He nodded. I had his word he'd stop his vendetta. I asked his name and he told me he was Tony Mancini.

"You're Italian? Honest? You like pizza?"

Sometimes I reckon there is a God. I left him and watched the car drive away, then caught Lesley up.

"How much do I owe you, Dave?"

"Oh, a lot. A night out with me at the Kicking Donkey."

"I'm paying."

"No - it's my birthday soon. My treat. You cooked that lovely dinner, so it's my turn."

We tried to find a day to suit us both and in the end I told her I'd miss my night at FE college.

"What you doing there then?" she asked. "Bricklaying?"

She stayed deadpan for a second and then smiled. She was teasing, she said. I debated whether to tell her, worrying that it might get back to Denis and Ray.

"No. To tell the truth I've started an English access course. I want to do A Level."

"Oh no! You mustn't miss that."

"It's my secret, promise you won't tell Ray Large's sister."

"Of course I won't. What about Saturday?"

England were playing an important friendly but I decided there and then there were some things much more important than footy.

Lesley never mentioned my English course to Ray's sister. I was sensitive about it, having rather missed the boat at school where I was more interested in being the clown than the swot....

"David Payne.....would yew please.....stand.....AP!"

It was maths and my appointment with the executioner was at hand - Tuesday, lesson three. The day before, lesson five, in spite of dire warnings as to consequences, I'd failed to hand in my homework - quadratic equations - (which I couldn't see the point of, as, I suspect, less than one percent of the population can.) I rose to my feet to tower above the rest, as Mr Savage, our resident Welshman, began slowly before moving through the gears, evidently relishing the humiliation he was in the habit of inflicting on anyone unfortunate not to have a clue or a care about his subject. Usually me.

"Isn't it it...us-ual..." he drawled, twiddling his red moustache "...to a-polo-gise when we fail to do what...we should....or to at least offer an....ex-plan-ation?"

He tapped the golden pile of our exercise books.

*"No book, you see, from yew.....BUT" - (prodding a page in his record book) - "Yew were he-re yesterday.....in **body** at least...."*

Polite titters rippled round from his few, favoured, creepy, adoring girls and the odd boy.

"Well? Have yew done it? Have yew got it with yew no-ow?"

Ray nudged me and whispered - "go on, double dare you" - out of the corner of his mouth.

"And yew, Mr Large, had better keep that big mouth shit, because your work left, shall we say.....more than a little to be des-ir-ed."

*I stood to win fifty pence if I dared to brave the Red Dragon **and** a fifty pence bonus if I could keep a straight face. The second bit was easy. I never laughed - not even Tommy Cooper could make me titter, partly because my dad looked quite like him and after a couple of pints could do his act better than Tommy could. Savage stood there, arms folded and invited me to speak. Ray had just double-dared me - so one pound ten!*

"Well, Sir, It were like this, see....."

I looked down, and the four others who had bet me, besides Ray, were looking round at me and pulling faces. Pete Wise could make his tiny pupils more or less disappear when he rolled his eyes up into his head, so he looked like something out of a Hammer Horror film; and he could stick the tip of his tongue, curl it up to his nose and make his mouth look - (please excuse what follows, for the sake of authenticity) - thick-lipped - like a "nigger's". The class, well entertained by Wise, laughed, but not me. Savage unfolded his arms, walked over and gave him an efficient, even affectionate clip round the lughole, frowned and looked back at me.

"Well? We're all yors." (ears)

Of course, years later, it came to me very suddenly, how much easier it was for him to plot and direct these dramas than do any teaching.

"Well Sir, hard as it might be to believe, like, there I were in the garden, Sunday - it were so nice - doing me maths late on when - all of a sudden - I'd almost finished - it were nearly seven, like - when out of the blue - would you credit it? - uvver flies this big seagull and does a big poo all uvver the page..."

Helpless laughter of course. Story told = fifty-five pence earned at least. Ray nudged me harder. Even Savage had joined in the laughter. But not me. Ray pushed me again. Not a titter.

"That....." said Savage "Was the sill-iest excuse I've EVER heard, Payne. You ought to be a comedy wri-ter."

“And cos it were late, me mam says I kern’t start it all again - it were me bath time - if I wanted to see the film at eight, like....”

“Well, Payne. Please extend my gratitude to your parents for their letter of ex-plan-ation.”

“Wot? They sent you a letter?”

He was a slow burner, old Savage. Now suddenly he went bang.

“I WAS BEING FACETIOUS PAYNE, YOU IGNORAMUS.” (Of all my teachers he was best at injecting utter contempt into my name.) “YOU WILL DO.....(class all stopped breathing).....AN EVERLASTING AT THE END OF SCHOOL.”

Bumchucks. An everlasting. He used to give delinquents a number - in my particular case that day, I think, twenty-seven - to which were added two noughts - and you had to sit subtracting twenty-seven from it with all your calculations shown, until you reached zero. It was a sort of mathematical poetic justice and a bloodless punishment - instead of which I’d have much preferred a good slap and be done. Well over two hours was a heavy price to pay for one pound ten. In fact, I only got ninety-five pence because three of them swore I’d smiled when he called me an ignoramus. I protested, saying I didn’t know what it meant, so how could I find it funny? But I did pretty well that year at taking bets on dares. The week before, I’d won fifty pence in history, pretending that my books had been slung out of a train window by some thugs while I was doing my homework on my way to a game in Carlisle. Mrs Keyworth said it was such an unusual excuse that she believed it! And Mr Softie Glover, the physics teacher, had fallen for my charm too. I’d started crying in his lesson - pretending to, like - when he asked for my work on magnets. “Can’t do it, Sir....c-c--an’t d-do it...t-too HARD...” He actually put his arm round me, and for that I won an extra fifty pence, plus a ride on Kev Russell’s moped round the park.

*

“You’ll never do any good at school, son,” said Dad, wafting his Senior Service smoke away with the letter the Head had sent. “Says here - you never do yer homework. Well, you might as well just leave at Easter and get a job for to pay for driving lessons. Pass yer test, then cum in taxi-ing wi’ me.”

This had started when my mum had signalled with her eyes - as she usually did - that I was required in the lounge. There he sat, overfilling his armchair, with his mouth looking like a lazy snake. I’d already had the honesty and truth lecture and had hung my head in shame as I knew he liked to see. At the mention of “leave school” up went my head and away went my woebegone look to be replaced by glee.

“HOY!” he shouted. “Duln’t you EVER turn round and blame me if you cum to regret it. But if you int gooin’ to do yer work, I kernt see the point o’ yer gooin school.”

Of course, he could have put me under curfew until I’d altered my idle ways - but he didn’t. I was grateful – and still am – well, sort of. So ended, when I was nearly sixteen, that pretty unpleasant episode which had taken up ten years of my young life. School.

8 The Car-Boot Sale

As I said much earlier on, I had a fantastic collection of lost property which I kept in a big box in the garage, in the unlikely event that punters would ring me to claim any of it. The next Saturday morning, I put the box and all the ornaments from around my house into my boot and felt satisfied that I had a wide enough range of junk to convince any sad soul - who had nothing

better to do with themselves on a warm June morning than gaze at it and rummage through it - that I was a genuine car-booter.

I pulled onto the field of the local rugby club, paid my tenner and found a nice pitch in the sun. I counted around fifty cars and soon the field was swarming with all sorts of people. One cheeky toe-rag offered me a fiver for the Montego and his mates laughed. I stood up from my foldaway chair and told him straight.

“You listen! If the Antiques Road Show comes this way, this magnificent motor will be there. The only one of its kind this side of the Ural mountains... You could offer me a tenner for it and I'd never sell! Would I Pudsey? Now.... on your bike!”

We had a little walk about to see what was on offer. There was everything from plants to pots and pans. There were vans selling tea and coffee and fast food. To be honest, I was quite enjoying being there. I'd set up a trestle table on which I'd arranged my best exhibits, keeping a weather-eye open for the arrival of the mismatched twosome. Do you know, I even sold a couple of things - an old LP by Status Quo for a fiver and a nice silver-plated cigarette lighter for a tenner. I was confident that the vase which Glenys's mother had bought us one Christmas - a grotesque yellow object I'd kept in order to remind me what I was missing whenever I felt lonely and low - would never sell, so I was amazed when a couple began to show a slight interest in it. It was a beautiful day, not a day meant for trouble of any kind, but as I looked through my binoculars - (actually not mine, but another taxi find) - towards the car which belonged to the fellow who had phoned me for help, I saw a giant and a midget appear on the scene. What a curious combination. The giant really did have a domed head, with tufts of hair around the ears, and he reminded me of a clown who had forgotten how to smile. There were quite a few punters milling around that particular car, but around my crappy bits and bobs there was currently no-one, and then - as if fate could have planned it no better - I realised that they had begun making their way over to me. I picked up my phone and sent the pre-arranged text to Stanley - who had been deputized for the day - hoping he was in position on his moped. As the pair approached I tried to look as dozy as I could - for which some of my acquaintance might think no great effort was needed - in order to boost their confidence. I was amazed and tempted to snigger when the giant picked up my ex mother-in-law's vase and they went through their slick routine. As soon as they had finished I shrugged and told them that they could break it for all I cared.

“It was a gift from my ex's mother. I can't give it away. For love nor money.”

The dwarf dropped it but it failed to smash. I chuckled, and he jumped on it but still it succeeded in remaining intact. For heaven's sake - what was it made of - kryptonite? - to spite me? The little man proceeded to do a war-dance on it but Storming Norman took hold of his forearm.

“Hold on one moment, Desmond,” he said in a very refined Scottish accent. “We're getting off on the wrong foot with this gentleman....My dear Sir, we really do not wish to damage your valuables... We are, after all, in the re-insurance business. A gentleman over yonder had one of his onyx balls mischievously inserted into his exhaust and it must have been the devil's job to extract same...It would be terrible if this... wonderful...vase finished up in yours. Now, we offer private insurance to prevent such an eventuality - against vandalism, accidental damage, theft....even a cruel Act of The Almighty is covered - lightning strike, hurricane, earthquake, sudden freezing due to the onset of a new Ice Age - besides any declaration of war, nuclear attack, ionising radiation - whatever the fuck that is - and bloody revolution - not that such events are likely in Fleetwood - but under-insurance is no insurance - so a premium of £25 would be more than reasonable. Notwithstanding - as it is such a nice day, I'm in a good mood, and you are a brand new customer - I have my partner's acquiescence - his tiny, cruel little eyes

confirm it - in offering you a unique and tailor-made deal for this day - and for this day only.....It's a tenner... or Desmond will take great delight in ramming every bibelot on your display either into your arse - or your dog's."

I was sure I'd seen his face somewhere - in a crowd, on a tram, on a poster... I smiled and told him it was very generous of him to offer us such a comprehensive insurance at such a low rate, but I already had the ideal deterrent to vandals, twisters and thieves. My faithful Pudsey, stroked and patted, rose on his paws and sat up straight, with one uncertain wag of his tail and panted. He was nearly as tall as Desmond, and as the latter stared at him I read in his eyes a history of disappointment and despair. My lovely dad, a very big man, had always told me it was the little ones you had to worry about. In Norman I sensed nastiness put on, but in Desmond it was ingrained. In our awkward Fylde jigsaw, he was a very jagged piece. Now, I don't know why I said it, it just came out. Instead of losing my rag at such an outrageous speech, I smiled and said, looking deep into those pained eyes "Desmond - do unto your brother as you would have him do unto you."

"You *what*?" he sneered. "You some sort of religious freak? Pay up, you gobshite, or the lot gets trashed." To be so threatened by a tiny Scouser was queer. Then I saw something glint in the sun. A long blade had appeared from nowhere in that little hand. A chill ran through me and I almost laughed. The situation was bloody stupid - my life being threatened by a man a third my size, over a vile vase and ten quid. I entered a weird dimension where only he and I mattered. The day had gone narrow like the picture on a clapped-out telly, and the shouts and laughter from the rigger pitch were reduced to a buzz and a hum. My arms weakened and my mouth - which wanted to tell him he could have the tenner - froze. I could only think how crazy it was, that so much malice had settled into that small space - into a stranger who had happened my way and who might prefer to stab me the next instant, rather than lose face. A mother and daughter, arm-in-arm, approaching very slowly...took in the scene, stopped and veered away. Norman's eyes were a mixture of approval and horror. Desmond came closer and I looked straight down into his face, knowing somehow that if I looked away again, I would be lost. Then something amazing happened. A growl, the likes of which I'd never heard before, came from my dog's throat, a sound like a saw on hard wood, and he reached across and seized Desmond's wrist in his jaws. The knife fell on my foot. Pudsey let go and gulped as the midget staggered back, looking at the teeth marks. A stream of effing and blinding came from him and he fell over Norman's leg as if that too was part of their routine. Norman was stooping, trying to reach the knife. Immediately, Pudsey stood up and put his forepaws squarely on his chest, knocking him backwards. I unfroze, grabbed the knife, threw it into the boot and slammed the lid. My voice returned, if shakily, and, patting my faithful old Labrador, I told them again that I had no need of extra insurance. A ring of onlookers had gathered and the two up-and-down men turned and pushed their way through them, making menacing gestures in my direction. At the point, my knees buckled and I sat down heavily on the old picnic chair, my backside going straight through the canvas. One of those youths photographed me. It took two strong men to heave me out of the frame.

*

"Well, Stanley. I suppose you're going to tell me you lost them."

"No, you'll be proud of me, Dave. They got into an old nail and drove to a street not far from Bloomfield Rd. A real dump. A terraced house with the upstairs boarded up."

"Right. Can you tell Ollie we've got a night shift. Meet me by the players' entrance at twelve."

“He’s for going over now and sorting ‘em out.”

“Put him on.”

I told him that we’d do it my way or I’d have nothing more to do with him or his pizza.

“There’s going to be no violence - well not much. If you want to go blundering in and get yourself into trouble, that’s your privilege. But count me out. The midget is a real nasty piece of work.”

I told him what had happened and in the end he agreed to let me be in charge.

How would *you* break in? Force the back door? Break a window? My plan was very simple, though a little more devious. The fact that Desmond had developed a real fear of Pudsey meant that he would be the fourth member of our team. He was already feeling pleased with himself, having been treated to the very best fillet steak for his act of loyalty.

The back street was very dismal in the midnight dark and drizzle. But haloes around the three street lamps suggested to me that all might not be lost, and one house stood out bravely from the rest with wall pots brimming over with grey geraniums. The property we were interested in was at the end, in shadow, by the railway bridge. Pointing to the places where Ollie and Stanley should stand, I crouched down, opened the letterbox and shouted “Police, open up!” while hammering on the door as loud as I could. I carried on until the door opened - straight onto a sitting room - and barged my way in, suddenly eye-to-eye with Storming Norman.

“You!” he exclaimed, but surprise was still on our side and my foot behind his ankle and a good push had him over. I rushed Ollie to sit on him. The stairs door flew open and Desmond appeared in his underpants. I deployed Pudsey to back him into a corner. And Stanley shut the front door behind himself. The incursion had taken less than twenty seconds and we were in control. Hardly a word had been spoken. I sat down in an armchair and told Stan to go into the kitchen and find a kettle.

“Right” I said, looking straight down at Norman. “This has got to stop. People are trying to make a living out there. I won’t say it’s quite an honest one, but yours definitely ain’t - and that goes for you too, Oliver Oliphant. Who takes sugar?”

“Are you calling your effin’ dog off?” demanded Desmond.

“When you promise to behave yourself, and show your nice side.”

He slid down the wall and sat, arms folded tight in anger, his little legs pushed straight out in front of him, giving Pudsey the evil eye.

“Are you some kind of social worker or do-gooder, you prick?” asked Norman.

“No.” I said. “Well, maybe...but LISTEN. It would do you good to think this over. Mr O has you pinned. There’s nothing to stop him - or me - from beating you to a pulp - and God knows, I’ve got reason enough after what happened today at the field. And Mr O has justification as well, seeing as he’s on your wanted list and seeing as you’ve been trying to put him out of business, dodgy though it is. But that’s not what we’re into. Ollie, you can get off him in thirty seconds when he’s had time to think that all over.”

“What? Are you sure?” growled Ollie.

I looked around the miserable threadbare room and into Norman’s eyes.

“This ain’t no way to live, pal,” I said.

“It’s easy fo’ you to sit there and say that,” was his bitter reply. “They say crime does na pay, but neither does working hard and doing you best. Ask that wee fellow doon there!”

“Yeah, who are you to pass judgment, you fat prick?” he - the wee fellow - demanded to know.

Fat??? I nearly lost my temper with him but took a deep breath and counted five.

“Okay. I agree - I’ve done alright for meself,” I replied after more thought. “But life ain’t always fair. If I can help you, will you let me? Not just out of the generosity of my great, bleeding heart....Okay Ollie. Let him up. Now, where do you keep your tea bags?”

My hunch that Norman was a clown - had been a clown - was spot on. His name was Norman Norman - and his middle name was also Norman in memory of his uncle Norman Gibson, he said. His domed head and his parents’ stupidity had sealed his fate in much the same way as Mr and Mrs Nummy had sealed their son’s. The economic crisis had not passed the circus by and he had been recently made redundant due to a surfeit of clowns. As for Desmond, he had been one of eight dwarves and each had had to reapply for just seven jobs. He, being slightly taller than the others, had lost out. A world where very small people could only be targets of mirth was a cruel one. They couldn’t be politicians, teachers, lawyers or anything where they had to be taken seriously. Years of ridicule and non-achievement had poisoned him - but not entirely. I told him that Pudsey was really a good dog and invited him to stroke his nose and pat the bridge, the hollow part, which Puds really loved. He reached out and after a hesitation he began to make friends with him. Pudsey panted and whimpered with pleasure and licked the same hand which he had bitten. I watched Des’s empty eyes brim with tears. Kindness couldn’t cure everything but it was worth trying. I asked Norman if they’d kept their circus outfits and he pointed up the stairs. I asked them if they were drawing jobseekers’ allowance and when they shook their heads I told them that they were entitled. I reached into my pocket and gave them five twenties to tide them over. I was hoping to offer them a job.

“Doing what?” asked Des.

“Advertising pizza. Ollie’s scrumptious pizza. I’ll do the leaflets and you’ll give ‘em out.”

We drank up our tea and prepared to leave.

“By the way Desmond. Would you really have stabbed me?”

“I dunno,” he said after a sniffle and a ruffle of Pudsey’s ear. “I felt desperate. I just felt sick and tired of always being told to push off.....I tell you what though, for nowt.”

“What?”

“Seeing you with your fat arse stuck through that chair were a real treat...”

*

The next night at the Legion I mused on the psychology of danger.

“I tell you lads - I used to imagine what I’d do if a punter ever threatened me with a knife - how I’d grab his wrist and give him a bloody good Chinese burn. But when it happens, you just feel paralysed - like in a dream.”

“I just can’t believe,” said Denis furiously “That you’d give such bloody scroungers money after that experience. I have to work hard, Raymond has to work hard - and you used to. Have you gone chuffing mad?”

“Maybe. It’s a business venture. I went to see the owner of Soggy Pizzas.com in Cleveleys this morning and gave him some of Ollie’s to try. Told him we were opening up soon off Bentinck. Should have seen his face! I told him he’d be out of business in a month and he’d got two choices. Either he could pack in and let his shop out to us *or* he could stay in business and use our special dough at so much per base. I gave him three days to decide. This afto he phones to agree - he’s had enough, We can rent his shop. *And* there’s a shop boarded up in Poulton with a big sign - *£150 per week rents this* - I’ve got somebody in mind Lesley knows to run that. We

can make a fortune. I reckon most folks'll respond if you take an interest in 'em. And if you're kind. I were watching the history channel...Did you know, Hitler was knocked about by his step dad? If he'd taken him fishing and helped him with his homework, who knows what the world would be like now?"

Ray had only been half listening.

"Do you reckon Mussolini gave Hitler pizza? He were an Eye-Tie, weren't he?"

9 The Case Of The Old Goat

"I think my husband is having an affair" said the posh voice on the other end. "I'd like you to keep your eye on him. It all started when he began to go to a gymnasium in Cleveleys. I think it's called Fitness Unlimited."

That was the one I was a member of! I asked her to describe him and she told me to come round while he was at the hospital.

"He's having treatment for his back, so if you pop in, I'll let you have his spare passport photo." Mrs Walsh had an air of gentility and poise - she had obviously been a looker in her heyday - a day now sadly well behind her. Her hair was white and she seemed to move with difficulty, as if bone was rubbing on bone. I straightway assumed that she had married a much younger man - she had to be nearly eighty - so when she gave me his little picture I was shocked and she smiled.

"Yes, it's hard to believe that such an elderly gentleman would be capable of deception, but Lionel isn't named after that great beast for nothing. He has, shall we say, his appetites..."

The face staring at me with a hint of a twinkle appeared to be made of a soft stone sculpted and much scored by experience.

"The doctor told him he couldn't expect to retain his old prowess unless he exercised and lost some of his paunch. Then he would regain testosterone flow. I fear he may have regained a little too much" she said with a wry smile.

This was a matter to be handled with some delicacy which is not my strong suit. Yet again, she came to my rescue. She could see, she said, what questions I wanted to ask.

"I can tell that you're wondering what makes me think he's got a girlfriend. And wondering about our married life..."

"Well, I reckon you've got to have reasons for suspecting him...some change in his behaviour?"

"Well, we are having marital relations less frequently...So where is his extra *go* going?"

I felt myself go a dark shade of scarlet. She smiled again.

"Let me be blunt...Instead of three or four times a week, sometimes just twice. So I started thinking that when he says his back's hurting or he says he's too tired, it's probably because his *go* has gone somewhere else earlier that day. I want you to find out whereabouts. I'll give you a hundred pounds when you do."

I frowned, knowing from recent experience how tired physical exercise could make me. Often, I'd doze off around ten only to be licked awake by Puds. So I told her his *go* might have gone to sleep.

"I'd hate you to waste your money, Mrs Walsh. The simplest thing would be just to ask him, as I told another client not long ago."

"Oh, he'd deny it, just like he used to. It's not as if it hasn't happened before. He had a terrible reputation at university. I don't think there was a girl on the course he didn't bed. Let me be blunt again - Lionel has a large one. I've seen plenty."

I must have gone purple this time, and she laughed.

"Oh no" she said "Please don't think ill of me. I meant in my capacity as a doctor. *Mainly*."

She got painfully to her feet and went to a drawer.

“This clinched it” she said. She gave me a little packet. A condom. She had found it in his pocket.....(*Beam me up, somebody please!*)..... To avoid her eyes, I glanced around at her paintings and ornaments - most of them abstract, some erotic - noticed the Guardian and The New Statesman tossed carelessly onto a chair, and calculated that she had been a real swinger in the Sixties. Seeing me look, she nodded. As sharp as a razor she was.

“Yes, we used to have quite an open marriage,” she murmured, half to herself “But that was *then* and this is *now*. In spite of quite a lot of tit for tat, we’ve stayed together nigh on fifty years.”

She rubbed her arthritic knee gently for relief and closed her eyes. It struck me that there were no photographs of children. Now I read *her* thoughts. For the first time her composure - her almost brazen composure - cracked when her bottom lip quivered. I saw that she was terrified of being stranded as the crippled, lonely curator of this museum. I looked at her husband’s roguish eyes and gave him a silent piece of my mind. What an irony that, in spite of our age difference, I was morally more old-fashioned than him - or her.

“I’ll take the case, Mrs Walsh. Text or phone me whenever he’s leaving for the gym and I’ll try to be there.”

*

He was on the walking machine. I was on the bike. His wrinkles and wasting leg muscles, his straggly white hair all betrayed his age, but he was tall, straight-backed and broad-shouldered, as if determined not to give in to a stoop. When he turned, his youthful, smiling eyes penetrated mine and seemed to say *I might look decrepit but all is as good as new in here*. Later, after he had gone into the pool, I watched him through the great windows by the walking machines, and admired how easily he glided through the water from end to end. Once he glanced up and seemed to smile. At no point did he come close to speaking to a woman.

The second time I went there to spy on him, he spent nearly an hour in the gym, mainly doing weights and sit-ups slowly and surely. There were two very pretty women riding side by side on the bikes. Like me and another man, he glanced at them occasionally, but made no effort to engage them in conversation. When a middle-aged woman came past him and he said hello, I began to take more notice. He was smiling at me a lot and I tried to look as uninterested in him as I could. Just as I thought there was a chance he might be heading towards the woman in the corner, he re-racked the barbells he’d been pushing, grabbed his towel, held up a hand of farewell in the direction of no-one in particular and left. I followed him into the pool area and grabbed a newspaper. I counted him do thirty breaststroke lengths, and out of the corner of my eye watched him climb out and go into the changing room. The man was innocent! I was pleased to phone Mrs Walsh and give her the good news but she insisted I go one more time. There had to be another woman - and probably a youngish one - the condom proved it! If I wanted my fee, I’d have to find out a name and take a photo with my phone.

“But what if there is nobody else?” I groaned. “How many times will I have to go before you believe it? Perhaps there’s some other explanation for the.....thingy.”

“Oh please don’t be so mealy-mouthed, Mr Payne. It’s a CONDOM.”

“Alright, alright. But I think he might be getting suspicious. He smiles at me quite a lot. He’s bound to start wondering why I’m there every time he is.”

I got a text message from her at ten fifteen the next morning, just as I was trying to mend a

cupboard door hinge. I was not in the best of humours as the little screw kept coming out. Bumchucks, bloody thing! Pudsey was hanging around and was restless. He hated to see me in a bad mood. I took the decision to go to the gym once more only and to tell her to forget the fee if nothing came of it again.

When I walked into the changing room Lionel was wrapped in a towel, feet in pools of water, having obviously just showered. He smiled and said “Hi, David Payne! You’re a little bit late this morning.”

“You know who I am?”

“Sure I do! You aren’t the only one with powers!”

“Did you ask at the desk?”

“No, no.”

I detected a slight North American accent. Was he perhaps Canadian? Then his towel slipped.... Now, I’m not exactly lacking in the trouser department, but Lionel was in a class of his own. He smiled as I pushed my eyeballs back into my head. Oh dear - a horrible thought struck me. Was Lionel perhaps a secret member of the Bumthorpe cricket team? I must have looked doubly shocked because he threw back his head and laughed.

“There’s a nice café across the road.” he said. “Forget the gym today. Have one on me. I have a proposition to put to you.”

I began to splutter but no sense came out. He told me to worry - he could see what I was thinking but I had the wrong end of the stick. He might have chosen a better metaphor and I felt myself blushing again.

“I’ll put my cards on the table, David. I know Ellie thinks I’m up to my old tricks again, but I’m not. I just want her to think I am. Let me explain...”

He told me that he had gone to fetch the car to save Ellie (*short for Elspeth - a name she hated*) from struggling across the car park at Morrison’s, when he saw her taking down my number from my placard on a pole.

“She’d had that old suspicious look in her eyes for quite a while and suddenly it all made sense. She thought I’d met someone at the gym! She was hiring a snoop. So I decided to play a game back at her - using you.”

“But that was cruel! What kind of a man are you?”

“Okay. I admit the condom was over the top - but I had to convince her she was right. I could have made it worse - could have left a used one in my pocket.”

He laughed, but I couldn’t. I saw red.

“I just do not understand you people. You live in style - you have a standard of living which people I come into contact with can only dream of - and yet you want to play cruel games with each other. I’m out of here.”

He told me to sit down and finish my coffee. He was being cruel to be kind.

“You’ve seen how she suffers with her knees, but she refuses to join the gym and the pool. It’d do her the world of good. I want you to go round and tell her that there’s a petit bourgeois blonde woman with a Range Rover chasing after me. She hates such people. Call her a social climber. What would you call her in Blackpool?”

“Somebody with a bob on herself. A daft snob. I dunno...”

“Whatever. If she knew about such a woman, she’d come up here like a shot to sort her out. And once she saw how nice the facilities are, and the pool, I reckon she’d join. I tried to convince her but she says she’s too old. How much is she paying you?”

“A hundred.”

“Right. If she joins - and you need to persuade her - I’ll double that. Have we got a deal?” £300 would be a nice addition to the £530 for the pizza fund I was putting together. We shook hands on it.

I told Elspeth Walsh that I had some good news and bad news and she chose to hear the bad first. Her hand clutching a tea cup was shaking a little, as I showed her a photo I’d taken of a blonde - any old blonde - climbing into a 4x4 at Morrison’s the previous day - a woman of a certain age with bingo wings and belly rolls.

“God!” she exclaimed. “How *could* he? She has clearly never heard of Elgar, would think that Barbara Hepworth was a clothes designer and could not name even three Shakespeare plays. She lives on microwave meals! She’s a fat.....slob! Why doesn’t he just go and hire a prostitute outside the Tower, if he’s so desperate? *Men!*...”

“The good news, Mrs Walsh, is that she only hangs around him at the gym. And there are one or two others - women around sixty - trying to get up close. They go and ride on the bike next to him. He’s a handsome man. How old is he? Seventy-five?”

“Seventy-one..... How is that good news?”

“They hang around, but he doesn’t show much interest - apart from being polite.”

“You say. But how can you explain that filthy condom?”

I’d puzzled all night over that. The best I could offer was that it might have been a unconscious purchase - there was a machine in the changing room.

“People do strange things when they’re getting on a bit. Do you ever wonder what you did the day before? My mum does - and she’s just turned seventy.”

I kept my fingers crossed.

“Perhaps it’s a sign he’s frustrated” I dared to say. “Perhaps he hoped you would find it and was trying to tell you something....”

“You cheeky young man!” she exclaimed, but a faint smile said she was only half serious. Now I made my main play. I told her that in my humble opinion there was a good chance he might be tempted because of the attention he was getting.

“It’s only human nature. Flattery causes more trouble than a little. If I were you, I’d get down there to keep your eye on things. So far, so good - but don’t bank on it. Now, I’ve done as much as I can. I can’t be his keeper and watch his every move. He’s bound to twig what’s going on. You need to be up there. I’m signing this one off, Mrs Walsh. Can we settle up?”

I left with a cheque for a hundred pounds. A week later, Lionel sent me a cheque for twice that with the message that Ellie was enjoying the rowing machine in particular, as it put no stress on her knees - and of course the pool.

Thank you, David. I’m sorry I used you, said the note. But you were an excellent tool

I took this as a great compliment - coming from a man who was so obviously an expert in that particular field.

10 The Man At The Funeral

“You’ll never believe what I did this morning.... I’ve never felt so embarrassed in my entire life..”

Denis’s old friend from taxi-ing days had died - a man called Billy Sinclair - at the far too early age of sixty-two. Denis had seen his obituary in the Gazette and decided he ought to go. When

he'd got to the crematorium the crowds of mourners seemed not to make sense. Billy had been a single man and Denis had expected just a few cousins, maybe a brother or sister or two to be there - and a few members of the taxi fraternity. He was surprised and disconcerted to count not far off a hundred folk.

"The coffin arrived and two more funeral cars and we got called into the chapel. I sort of sidled in and sat down. Well, as the parson started to get into his stride about the bloke in the box, it dawned on me - horrible - that this were a different Billy Sinclair. My mate were a Scottie and this 'un were a Scouser."

"So - what did you do - get up and leave?" asked Ray.

"How could I - you PLONKER? I were sat near the middle. I had a quick look-round to see if anybody were staring at me, as if to say - *Who the eff are you?* - and God! I froze. Who were waving at me but the Billy Sinclair I knew. I nearly fainted."

Afterwards, that bloke had gone up to Denis and said he hadn't realised he'd known his namesake.

"He told me Billy Sinclair R.I.P. had only been driving in Blackpool a while - long after I'd knocked it on the head. *So how* - he asked - *had I known him?*"

"And you said..."

"What could I say? I had to tell him the truth. He laughed his bloody head off! Said *he* were sixty-six - the jolliest corpse in town. Then he said nobody would know if I went to the wake - he'd cover for me if necessary - so I did - and we both got steaming."

Ray rubbed his chin for a while until his eyes lit. "You know, if you were dead cheeky, like, you could survive on funerals. Just turn up with a tale ready and go back for a nosh. You might get found out once in a while...*I know!* - you could listen to the vicar - and pick up on summat he said about the deceased - he were an angler - a keep-fit fanatic, a canal barge enthusiast, and just say you were a member of his club, if anybody asked. Who'd know? And who'd argue, at a funeral?"

We looked at him amazed. You never really know somebody for sure, do you? Beneath that simple exterior people referred to as Ray Large, there was hiding a truly devious mind...

"Hold on," said Denis. "What if they asked you to describe him? You couldn't go up and open the box."

He thought this over. "Well, you could just look at the coffin and say how tall he was."

"They break yer legs to make you fit at the Co-op," confided Denis.

"That's bollocks, Denis. They buried me mam. We saw her lying nice and straight in the chapel of rest.....*Anyway!*" he exclaimed, inspired again "On the front of the programme there's always a picture. If anybody asked, you'd just show 'em the picture and say he looked like him. You could fill a plate, stuff your face and bugger off before anyone was the wiser."

"How effing sick can you get? Take advantage of a death just to feed your face?"

"It were only a daft idea," whined Ray, suddenly aware he had infringed Denis's sense of taste and decency.

Denis held up his hand for attention and returned to his tale. After the lagers had loosened his tongue at the wake, he had got talking to the live Billy about me, and *he* wanted to hire my services. Somebody in his street had a vendetta against him.

"They keep chucking stuff at the window, doing minor damage, being a bloody nuisance. Their latest trick was to stuff a potato up his exhaust the other morning. There's fifty in it for you, he said, if you can catch 'em and put the wind up 'em. He missed a fare cos of the first spud."

I looked at my watch. It was nearly eleven. I told Denis I'd think about it, but he wasn't

listening.

“One of the mourners - you won’t believe it - was wearing jeans and a Ghostbusters tee shirt. No word of a lie.”

I shook my head. I believed it.

*

Billy Sinclair had a weatherworn face. His slight limp, he told me, was due to a minor stroke he’d had a while back.

“I cannae go oot on the street and fight ’em - in my state of health and at my age. There’s youths over there, and you never know whether they’re carrying.”

Over there referred to the family opposite - the Clarkes - who were noisy and inconsiderate. He had a good idea which one the spud-rammer was.

“Little bugger with a hood and a little bike. Got bigger brothers, though.... I often have early fares to John Lennon and Ringway, so I need my sleep. I’ve been over and asked ‘em times to keep the noise down after eleven but it does nae good. It’s that lad - Kirk - who’s started this game with the tater. Happened twice now. Last time it took me nearly half-an-hour to dig it out with a fork.”

I told him I had a sure-fire way of putting a stop to it - and I’d only charge him thirty, seeing as Denis was a mate. I asked when it had last happened.

“Friday night. I had a get-up at four - so when their bloody music was still going on past midnight I went over and let rip. Starts the car at half-four - engine sputters and stops. The fare were really panicking cos I was late. Do nae think they’ll use me again.”

“Right. Here’s what you do tonight. Go over about half eleven and play hell up. Doesn’t matter even if it’s quiet. Make a real scene. I’ll be in my car behind yours.”

He looked anxious. He didn’t want anybody hurt because that would only come back on him. I told him not to worry.

It was a warm night and the windows opposite were open. Some appalling apology for music - I’m into Country and Western, me - was drifting out onto the dark street. At just gone eleven thirty I watched Billy limp across and hammer on the door. A fat man, scruffy and unsteady, appeared and there was a slanging match. Two youths, one not much more than a boy - Kirk, I guessed - hung out of the window and yelled something. I doubted it was an apology. Back stalked Billy, winked and went into home. Pretty soon his house went dark as prearranged. I settled down low in my Montego to wait for Kirk Clarke - who was always going to be not far short of a villain with a name like that.

You can’t avoid looking up at a light - it’s instinct. Going up for one o’clock, when I was beginning to wonder if anything would happen, a black shape crouched low on a bike appeared from nowhere, like a monster mobile bat. After he’d circled a bit he stopped and stooped down to Billy’s exhaust. I put my headlights full on and of course he looked up. Click! And, startled, away he flew.

By ten the next morning I’d produced a leaflet to be proud of. The face on the photo was as clear as day, as clear as what he intended to do with the potato. The block capitals above it read -
**HAVE YOU SEEN THIS VANDAL? HIS NAME MIGHT BE KIRK. CONTACT
CRIMESTOPPERS BEFORE HE TARGETS YOUR PROPERTY.**

For thirty quid I didn’t mind delivering the hundred or so copies with Pudsey to help in Billy’s

neighbourhood and quite a few local businesses agreed to paste them in their windows. I'd stapled a few on cardboard, like my adverts, and I tied them on lampposts. The exercise was good for me and it took less than an hour.

*

I'm pleased to say that ever since, Mr Sinclair has had no bother with them *over there*. One factor was quite possibly the courtesy call paid to the family by the police a few days after my leafleting. Denis had had a message from Billy.

"He was real grateful, Dave. He's recommending you. No violence. No threats. Job done."

"I reckon the court of public opinion can have quite an influence on how folks behave." I said, a sentence I'd rehearsed.

"The court of public opinion...*the court...of public opinion!* Mmm...I do like that" said Ray, and I felt quite chuffed to see how his eyes shone with admiration. Then he asked me, with a smirk, if I was going to offer the lout a job doing pizza. I shook my head - *No, not this time....*

Denis said "There's a street not far away from Billy's where there's an anti-social family. He heard that a group of neighbours are getting together to try the same tactic. The Payne Procedure. Your fame is spreading *in the court of public opinion....*"

This made me feel even more chuffed. Ray held up his pint and proposed a toast to me - *the best private detective in Blackpool*. He and Denis clinked glasses and winked at one another....

".....Oh, by the way, Dave.....Is it your round or mine?"

"Mine, Ray.....Mine."

11 The Case Of The Lucky Old Lady

Before I update you on our pizza progress, there are a couple of cases I ought to get out of the way first, I reckon. The first involved my favourite animal again. Once you start getting a name for yourself *in the court of public opinion* and word spreads, business begins to blossom. One good word put in by a satisfied customer can be worth a thousand adverts. And so I should have been delighted to be hired on the basis of a recommendation. My phone rang and I listened with growing disbelief to the lady on the other end. Finally, I felt moved to comment.

"Call the fire brigade!" I said. I was dripping wet having just emerged from the shower. It was that really warm spell in late June and I'd come back from the estuary all sweaty. To have my ablutions disturbed by such a frivolous call was infuriating.

"They won't come out." said the elderly voice.

"You must have a neighbour who can sort it. Surely?"

"Mr Cheeseborough can't climb. He has arthritis and piles bad. He doesn't know I know about his piles - but his wife told me. The neighbour the other side is huffy and her son *drinks*."

"It's not my line of work."

"But Mrs Sharkey - who I see at the Church Hall for bingo - says how kind you are - and how much you *like* them. I could spare a fiver. In the outhouse there's a stepladder. I'd go up but I get vertigo bad and I'm eighty-one. Oh the poor thing - I can hear it crying now - he keeps going higher. He's the only friend I've got. Apart from Nora Sharkey and Mr Rodrigues.....when he's in a talkative frame of mind."

Double bumchucks.

Mrs Fryatt lived in a terrace similar to her friend's. She'd told me to come down the side as her

front door was sticking - and she wondered if I'd mind having a look at it after I'd rescued Boris. I'm not exaggerating; this tiny kitten was around twenty feet up in the apple tree. I think the last time I climbed one was when I went scrumping with our Jonathan. The bottom bough, speckled with green, looked old and I could just see it snapping due to my weight. Slowly and trying not to wobble, I put both feet on the platform of the ladder - something you should never try at home, boys and girls - and reached up for the branch. As soon as I'd gripped it, the stepladder did a graceful topple and crashed to the ground. Somehow I pulled myself into the tree. The little beast above me was beautiful pale grey colour with darker grey stripes, like a mint humbug. Of course, the higher I climbed the higher it went. Once or twice I reached high enough to touch it and got hissed at and scratched as a reward. It was hot and the sun was boiling my brains. Sweat was dripping off my head and streaking my glasses. The cat became a blur. You can't reason with a cat like you can a dog, and explain what a good ally you are. I've often wondered why they do climb - and they don't do it just the once and learn their lessons - if they get so afraid of heights and of falling. This was another argument, I reckon, against the notion that they're intelligent. Now, a glance through my clear lens across the back gardens showed me that I was not alone in appreciating the humour of this event. Quite a few neighbours had come out. Every stretch of my hand and every new foothold began to be greeted with oohs and ahs - and every retreat of the cat provoked boos and gales of laughter.

"Haven't you got anything better to do?" I asked the main knot of commentators, some youths sat on a patio.

"No mate," said their ringleader "It's only the antiques on telly - this is much better."

He swigged from his beer can and did a loud belch.

"It's three o' clock on a Wednesday afternoon. Haven't you lot got jobs to go to, you idle bleeders?"

This was greeted with a chorus of oohs. The youth I'd particularly addressed went to the back door and shouted his mother to come and look. "There's a gorilla in this tree, Mam. Quick. You'll miss it!"

I admit, I had to chuckle myself at that. I didn't mind a bit of honest wit and rapier repartee - and my reply brought the house down.

"Bollocks, you."

I had a plan. There was not much further for puss to climb. I opened my shirt, grabbed it, stuffed it inside and buttoned him in. Loud cheers. Well, I'm not a boastful kind of bloke but with the Olympics still a hot topic, I reckon I hold the world record for coming down a tree with a vicious cat in his shirt. Mrs Fryatt had repositioned the ladder but as soon as my foot hit it, over it went again and I found myself swinging on that bottom bough. That youth was quite talented. His Tarzan impression was pretty good. I hit the ground and turned my ankle over. The kitten pushed its head out of my shirt, hissed into my face and bolted. No, not back up the tree - into the house. There's gratitude. Once, I'd got a thorn out of Pudsey's pad and he nearly licked my face off.

"Oh dear," said Mrs Fryatt. "I'm afraid you've hurt yourself."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Oh dear. You've knocked my delphiniums down."

What happened next made me glad I'd accepted the commission. She offered to make me a cup of tea and I gratefully accepted, having a Sahara-like thirst. I got to my feet and hobbled after her. As soon as I entered her kitchen, I smelt it. She had lost her sense of smell and, when I exclaimed *gas*, she asked me if I was sure. No doubt whatsoever. I found the gas tap and turned it off, before opening all the windows. If it hadn't been for bad Boris, Mrs Fryatt would have

been an ex-cat owner.

“So, it were worth getting scrat up for then?” said Ray, “Let’s have a look at your chest.....Blimey...Looks like you’ve been with a desperate mucky woman.”

“Your missus, maybe, Ray. *She* must be desperate.”

He took this the wrong way and he almost grabbed Denis by the scruff. He asked him what he’d heard (their wives had been going to Weightwatchers together *for years* - (which really showed how pointless Weightwatchers was for some.....))

“Nothing, Raymond. Cool it. If you were really that bothered, you’d shave twice a week.”

He rubbed his chin and did some thinking.

“No” he said finally. “She likes her Saturday nights. Drink up. My round.”

12 Make Pizza Not War

“You know, Dave, I dulnt know ‘ow ever to thank you for this chance to get back to where I were!” said Ollie, rolling out his pizza dough. I watched him cut out a few circles and spread his special blend of passata, puree and herbs with one swirl of a spatula. We had the two takeaways already mentioned in operation and business was brisk. Norman Norman and Desmond Whitworth had been going out and about, doing daft things in their clown suits and giving out leaflets. Soggypizza.com’s chef had had a prima donna moment, reluctantly tasted Ollie’s and then magically calmed down. I’d promised him he could stay on at the other shop on condition that he came to watch Ollie and learnt some of his tricks, although Ollie was determined not to give away his main secrets. Now I had a very difficult question to put to Ollie. It concerned Lesley’s erstwhile colleague, latterly tormentor.

“How can you thank me Ollie?? Well, do you remember that other shop that’s vacant in Poulton? I want to open that up too. There’s a lad called Tony Mancini - a distant relative of the Mancini who used to be at Leicester under O’ Neill. Aye, *him!* The great man!”

Alright, the *distant relative* bit were a bit of a fib - but can you can prove that all Mancinis, Oliphants, Paynes and Smiths, etc are *not* all descended from one head man and his woman? Any-ol-how, Ollie stopped rolling and spreading and looked at me suspiciously.

“Worrabout him?”

What I said next nearly got me sat on by Big Ollie. If he’d have *physically* exploded, he’d have made quite a mess.

“Yer what?? Give me secrets away - to a STRANGER?”

“He’s Italian! What if you have a coronary? At this rate you will! Who will know what your mother passed on to you, if you kick the bucket? Think about it. Have him as an apprentice. Teach him the trade, like. He needs a job. His old mamma is poorly and he’s out of work - like you were.”

He hurled a lump of dough onto the table and rolled furiously. I left him for ten minutes and had a word with Stanley in the front of the shop who was chatting up Angela, a lovely local girl I’d hired to serve the customers. It was just gone five and it wouldn’t be long before we’d be open.

“Does he support Man City?” he yelled from the back. “I ‘ate them more than United.”

I went back in. “Don’t know Ollie. All I know is, life has been a cruel to him. A bit like you. I’d like to give him a break. Shall I give him a ring? He could come round and you could interview him. If you don’t like him, we’ll forget it.”

“No.....I mean *yes*.....Right....‘e can cum and watch. No. Wha’ I want is your services in exchange fo’ me secret. I want to hire you - proper, like...you know...Oh God....”

Then he sat down, that great big man, with tears welling in his eyes. He did his best to stop them but they just kept coming until they were pouring out of him and dripping out his pudgy hands and apron. He was nodding and shaking but no noise came out. I made him a cup of coffee.

“Come on, Oliver.” I said. “Pull yoursen together. We open in ten minutes and there’s already phone orders coming in.”

He did a massive sniff and went to wash his face at the sink. He said he’d be okay - he would talk to me later.

That same night, when we’d shut, I talked over with Ollie what had happened to him in Ormschurch. It turned out that he just couldn’t get over it. His mamma had left him, besides her secrets, a small bequest which he wanted to use in memoriam and celebration of her wonderful kitchen skills. Her brother, his uncle, had moved to Leyland and after her death he’d decided to move up there to be near his few remaining relatives. Besides that, there were loads of northern teams in our beloved Leicester’s division, or hovering close to relegation from a higher one.

In nearby Ormschurch he’d found the perfect premises to open a pizzeria. The nearest competition was three miles away and he believed in live-and-let-live. Ollie’s parlour had done so well that he began to think of expansion. But one night, a muffled voice had told him over the phone that if he didn’t clear out, he’d be burnt out. It had to be his competitor Clifford Banks, or somebody acting on his behalf. Customers had been commenting on how they’d driven out of their way to come to Ollie’s rather than Banks. *His pizzas made the other place’s taste like wet cardboard* - had said one.

Ollie managed a faint smile to recall this, but it soon vanished.

“*And* I were cheaper!....Well, you know the rest. In the middle of the night a rag wi’ petrol on it were lit and stuffed through the letter box. I’d forgotten to renew the insurance. End of story....If I could only get justice for me and me mother, I’d be a different person!”

I told him he could hire me, but not to get some sort of violent revenge.

What did I take him for? - he retorted. He was out of that scene for good.

“No, Dave. I’d like to fight fire not wi’ fire but summat else. Wi’ pizza. I agree to your suggestion. That Italian lad you mentioned....I could do wi’ a good apprentice.”

I rang Tony Mancini and invited him to come around the following evening. He gratefully accepted - and Ollie decided to like him.

The next Tuesday, we took a trip south in my Montego to that old Lancashire market town of Ormschurch and he pointed out the premises of his rival.

“The rotten bugger!” he exclaimed. “‘E’s even ‘alf stolen me name. Mamma O’s Perfect Pizzas.”

“How do you know it’s the same business? He might have sold out.”

“No...There ‘e is, the slimy git.”

We watched a large, balding man waddle across the concourse from a Jaguar to open up the shop. Two doors away on the parade, another premises was boarded up and a large smile began to spread across our faces as the same idea occurred to us. The place was for rent and after a bit of haggling on the phone I got it down to one hundred and eighty a week. In its most recent existence it had been Bev’s Butties. We fetched the key and had a quick look in. It needed little doing to it - just a bit of smartening up - and, of course, a couple of pizza ovens in the back. We sat in the car and did some calculations. If the ovens could be bought the next day, by Saturday we could be in business. It would be a nice surprise for Banks if we could get it right. I knew a pair of chaps who could help out and who would not be intimidated by him or his mates. Any-

old-how, would he set fire to a shop in the same parade as his? Ollie looked at me and pointed something obvious out. Who would run the shop? Ollie could spare himself for one night - Saturday - if we opened one shop in Blackpool at eight rather than six. He looked up at me and gestured with his open palms. It was then I decided that Tony Mancini would not be the only apprentice on Wednesday night. I knew that Lesley had some leave due from the council. How would she feel about serving pizza and living over a shop for a while?

*

What the shop was to be was kept under close wraps that week. Desmond proved to be a good and willing carpenter and shop-fitter and Norman his hard-working labourer. The shop sign - it took me one whole day to paint it - would be the last thing to be put into place. Lesley proved very willing to take lessons with me and Tony - big, big, big tearful reconciliation! - in pizza dough rolling and topping. Ollie took Tony to one side and disclosed his key secrets, swearing him to not reveal them. I drove Ollie back to Ormschurch on Thursday afternoon, when the fitters had installed the ovens and a great fridge, and he surveyed the shop with approval. Norman and Des had laid some classy Italian cream floor tiles with irregular air bubble patterns. The walls, half-tiled and the rest emulsioned white, made the place look spacious and tasteful. Some potted plants and pictures in warm colours added a great finishing touch. I'd already paid a clandestine visit to Banks's place and had been struck immediately by how dingy and scruffy it looked. And the pizza was as floppy and flabby as I could have wished it. Norman told us that Banks had stuck his head round the door the previous afternoon to enquire what was planned, and Norman had shrugged. He thought it might be a sex-shop. *No way* - Des had countered - *it was going to sell fancy goods. Or was it going to be a news agent's?* Banks had smiled and remarked how glad he was that it wouldn't be *foody*.

"Not a chippy then, or a chinky?"

"Oh no."

"The last place didn't stand a chance," he'd said with a smug grin. "God knows why people invest their life-savings in a shop without a proper business plan. Crazy."

On Friday we smuggled in kilos and kilos of Ollie's special dough, mozerella and bins of toppings in their special marinades; olives, mushrooms, red onions, chicken sliced ultra thin, sweet ham, great prawns, mussels, squid, fresh pineapple, fresh tuna, crab - head meat and white meat, beef fillet, peppers, anchovies, skippers - everything that had ever topped a pizza and some things - like asparagus and artichokes - which rarely had. Ollie showed us again how to prepare and arrange things and on Saturday morning I had a run-through with Les. The early efforts were alright - but by the afternoon the product was very good - almost Ollie standard - and Norman and Des were more than happy to be our guinea pigs. Ollie was so impressed that he got the bus back to Blackpool to organize our other businesses. So he missed the grand opening. In some ways it was probably a good thing - and we took plenty of snaps to show him later. He had, he said as he left, his particular way of getting his own back on Banks which would leave him occupying the moral high ground. I squinted at him suspiciously before he went and he clapped me on the shoulder, telling me not to worry.

I'd taken a rival menu away with me and we had made all our pizzas a pound less and bigger. At just gone six, after Banks's shop had opened, Norman and Desmond emerged in costume and performed a double act on a ladder, sawn in two unequal lengths, to screw the shop sign into place, removing the cover to reveal the original legend OLLIE'S ITALIAN PIZZA in red, green

and white on a yellow background. It looked great. A few onlookers laughed and clapped. Desmond did cartwheels and pratfalls. Norman gave out leaflets and squirted the kids with his carnation. Eventually the commotion brought out first the counter girl and then the chef from our rival's. He took out his mobile from his pinafore, and sure enough, ten minutes later a Jaguar came speeding up the road. Banks got out and Norman and Desmond did a deep bow. He stared at the shop sign and his eyes almost popped out. Lesley took photos.

"Ollie?!" he exclaimed to himself. "I thought..."

"You thought what?" I asked, coming alongside him. "Thought you'd burnt him out for good?"

"How dare you insinuate such a thing! I'll sue you for libel!"

"I think you mean slander, Mr Banks. Libel's what you write."

"You meant to say, of course, Mr Payne" said Lesley loudly "That when his shop burnt out two years ago, Mr Banks had absolutely nothing to do with it."

Everyone overheard all this of course and soon tongues would wag. I invited him in to try some decent pizza but he went off in a huff. Our leaflets promised one free pizza with every order.

And soon they were queuing out of the door while our competitor had no trade at all. Later, I slipped his chef a fiver for Banks's phone number, and told him I'd double his wages if he'd bake for us. It took him all of five seconds to throw off his apron and come over. The girl assistant, bored to tears, went home. I sent Banks a text.

My colleagues Dippo and Dimmo double as watchmen. When one sleeps, the other watches. We have surveillance cameras. Put your prices down and so will we. We'll give pizza away, if necessary, until you retire.

Not long after he phoned back.

"You can't do this to me! I've taken out a big mortgage on our new house."

"Well, all I can tell you is that you'll have to downsize - like Mr Oliphant had to, thanks to you."

Within a month he would be shut but not before Ollie, with Stanley's help, delivered to his mansion - up for sale - an ultra large pizza with pieces of pineapple arranged in a huge smile. Now, at last, Ollie could smile properly too.

13 The Groom Vanishes

This is a difficult one. Skip it if you like happy endings. The Scouser voice on my phone was pleading with me to help.

"Our brother's gone missing and he's due to get wed tomorrow."

My alarm clock said six thirty-five. It ought to have been light but the window was dark blue and rain-lashed. It was a terrible morning and if you'd have woken up after being in a deep sleep for months, and had no idea it was a Friday in July, you'd have sworn it was November. A dark storm was blasting the whole coast, the sort that makes me wonder whether it had been on such a day that our town had got its name. The young man sounded so desperate that I overcame my natural reaction to tell him to do one. Almost crying with gratitude, he gave me the name of the guesthouse and I got dressed.

Are there more depressing places on earth on a wet, windy early morning than a seaside resort? Cheery and gaudy attempts at diversion seem to make it worse. I drove past the North Pier which had spookily half vanished in the rain and gloom, the kind which amusement arcade owners prayed for. The bright lights of the Golden Mile were streaming down my car windows making me think that the place was now giving up all efforts to be cheery, and was decomposing. The guesthouse I'd been phoned from was in a narrow street away from the Front. It was called Westward Ho - not a good name in view of it facing east. From my taxi days I knew it well. It

had always smelt of dirty bodies and bad food and as soon as I walked through the door it was like going back in time. The same floral carpet ran along the hall, the same woodchip paper lined the walls. The aerial photo of the town, tower, beach and sea on a sparkling day seemed ludicrous. A sign asking residents to please respect other guests after midnight had had *bollocks* scrawled on it. I made my way upstairs past the suspicious landlady in a limp pink dressing gown - not me, her - and knocked on door number seven.

The chap I'd offered to help was a picture of ghastly, unslept, hungover misery.

"Our Gary's only just seventeen. I promised our mam faithfully I'd look out for him. God knows what she'll say."

He began to tell me a disturbing story. They - a third brother, their cousins and mates - had had the predictable skinful and had gone at midnight to the beach for a game of footy in their Liverpool kit. They'd challenged some lads from Wigan and won six-three.

"Then the wind started getting up so we jacked it in. Gary was laughing and joking, but when we got back here and there was just me and him, he started to cry. He was having big doubts about marrying Denise but he wouldn't want to hurt her for all the world. I told him - *you're bevvied up - things'll look better in the morning...*"

I went to the window and watched a milkman scuttling back to his float. Things look better? How could they??

"Do the others know he's missing?"

"No."

"Keep it all to yourself. Lots of grooms get cold feet, pal." I said quietly to the dingy net curtains. "I only wish my buggers had frozen up..."

He told me not to jump to conclusions. They weren't scallies or chavvies. He was twenty-one and doing a Classics degree at Liverpool and Gary was doing A Levels. He had got Denise pregnant and had promised their mother - they were a Catholic family - that he'd do the right thing. He'd leave school and get a job. Straightway I thought of Denis. And then of me.

"I told him to get some sleep and I tried to stay awake. But when I woke at half-five, his side of the bed was empty. What bothers me, he's been under the doc for depression. He's that way inclined."

So why the hell get him pissed?? I didn't say it though.

I drove slowly around the streets while he looked for a red shirt amongst the winded figures, all streaking hair and flapping jackets. We stopped at various places; cafés and shop doorways - whenever we could see a sleeping heap of clothes - and a couple of dosshouses I knew. We even went to the Salvation Army shelter. We drew a blank everywhere. He snivelled and told me angrily how the police had lost interest as soon as he'd told them it was a stag party.

"You can't blame the police, pal. At this very minute there are probably a hundred lads and lasses separated from their groups, waking up next to a bird or bloke they picked up last night. It's odds-on your brother is."

I tried to make this sound convincing, but I didn't believe it myself. No, he said, Gary wasn't like that. I stopped the car and tried to rally us.

"Oh come on! Last fling and all that. He got up, went out and met somebody in an all-night caff. Probably someone feeling the same way as himself. He'll be feeling like shit now.....And wishing he was dead."

Have you ever wanted something unsaid, like an email unsend? My great big mouth. Quickly I added "He might even be back at the digs now, wondering where you've gone."

“Look, Dave, I know you’re trying to cheer me up and I appreciate it. But Gary’s different. He’s shy.”

This would be my saddest case. I didn’t charge him. As we drove back along the front towards the Tower, buffeted and bulleted, he told me to stop. He had a feeling that this had been the place where they’d played football. We got out. The storm stopped mattering. We both knew what we’d find. Soaked through to the bones in seconds, we walked down the slope from the road to the sands. Tucked away, neatly folded in the corner of the great wall was a red shirt with TAGGART - his surname - on the back, plus red socks, underpants, trainers and white shorts. While the brother walked around in circles helplessly shouting GARY and sobbing, I looked out to sea. To my right, the brave, jolly lights and the adverts and the signs and the blown-up pictures of minor talents seemed even more cheap and vulgar. They could all be switched on and off, unlike the terrible scene on my left. Walking back up the slope, as the brother fell to his knees and searched through those few belongings, I phoned the police.

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“They’ll probably never find the body” said Denis. “God help his family - and that poor girl.” “Maybe he went for a swim and couldn’t handle it,” said Ray. “How many drownings are there like that very year? In spite of the warnings. Ale and sea water don’t mix. Remember that lad washed up in May?”

“I do. Awful.... Well, I went back down to the beach. I told the brother to tell the police nowt about what Gary had said to him about having doubts and all. I told him to say they’d just got separated and that he’d mentioned earlier going for a swim..... as a joke, like. He said that’s what he’d do. Spare his mother and the bride even more pain. He’d take all the blame on himself - for not keeping an eye on him.”

Denis said that was good thinking. He looked into his glass and wondered out loud just how many drownings weren’t really accidents.

“Promise you two, you’ll keep all that under your hat.”

They solemnly swore. Inadvisably, Ray tried to inject a little humour.

“Who knows - he might turn up in Australia - like that Stonehouse bloke.”

Denis shook his head and went to the bar.

14 Bingo!

Another lad had gone missing. Mrs Roberts was on the verge of hysteria. Her son, Tony, a schoolboy of fifteen and eight months had not come home from school six days ago. Of course, she’d reported it to the police but, once she’d described him - six foot and looking eighteen - and admitted he was a bit of a rebel at school, they’d sort of lost interest. Had he had a row with her or his dad? – a constable had asked. *No - she was a single mother and he was just too much to handle.* This admission had sealed it with the cops. Any number of teenagers went off like he had each year. I was tempted to say I couldn’t help either - but the more she told me, the more unusual the matter seemed.

“He’s very sensitive. He gets bullied at school by some of the other boys. He hangs around with the girls and likes fashion. Can you hear what I’m saying? He’s vulnerable, Mr Payne, and I’m worried to death he’s going to finish up exploited by some dirty old.....man. He just said he’d had enough of being ordered about at school - and I found a note that night in his room telling

me not to worry, he'd be in touch."

Well, he hadn't phoned and she was sure he'd come to grief. She was so desperate that I could hardly refuse to help. I went round to the address - a respectable semi-detached house - and quite unexpectedly found a very smart and attractive woman. We form stereotypes, don't we - and she didn't fit mine at all. On her sideboard was a photograph of a beautiful boy. He was half-caste. "I met his father on holiday in the Carribean. He went home when Tony was three. Of course, his colour is another reason for the kids - and I reckon a few of the teachers - to pick on him. I want you to find him and persuade him to come h-home. He's so clever, I don't want him to give up at school. I'll pay you a thousand...anything!"

I made her a calming cup of tea - our national remedy for most upsets. I wanted a list of friends, relatives and, most importantly, a recent photograph. Unfortunately, the best she could provide was the one on the sideboard - taken when he'd started secondary school. When I asked her to tell me more about him, she mentioned his love of drama and writing his own poetry which he enjoyed reading aloud. A sensitive lad indeed. After my previous tragic case I was praying that this one would end happily. We all know only too well what the victims of cowardly bullies may resort to.

I went round to interview - with his parents' permission - Hanif, a schoolfriend. All he could tell me was that Tony was dreading failing his GCSEs the following year, and causing upset to his mother.

"He's not doing enough work. He hates school. He knows he's going to do pretty rubbish. He just said to me last month, he reckoned he'd easy get a job if he left and lied about his age."

This gave me something to bite on, and, on hearing that Tony had made plans, I felt more optimistic that - in the immortal words of George Formby - everything would turn out nice again. Now then, I asked myself, putting myself into the shoes of her Tony, where would I try to exploit my dramatic talents and earn a crust if I could? The answer, of course, had to be the Golden Mile. I rang his mother to ask her if Tony could sing and she said he had a lovely voice - and he could play guitar. She told me to hold on, she'd go upstairs and check.....yes, it had gone.

Any-old-way, I blew up that charming photo of the boy on the printer and packed Pudsey into the car to wear out pad and shoe leather on the prom. I'd cobbled together a placard on a pole with the lad's picture under the slogan MISSING - SEEN HIM? And there I stood outside the Tower amongst the swirling crowds of high season. Most people seemed sympathetic but of course some knobheads came along who imagined they were dead funny. Here's just one instance of the morons you have to put up with down there. A stag party in striped pyjamas surrounded me and one, very sozzled, said "I've seen him, mate!"

"Oh really? Where?"

"Just this minute."

"Where?"

"On that board you're holding."

"Tee - double u - ay - tee spells you. Now **do** one."

Of course, they all fell about laughing and one was sick. Pudsey whimpered. He hated for me to be humiliated. We moved on and after more stupid, unpleasant remarks - one bird suggested I was a paedophile - I took the photo off and binned the placard. A child was missing, for God's sake!...I took more copies into all the boozers in case he tried to get hired as an entertainer - and for one minute I thought the busker up by the entrance to the pier might be him, but it wasn't. After two hours of putting my head round doors and getting nowhere I started to question my

theory. Maybe he was holed up in a hotel room, as his mother feared, with some dirty old man. Rent boys were not unknown in the town, particularly up the north end where the swankier hotels were. I decided to put them on my visiting list for the way home, and leave pictures of him with receptionists.

It was starting to drizzle and punters were making their way into arcades and bingo parlours. I looked at my watch and Pudsey looked up at me. He was fed up too. As we were passing Silver Palace Amusements And Bingo, a flash of glittering white caught my eye, as of course it was meant to. It came from a one-piece costume barely covering a very shapely, tanned body. I was about to trudge on when a sight of the profile under a large pink plume made me stop again. No...surely not.....? I tied Puds to a pole, went in and sat on a stool at the back, next to a rather large comic-postcard lady, who was studying four bingo cards and working her way rapidly through a stick of banana rock. The pretty woman in pearly-white, not twenty yards away, holding a silver tray with drinks on, had her back to everyone. Suspicion began to harden into certainty. It was a body I knew. When she turned round, to face the audience I broke into a huge smile. Yes, it was. It was my old friend Irenya Capstick. As the bingo caller paused, she held the tray higher and announced “By-itter ly-emon! Did a-ny-one order a by-itter ly-emon?” I held my hand up and over she glided, stopping dead in her glitzy high-heels as soon as she recognized me.

“You!” she hissed, not quite in a Slav accent, but then recovered. “Oh - oh - how nice to see you-ou a-gain Mr....Pay-en? Bingo is nice hobby, ye-es?”

“Not really. Is this one of Trevor’s other pies he has fingers in, then, hey?”

She actually blushed before moving off again in search of the bitter lemon order. I was about to push off when the caller’s voice made me pause. It was melodic and not ridiculously exaggerated as most are. It was almost hypnotic. Outside, people were stopping as if under his spell, the Lorely caller luring holidaymakers to their gambling doom! It was a bit hard to get my eyes used to the dimmer light at the far end. The fruity fellow was slim and tall in a tuxedo. And tanned. And....bugger me sideways! - it was Tony Roberts! It was! He was just a bigger version of the photo - a very, very handsome young man. I nearly fell off my stool and could have kissed the fat woman next to me. Irenya was still having no success with the by-itter ly-emon and I held up my hand again. Over she came, though reluctantly, and I beckoned her to come close.

“I’m going to get you closed down, me duck,” I whispered in her lovely tiny ear.

“You wot?” she yawped in broad Essex.

“Yep. Your caller is a schoolboy. Here’s his picture. His mam hired me to find him.”

She stood up dead straight and put the tray down next to the big woman.

“Is the-ere a-ny-where we could have li- ttle private chat, Irenya?” I asked in not a bad impersonation of her.

“Wait till after the next ’ouse. There’s a changing room backstage.”

Five minutes later, while they were checking a card, I saw her open a door in the far left hand corner and she beckoned me to follow her. As I drew near to the door, another bathing belle hostess - but not quite in the Irenya class, being sour-faced and quite a bit meatier - came out, trying to fix the awkward pink plume into her headband, whispering *shit* under her breath. Flash and vulgar, just how the punters love their fun! Irenya sat on a turned-round chair with her long legs provocatively spread on either side, smoking a king-size fag.

“Close the door.” she said. “Miserable cow, that Samantha.”

There was another chair and I sat down. It was quite a narrow room with a mirror along one side and pegs for clothes along the other. At the end, a door was ajar and there was a toilet just

visible, still hissing and filling up with water. It poned. She blew smoke away to one side and fanned the air. On the counter by the mirror stood a half-empty glass of white wine which she picked up and sipped delicately.

“Want one?” she asked, picking up the bottle.

“No thanks. I’m tea-total.”

“Bloody Nora!.... Now then, what’s this crap about Tony? ‘E’s nineteen. ‘E told me ‘e was. ‘Old on a minute..... ‘As bloody Trevor ‘ired you agin to spy on me?”

I shook my head slowly, first in denial - and then in admiration. “Who are you really, Irenya?”

“Nicola Gibson. From Chingford. Not that it’s your soddin’ business.”

“*Tony* is though.” I showed her the photo again and she took it.

“You and Trevor know perfectly well there are regulations about youngsters working. He’s not sixteen till next March. No word of a lie. And his mam wants him home.”

“Fifteen? Un-bloody-believable. Good God, what’s ‘e gonna be like when ‘e’s twenty?” she said, more to herself than me. Then she looked up and smiled in a kind of triumph. “It’s a real struggle, you know...”

“You what? You surely don’t mean.....Oh, Irenya, what have you got yourself into now? What about the elastic bands?”

She threw back her beautiful head and body and laughed. Then, heaving herself up on the chair to sit straight, she slapped her long stockinged feet flat on the floor and showed me a nasty - in fact - quite an ugly side of herself.

“Now you listen to me, you self-righteous snooping bastard. ‘E’s fine here. We go’ a fla’ upstairs. Trevor don’t know. ‘E’s the best caller we’ve ever ‘ad - you can see ‘ow the place is packed. He rhymes *brilliant*. And can sing. A real na’-ral.”

She relaxed and drank a good glug of Blossom Hill, watching to see how her speech sank in.

“You listen to me. I left ‘ome at sixteen...made me own way...went all rahnd the world on cruise ships. I’ll make sure ‘e’s fine. But if you say anyfing to Trevor...I’ll tell ‘im you swindled ‘im out of three ‘undred nicker - that I *was* shagging Pallet. I don’t give a flying fuck!! Trevor knows people who’d break your legs - just for a night out on the piss.”

“You’re bluffing. This is nowt to do with Trevor...well, it is. But that’s beside the point. Oh, bunchucks. Why ain’t my cases ever straightforward?”

“One of these days, the miserable git’ll ‘ave a coronary on the nest - if I can do anyfing abaht it - and then I’ll be mega-rich, ye-e-e-ah!”

Yes, she’d really said that. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. She laughed again, louder, squealed in fact. The wine?? She could see she was winning and started to slap the charm on thick again. She’d been a singer, stand-up comic, stripper, dancer, escort, croupier and female impersonator. Did I want to hear her Margaret Thatcher? Well, she gave me that *Maggie’s not for turning* spiel and, honest, if you’d closed your eyes, you’d have sworn that the old bat was right in front of you.

“So, David, what you gonna tell Ol’ Mother ‘Ubbard then? That ‘er boy’s being exploited by a forty-four year old vamp who can’t keep ‘er ‘ands off of ‘im? “

She stubbed out her fag, coughed and squinted. I replied that I’d tell his mother the truth, and then she could decide what should be done. This made her change her tune.

“Dave, listen. You don’t ‘ave to say you’ve been ‘ere. If you promise not to breathe a word of this to anybody...”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. She reached across her bosom and started to undo the zip under her armpit.

“Lock the door.”

Half-an-hour later I was knocking on Mrs Roberts’ door, having left poor old Pudsey kipping in the car. I followed her into the lounge where she turned and looked at me apprehensively. I asked her if she wanted to hear the bad or the good news first. She burst out crying. My great big mouth again! She got herself under control and whispered ...*the bad*.

“Well, he’s moved in with a girl...no a lady...a pretty lady.....she’s a *bit* older than him....She’s really keen on him. She thinks he’s seventeen...I didn’t know whether to tell her the truth or not.”

Her dismal face lit up. “That’s the bad news? Can’t believe it! All these years, I’ve been surer and surer he was - you know - not keen on girls....no GAY. Is she really a girl?”

In my glove compartment, I’d found that fabulous photo of Irenya/Nicola from my second case and I showed it to her. Her eyes popped.

“She looks a bit older than she is...” I said, reddening.

“She’s GORGEOUS! What’s the good news, then?”

I winked. “Well, he’s got a great job entertaining. The punters love him -”

“Is he reading his poetry and singing his songs?”

“Definitely. To a large audience. He’s coming round tomorrow to tell you he’s sorry for worrying you. He’ll tell you all about it. Then you’ll have to make your mind up.....but can I just tell you a bit about me, Mrs Roberts? It might help. I left school at fifteen year and nine months. I’m doing A Level English next year. There’s more than one way to make the most of yourself. Tony sounds a lot like me - had his bellyful of school. Best let him leave now. He’ll go back when he’s good and ready. It took me till I were 49. If he’s as clever as you say, one day he’ll want to study. If not, he’s made the right choice. There, free advice. Just give me thirty for me expenses and time.”

*

“You did WHAT?” demanded Ray.

“I told her I’d left me dog tied to a pole and he’d be worried. I just told her to keep her tits in her costume and went. I had a stern word with the lad on the way out.”

Ray looked at Denis astonished. Denis looked at the table, ignoring him.

“A gorgeous bird lays it on a plate and you prefer your bloody hound? Hells’ teeth! You’re cracked.”

Ray started staring into the scene I’d described and his dingy eyes widened, the fat lecher. Denis looked at me and shrugged, as if he wanted me to justify myself more.

“Look, Ray. Having sex with a slut in a dingy, smoke-filled room where her fat mate has just had a smelly dump is not my idea of true romance. No way I’d have got it up! I’d have needed Den’s vacu-pump. And Pudsey was real thirsty.”

Ray clapped his hands to his ears and slowly rotated his fat self through three hundred and sixty degrees of awful disbelief.

“And besides, pretty though she is, I just didn’t fancy her. Where *ain’t* she been? And if I’d gone and done it, there’s a certain person I couldn’t have looked in the eye again.”

“What, Pudsey?” said Denis,

“Give over. You know who.”

“You must have been tempted, though, but,” said Den.

“Maybe a bit. Not really though.. No.....Mmmm....Well....”

I'd been tempted to flex my biceps and talk about the heart of a true red-blooded Englishman, but Den's face anticipated it and told me not to.

"I dunno, David," said he, draining his lager. "You're either a bum bandido on the quiet - or a saintly one-off."

* * * * *

Can I just say something at this point? I'll break off from the story. Please bear with me. I have to confess, I'm no angel - I've had my flings and done things which make me cringe to think about. I cheated once on Glenys in the back of my taxi when this drunken bird couldn't pay the fare and I felt physically sick for it all the next day. I've overcharged drunks and dickheads. I've been idle and wasted time and opportunities and ignored good advice. I look at kids now and see them going off to college and I could give myself a bloody good kick. I could have gone as well, if I'd had the right guidance. To come across as big-headed or over-clever would be the last thing I'd want to do, but when we went, me and Sue, to Saturday morning pictures for kids, the manager had a quiz afterwards with sweets and rock for prizes, I always came away with a lot. I just knew the answers. My English teacher Mrs Peake kept on to me to make *more of myself*. I never did though - just like in Mr Savage's maths lessons and in most others - being determined to leave as early as I could and follow in my dad's tyreremarks, him having got out of selling rock when I was thirteen to drive a taxi up and down the prom.

Sometimes, when Ray wasn't out, me and Den would sit down the Legion and talk about all sorts of topics. For one thing, we both watched *Horizon*. He liked to take John Le Carré novels with him to Belgium and Germany and he lent me a couple. They were hard-going but worth it in the end. Once you've read him, trashy thrillers aren't worth opening. In my mid-forties I began to regret neglecting my education. Dad had been half-right and half-wrong- telling me I was a waster - true - but he'd accepted too easily that it was impossible to turn me round. It wasn't that I was ashamed later to have not one qualification to my name, it was that I realised that there was a huge book, getting longer, out there entitled Things I Don't Know. Not many Christmases ago I went into a big bookshop to look for a pop-up reader for Sue's little granddaughter Tyler, and I remember just standing there staring at the rows and rows of books which seemed to all be whispering *ignoramus* - like that idle twat Mr Savage had done. I just had to come out - and bought her a cuddly toy instead.

Any-way-round, I plan to live to a hundred now, just so that I can make up lost ground. With Howard Nish's patient guidance at the Tech, we've been battling our way through Middlemarch. Like most women, Eliot goes on a bit and can be hard to follow - like Ray's sister who has to say every single thing that comes into her great fat head. But with Eliot there are, like, little doors on every page - a bit like an advent calendar, only there's never a flat picture square behind them, but passageways leading to strange places in her mind. I'm determined to get to the end of Middlemarch to see what she does with all her people. And, as Howard says, who need a time machine when you've got a classic novel? And, dear Mrs Peake, who knows where I'd be now if I'd listened more to you and less to my own wayward thoughts and my lovely, adorable, easy-going dad?

I just thought this was the right place to get all that off my chest before describing my final case which took me way beyond lost cats, minor thuggery and wayward spouses. That early August week started brightly and straightforwardly enough, even though I did have something on my mind....

15 The Case Of The Devious Private Eye.

"I feel terrible," said I one night in the Legion. "As if being fifty wasn't bad enough. I can't stop thinking about it..."

"I know what you mean," said Ray. "It only seems like last year I were forty. I had a curious thought, though..."

"Oh? When do you have any that aren't?"

"Shurrup!... Say I did summat really bad and got slammed up for it, then the rest of my life would go really slow, wouldn't it?"

"Like Albert Einstein" said Denis.

Ray rubbed his chin for a minute and said "What did he go down for then? I thought he were the hangman, like."

"Oh you great knob! He were a scientist. Albert *Pierrepoint* were the hangman. Give me STRENGTH."

"The trouble is, if I got slammed up, I couldn't come down the Legion..."

"...Amongst other things. God!..."

"...So they'd be no point getting slammed up, would there?"

Denis raised his eyebrows and I shook my head, but not over Ray's dimness. I needed to confess something. It was really bothering me.

"No, I said being fifty's bad, but *lying* about it's worse."

"Hold on, didn't you take Les to The Donkey on your birthday?"

"That's the sore point, Denis."

He put down his lager and asked if we'd fallen out. No, we hadn't. We were getting on really well, like Ricky and Pudsey. The problem was I'd lied about my age.

"How old did you say you were then?"

"I was stupid. I said forty-seven. I had this awful worry, if I told the truth, she'd see herself - I dunno - taking care of me and maybe having to do stuff like wipe my backside one day. I was bothered it'd put her off me."

Ray tried to be helpful. "My Aunt Vera were twelve years older than my Uncle Walt and she had to get social services in to see to him. So could you. You've got plenty of happence."

Denis tried to be helpful too. "You're an odd-job-man, Ray. Dave'd much rather have somebody round he knows to wipe his bum."

He failed to spot the irony. No, he replied - he had enough of wiping his own, without anybody else's.

"Why don't just come clean and admit it were a fib." said Denis "You could turn it to your advantage, like... You're so keen not to lose her that you told a white lie."

"You've got enough happence for her to put you in a home, Dave." continued Ray. "I tell you both here and now - the day I can't get up me own stairs and wipe me own arse, that's it. Suffocate me."

"Haven't you seen them new toilets for fat folk, Ray?" said Denis. "The missus's eldest brother's got one. He's massive. He does his business, like.. and then this rod-thing comes out with holes in and hoses him down....washes his khyber, like..."

"And dries it.?"

"Aye, it blows hot air and does his pubes a perm an'all."

"Never!"

"LISTEN!" I shouted. "Will you two stop talking about bum-wiping?"

“Well you started it!” said Ray.

*

I was looking forward to seeing Lesley that evening. It promised to be warm and sunny after a miserable start, once that sea mist had cleared. I had no detective jobs in the pipeline, and, to be honest, the pizza business was doing so well and occupying my thoughts so much that I wasn't that bothered. So when the phone rang, and I sensed it was a job because it displayed a number, not a name, I was in two minds about answering it.

“My wife has a bloke and I want you to find out who he is. Then you're out of it. I'll take care of him.”

I went all cold. The voice on the other end was so thin and cruel that I imagined the worst. What should I say?

“Take care of him? If you mean what I think you mean, I want nowt to do wi' it.”

The line went dead, but the voice kept coming back all day like a tune you can't get rid of.

“Can I tell you something, Les?”

She looked up from her drink. We'd stopped at a pub on the Wyre estuary where you can sit outside on the lawn. It was indeed a lovely evening after a very warm afternoon, and the light was lingering as if sorry to go. We'd ordered crunchy fish and chips and soakers - and sausages for the dog - and watched the sun go from gold to orange and then swell up all red as it drifted down into the haze out to sea. The dogs, exhausted by their dashes into the reeds, were having a nap.

“Something on your mind, Dave?”

“Something and nothing, really. I'm probably worrying too much.”

I told her about the phone call and how nasty the man had been.

“His voice sent a real chill through me. I reckon most people are okay if you treat 'em right,. But this bloke...I could just tell there was no....you know...”

“No kindness? No love in him?”

“None.”

“But if his wife's cheating on him, then he's bound to be bitter.”

“No. This was more than that. No emotion. As if the other man were an insect he'd gladly tread on and walk away from. I've got his number. Do you reckon I should go to the police?”

She thought this over and came up with what I thought was a brilliant idea. I ought to phone him back and arrange to meet him and hear him out.

“Then you'll get a better picture. Then you'll know what to do.”

We stirred the dogs and walked back to the car as the light was thickening to a woolly grey. I told her I had something else to tell her - a confession. She seemed alarmed by this, so quickly I added “It's about a fib I told. I'm not forty-seven. I'm fifty. There! I've said it....Only I was so keen not to put you off, like, I was worried about telling you my real age.”

She began to laugh, that lovely ringing laugh of hers. She'd told a fib too.

“I'm forty-six in February. I didn't want to put you off either....”

“But that means I've lost me bet wi' Denis and Ray. I'll have to give 'em their money back!”

*

The man who'd phoned me took the initiative the next day and got back in touch.

"Look, I was angry," he said in a voice meant to reassure me. "I've heard you're good. I mean to find the guy and warn him off - no violence. In fact, if you're worried, *you* can warn him off. I'll pay you extra for that. There's seven hundred in it for you."

I hesitated. That would pay shop-rent and buy quite a lot of pizza flour and toppings. It would be my biggest ever pay-day.

"Listen," he went on "I gave you the wrong impression. I'm not some shaven-headed yob. I'm a professional man. Could we meet this afternoon? Do you know The Victoria off the Garstang Rd? I'll have a white shirt and red tie on. Moustache. And a face like I've had sour sherbet. That's how she's turned me..... My name's Rofe. Alan Rofe. Yes *that* Rofe. Rofe and Birchenall, as was - financial advisors."

Ah yes, *that* Rofe. Pompous twat.

There were few people in the pub in mid-afternoon and he looked exactly as he'd described himself. He was around my age and quite portly - no, let's not beat about the bush, he was an ugly fat bastard. I bought a drink and went over. He said his wife had been cheating on him - off and on - for the past few years, but he couldn't complain because he was no good in the sack - and in the past he'd been no angel himself. I felt puzzled and asked him why, then, he was so bothered.

"Ah! This time it's different. *This* time I get the impression that the new guy's a bit special. She's changed - like a spring chicken again - God, it's bloody horrible to see it.Is that all you want, a bloody Vimto?"

He was drinking spirits. A large one.

"So," said I, turning down his offer to buy me a *proper drink*. "You're worried she might go off with him?"

"None of your bloody business *what* I'm worried about, Mr Payne."

"Hang on a minute... You told me you'd be absolutely honest with me. This is out of my depth, pal..."

I went to leave and he held up his hand. Swirling the ice around in his tumbler, without a trace of shame, he told me pretty bluntly what his agenda was. I just looked at him, speechless. How debased and mercenary could people be - towards people they had loved enough to marry? I despaired to hear it. His unfaithful wife's father, a widower, was rich, having made a couple of million, he'd calculated, in the hotel business in St Annes. He had cancer of the spine and not long to live. Marianne, his wife, being the only child, would inherit the lot, And he, this ugly man opposite, this very ugly man, would miss his share if there was a divorce before the old man's death.

"I want this new guy put off, deterred, intimidated, bribed. I'll leave it to you. If some shit could be dug up on him to put Marianne off, then that might work. It doesn't have to be the truth. You're the man. First of all, find out who he is and where he lives."

"How do you know he exists? It might be your imagination."

"No way!"

There were, according to him, several signs. He mentioned again her smug face - and peculiar calls which he taken only to hear the phone go dead, with the number withheld.

"Then she'll take a call on her mobile and drift off into the other room, talking dead loud to *Debbie - Debbie this, Debbie that* - How bloody stupid does she think I am? You just don't keep saying people's names on the phone. Thick twat. But what clinched it was when the landline

rang - her phone's battery was flat - and a man's voice said - *oh sorry, wrong number* - when I spoke. Only this time he forgot to withhold his number. Here it is."

He passed me a slip of paper. He was, he said - (holding up two flat fingers to the bored barmaid for another double whiskey) - not as gifted a private eye as me, but he'd had the nous to look on his wife's phone directory when she'd been in the bathroom.

"Sure enough, that number in your mitt is listed under P. P! Not Paula, not Pauline, not Pat - bloody P, for crying out loud. It's like saying a man called P is shagging me! She really is a stupid pillock. You find out who P is, Mr Payne, and the money's yours! God, I'm dying for a fag. Curse those bloody do-gooders!"

Tobacco was not his only addiction. With a crazy gleam in his eye he watched the pretty barmaid bring over his double and he told her, with an over-familiar leer, to keep the change from a tenner, to which she responded with a quick and sickly thank you, before hurrying back to the bar with our empty glasses. He picked up the whiskey and took a large gulp. Now it was decision time. Who dares wins, they say. I leant forward and said confidentially "Mr Rofe...this is not a pleasant job for me. You're not a pleasant person. The fee has gone up to a thousand pounds plus all expenses. Non-negotiable."

I had my fingers crossed, hoping he'd tell me to do one. But his sad red balloon of a face, in which every pudgy feature was trying to outdo the other in mediocrity, almost smiled. He nodded and finished his drink.

"Are you alright to drive?" I asked.

He sneered at the implication that he was unfit.

"I've been an alcoholic for the last twenty years and never had an accident."

"There's treatments, you know."

"Who says I want one? I enjoy being an alcoholic. You just mind your own business - and the business I'm putting your way"

He got up and left. Left me with a horrible job I'd agreed to do. Bumchucks.

"Such tales make me glad I never got married," said Lesley that evening, looking out over the slow estuary and for signs of Ricky. Pudsey had retrieved the old tennis ball and was wading back through the reeds. Now Ricky came scurrying and leaping at his head to try and steal it. They were deliriously happy over so little.

"God, Lesley, am I wrong to think we're not the cleverest species on earth?"

"Not the nicest, that's for sure. Here, Rick!"

I'd already told her about Glenys and her never-ending wanting for clothes and new furniture and things. How I would finish tiling the bathroom or the kitchen or doing some other job, and a month later she'd want some other scheme she'd seen in a magazine at the dentist's or hairdresser's. Les had said she'd never even been close to getting married. She'd never found a man who hadn't turned out selfish and too full of himself. I thought this over and said that Alan Rofe and his missus weren't typical.

"Aren't they?" she replied, putting Ricky's lead back on. "Things start out fine for most but go wrong in the end from what I see and hear. They *are* typical!"

"It depends on the people, Les. Come on it's getting chilly."

Rick was all excited and automatically I drew my legs under the bench. We took a slow walk back to the car. A man was out crabbing in the deeper middle of the estuary, throwing his pots overboard. He was singing and in the twilit air his voice carried clearly to shore. All he wanted was *a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air....* The sun's shattered reflection in the

water had gone - as if its golden shards had sunk - and an arc of indigo, studded with the first stars, was spreading from the east. It was a beautiful sight. Two swans, glowing ever whiter as the dusk gathered, came pushing past and swam further downstream.*

“I don’t know, Les. What’s wrong with folk? Who’d trade this in? For what? Give us strength! There’s got to be a better way to live. But who’s here seeing all this? Nobody but us. Ain’t there Puds?”

He panted and Les reached down and ruffled his head. I asked her what she thought - about taking the job on. She sighed and turned to look at me.

“Well, if you advertise for business, sooner or later you’re bound to get a nasty item like this. A grand is a lot of money to put towards pizza. Tempting. I’m in two minds. You’re a nice guy - if you don’t take it on, he’ll find someone with fewer scruples. Maybe he already has somebody lined up to do the dirty work. You could find out who the bloke is and maybe warn him on the quiet to watch his back. It might scare him off, if he’s none too bothered about the wife - which is the whole point.”

Clever girl. This was the perfect solution.

*(I thought about deleting that purple patch but Howard, my tutor, said he quite liked it.)

*

When I woke the next morning, I heard that thin voice whining in my head and my heart sank. I had no wish to be mixed up with these horrible people. Then I thought of the fee, of Stanley and Ollie, of the others and my projects. Sometimes, I reasoned with myself, you have to put your better instincts on hold. I could easily find out the name of Marianne’s fellow, and the money would be ours. I could tell Rofe, warn Mr P off and if he chose to ignore me, it would be his lookout. Trouble was, I had the horrible thought that men who manufactured bullets probably dissociated themselves from their targets in a similar way.

My client had told me that his wife was away to her love nest on Fridays - her night out with the girls, a night out, he suspected, which had long ago ceased to involve girls at all. Anyway, with a heavy heart late the next Friday afternoon, using an old pay-as-you-go mobile of mine, I texted the following message to the number on the piece of paper which Rofe had given me.

Phone locked - borrowed a friend’s for a sec. Car failed M.O.T - pick me up at The Weavers at 7:30. Don’t reply - and DON’T phone home - Alan suspects. M x

I’d already told Rofe to slip the battery out of his wife’s phone after five p.m. Of course, my plan might not work - she might happen to phone her bloke on a landline or use a friend’s mobile. That was why I left it till almost six before pulling the trick - a time when, I reckoned, she would be at home and less likely to risk contacting P. At seven fifteen I drove to The Weavers, a pub within walking distance of the Rofes’ house, a small pub where I could easily keep my quarry under surveillance. I sat in a bay window seat with a good view of the only entrance to the car park and at seven twenty-five a black Audi arrived. A lone man, quite a decent-looking, smart bloke, came in a minute later, windblown, and in an over-refined Yorkshire voice - the sort that pronounces Huddersfield as Hiddersfield - ordered a small lager shandy with lime before sitting down a couple of tables away. He was in his late forties and a much better catch than Mr Rofe. I was playing with my phone and while he was looking at his, I took a quick snap. He began to

look at his watch more and more often until at seven forty-five he finished his drink and left. I sent my accomplice Stanley a message to follow the Audi. I was in two minds about my next trick. I waited a couple of minutes after I'd seen him leave and watched Stan's moped go haring after him, then, using my old phone again, sent my next message.

Sorry, love, I've not been quite honest. We're finished. Thanks for a nice time. Marianne x

I thought the *love* and the kiss were a nice insincere touch, likely to persuade him that she wasn't worth the bother. I hoped to kill three birds with the one stone - 1 - slow him down in the Audi or stop him so he didn't outrun our Stan - 2 - split him and Marianne up - and - 3 - make Mr Rofe happy - happy enough to pay me a grand.....When my message tone rang a minute later I was hoping his reply would be something like *Up Yours!* - but it wasn't. - *Who are you?* Then I did something I regretted immediately. I texted - *Been at the clinic today. Get down there yourself. Have the clap.*

My phone rang this time with a call. I pressed accept and heard that refined voice turned nasty.

“What's your game? Who are you? Is that you Rofe? You biggered ip big time, sinshine.

Marianne would never call me liv. Marianne got the clap? You'll regret saying that!”

I said nothing, ended the call and switched the old phone off. Misfire. Bumchucks. Double bumchucks. I went out to sit in the car and sweated. After ten minutes, I got a message from Stanley. It was an address not far away, just outside Poulton. I connected to the local electoral register website and within a minute had the name. Peter Birchenall. I phoned Alan Rofe with the news. After a silence, then a great sigh and finally a burst of savage laughter, he said Peter Birchenall was his ex-business partner .

“So,” said I “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” said he “You've done enough. Now I know exactly what to do.”

“I'm warning you. If there's any nasty stuff, I'll report it. I've got a photo of him to prove you hired me.”

“No worries, Mr Payne. You're Birchenall's insurance policy. Your cheque's in the post.”

Over the next few days I hardly dared read the paper or turn the local news on, terrified there'd be a report of Birchenall's disappearance. I didn't want to worry Lesley. I looked unslept and terrible and knew she would see straightaway something was very wrong, so I texted her to say I had a bad throat. The tension was becoming unbearable by Thursday - and when I received Rofe's cheque that morning - I'd almost forgotten about it - and the letter I quote from below, I cheered!

I don't know what other strings you pulled, but Marianne seems to have fallen out of love and is back to her glum, nagging old self. Job done, David. Am very grateful.

My throat underwent a miraculous recovery and we had a lovely couple of days out walking the dogs. I showed Lesley the cheque - for twelve hundred pounds! - and told her the advice she'd given had been brilliant. On the Saturday we spent the whole day together out in the Fylde walking and took a picnic. We held hands and it felt so natural. The dogs were in their element too. But that evening, as we drove back into town we passed a newsagent's, and I read on the sandwich board a headline which made me touch the brake and stop. I told Lesley I needed some cough sweets and jumped out.

HOUSE FIRE CLAIMS LIFE IN POULTON

I just knew it had to be Birchenall. I bought The Gazette and began to walk back to the car. But the victim was not Birchenall. I don't know how I managed to keep my composure. Sounding as husky as I could, I refused Lesley's offer of a coffee, dropped her off and went home. The man burnt to death in his living room was Alan Rofe.

*

The photo was shocking. The front of the house was charred black and most of the roof had fallen in, leaving only the blackened timbers. There was a picture too of his distraught widow. It was the first time I'd seen her. She was blonde and looked surprisingly youthful and attractive. Maybe what I knew of her coloured my view, but beneath her show of anguish I sensed a coldness, a shrewdness, a calculating, not a feeling mind. That's when I realised it was not an accident. I read the report over and over just to make sure I hadn't missed anything, any hint that the fire was being viewed as unexplained or suspicious. It usually says so, doesn't it? But there was nothing. It only mentioned that a report was being prepared for the coroner's office. I wrestled all night with my conscience. How could it be a coincidence? Birchenall had assumed he was speaking to Rofe when he'd called me outside The Weavers. He'd jumped to the conclusion that Rofe was responsible for the deception. And I - getting carried away by my own fame - had inadvertently caused his death by my clever-dick texts. The only relief I could find, as the stupid birds were singing at dawn - as if everything was okay with the world - was the realisation that Lesley would have no inkling that the fire was linked to the case. I hadn't mentioned any names to her. Then, of all people, I thought of Ray Large. His brother-in-law was a fireman. At gone five I managed to fall asleep.

"The poor bloke were more or less cremated" said Ray at the Legion on Sunday night. "His bones were in the ashes of the armchair and bottles of Scotch nearby. There were a fag packet and a lighter. Open and shut case, according to our Phil."

I bought Ray and Denis a pint, said I felt rough, put Pudsey's lead on and walked him home. I needed peace and quiet to think....

An open and shut case. Obvious. Any evidence of harm done to the man - suffocation, assault or wound - would have been destroyed in the flames. If it was a crime, it was perfect, except in one major respect: *I knew about it*. Did Marianne and Birchenall have any idea of my part in all this? Had Rofe said anything to her in his anger? I worried that there existed a link to me. I cursed myself for playing God in their terrible marriage - and sending those texts. The fee be damned! I could well be an accessory - though an involuntary one - to a murder. How could I go to the police? They would tear me to pieces. That was when I decided that this case would bring about my early retirement from blackpudlian sleuthing. I would enter into pastures new, closing the big gate behind me.

*

"Mr Payne? Private investigator? A friend of mine recommended you."

It was a voice of over-refined northern vowels - the voice which had asked for a small lager

shandy with lime in the empty lounge of The Weavers - and which had later accused me of being Alan Rofe. I froze and took a long, deep breath.

“Oh really?” I managed to ask. “Recommended.... Who might that be then?”

He was not prepared for that question and the line went silent. In the end he decided to pretend he hadn't heard it. He wanted to meet me and wondered if I knew The Weavers in Hardhorn.

“What do you look like, Mr Payne?”

An inner voice shouted *trap*. I had to think very quickly. Would he remember me from that Friday night? The landlord of the pub would doubtless confirm to him afterwards that I'd been in. The choice of the pub could not possibly be a coincidence. I asked him to hold on a minute - there was someone at the door. There wasn't, of course - I just needed time. I put the phone down and went walkabout to weigh up my options. I wondered how he had got the number of my “proper“ mobile. I racked my brains. I had no recollection of giving Rofe my card. If I had, surely it would have been destroyed in the blaze. But Birchenall might have seen one of my placards...and if he had he would *know* what I looked like. So why was he asking? I was in a real mess. To lie or be evasive would show I had something to hide. I picked my phone back up. “Sorry about that....Jehovahs. Right...I'm looking through my diary....(*in fact I was rustling dead loud the pages of a paperback*)... and I'm afraid I'm fully booked at the moment....Try the yellow pages.”

“No. I want you.”

“Well, there are certain cases I don't deal with. What's it about please?”

He said it was a matter he preferred not to discuss over the phone - and anyway, his battery was low. Then I had an inspired idea. I told him I'd been poorly with the flu and would prefer not to leave the house. Could he send me an email?

“Tell me briefly what it involves and I promise I'll get back to you.”

As soon as he agreed to this, a chill ran through me. I asked for his name but he ended the call and I sat down with a plonk. He already knew my email address! *Either* he had seen my advert - in which case he wouldn't need to ask me what I looked like because of the photo on it - *or* he **did** have my card - the card I must have given to Alan Rofe at some point - on which there was no photograph. I felt queasy. I played chess on line sometimes against Jonathan. To win you need to be one step ahead of your rival. And I was. But only just.

The email clinched it. It came from *prbfinance.co.uk* and described how the subject and his girlfriend were being harassed by her ex-partner. They would prefer to have me dissuade him than involve the police. *I realise you are a busy man - it concluded - but as soon as you have a vacancy please arrange to meet me at The Weavers, preferably early evening.*

The fact that Alan Rofe was not merely an ex partner but an ex human being told me the whole story. Why, otherwise, tell a lie? I concluded that Birchenall had no idea I'd seen or heard him. The advantage *was* with me! He probably wanted to sound me out to see how far I'd gone on Rofe's behalf.....perhaps have me followed back home from the pub - maybe by Marianne - and keep tabs on me for some future purpose. A purpose I refused to think about. After hours of debate with myself, I tossed a coin and phoned the police. I said I needed to speak to whichever officers had investigated the Poulton fire. “Tell them that I have roundabout evidence that it was murder.”

Pair of fools! By assuming that *Rofe* had sent the texts they had persuaded themselves that I was at most a side-show, a minor player, someone they would only take action against if they were sure he'd made significant progress. The fact that I hadn't taken the initiative with them or the

police after the fire might have persuaded them that I'd never met Rofe and had no idea of his circumstances. How many business cards given out are never acted on? If Marianne and Birchenall had stuck to their plan, the coronor would have recorded a verdict of accidental death due to the influence of alcohol. They were perfectionists - which ironically would, I was sure, unpick the fabric of their perfect crime. I saw a way to exonerate myself from blame. I would never mention to the police the texts I'd sent. There was, I was confident, enough other evidence to win the police over to the view that Rofe had been murdered.

How shocked and disappointed I would be. Even more shocked and disappointed than when Bury beat Leicester 9-1.

*

Somehow we'd got onto the topic of dreams, and Ray was dying to tell me and Denis about a queer one he'd had the night before.

"You'll never believe it! I dreamt I were a goldfish."

Denis winked at me slyly and said "I don't know how you remember it - if you were a goldfish." Ray ignored this and said he knew what had brought it on. He had been reading an article about reincarnation at the doctor's. The nicer you were in life, the nicer the animal you'd come back as. "So," said Denis "What have you done to come back as a chuffing goldfish? Mind you, could be worse. You could be a tapeworm."

Ray took no notice and started to tell us about his Aunt Vera who was a firm believer. After her husband, his Uncle Walt, had died twenty years ago, she found out that a baby had been born down the road just three minutes after he passed away.

"And, do you know, this baby boy were the image of him. So she thought."

"What? Bald and no teeth?"

"No - more than that. He had his snubby nose and big chin."

"What, with white whiskers like?"

"Be serious for once, will yer Denis! Look, you have to admit, the more you think about it, the more sense it makes. Babies are born helpless, can't talk sense, make queer noises, know nowt and look all wrinkly.."

"...Have to wear nappies like your Uncle Walt..."

"Right...and they can't walk."

I'd said nothing till then. "Well, lads, if I came back I'd want to be a golden Labrador. Nicest nature there is. Ain't it Puds?"

I fussed his head. Denis pulled his ear, making him pant and close his eyes. He looked at him and said "And Mistress Lesley can come back as a cat. Then Master here can chase her."

"You know," said Ray "Aunt Vera were so convinced the lad were Walt that she even sent over little cakes and stuff on his birthday."

"So...does she still keep in touch?"

Ray shook his head sadly. "No, not any more. He's in Walton jail. Turned out a right bloody thug and tearaway. Drink up. My round."

While he was making his way to the front of the queue I turned to Denis.

"Look Denis. You're the best mate I've got. I'm giving you this."

I handed him a white envelope and told him to open it only if I went missing or worse.

"This a joke?"

“No. Say nowt to Ray. I had the police round today. They’re bloody useless. I’m not in trouble with them, like. It’s summat I’ve been investigating which turned nasty. It’s all in there. Keep it safe. You could hand it to a journalist if...”

“If what?”

*

Now let me tell you about my visit. The two officers who’d been round sizing up me and my living room - a middle-aged man and a younger woman - had turned out to be very sceptical about what I’d had to say and then quite hostile.

“So, Mr Payne, you’re worried you might have got out of your depth. People should stick to what they know and leave the detective work to the professionals.”

The woman said this. She was a pretty brunette and had been stroking Puds - which somehow made her words all the more scolding. She was DS Fox and he was DI Knox - so predestined to be partners. Knox reminded me of that Yorkshire Tory - bald as a bum - but this version on my settee had great lugs and a wart on his cheek. Now it was his turn to weigh in.

“So, Mr Rofe hired you to find out who was diddling his missus. You followed him, looked on the electoral roll and told him the name. Birchenall. Six days later he dies in a house fire.”

“Seven days. The Friday after.” I said. “It’s a bit of a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Let us be the judge of that,” said Fox, flicking through a notepad. “Mrs Rofe has already told us that she didn’t have a happy marriage. He was a boozier. And she admitted being with Birchenall that night.”

“His old business partner! He was...you know...”

“No, I don’t know. Nor do you. You jumped to a conclusion. She told us she wanted his advice on the financial aspects of a divorce. There was nothing sexual in it. According to her. We have no proof otherwise, or of anything criminal. Nor do you. A neighbour saw her leave his house at eleven. The fire started at quarter to ten.”

“So, their alibis are each other” I said. “Very convenient don’t you think?”

“You’re forgetting the neighbour,” commented Knox. “Are you saying she - or Birchenall - or both - slipped out, killed Rofe, set the house on fire and went back to his place? There’s absolutely no forensic evidence and no witnesses. Just your imagination. The fire expert says it started because of a dropped cigarette in whiskey - there were two bottles. He was as high as a kite.”

“I met Rofe. He told me he drove around full of booze. He ran on alcohol, not blood. I can’t believe he was so pissed so early on in the evening.”

Their faces told me I was getting nowhere. If, I declared, their alibi was so water-tight and they were not suspected, why had Birchenall tried to trick me into meeting him? Why had he sent me a lying email? I passed my phone to Fox for her to read it.

“I’m telling you now, they found out - somehow - that Rofe had hired me and now they’re worried to death what I might know. I’m the fly in their lily-white ointment. And I’m worried.”

They looked at each other. He grimaced. She shrugged. Reluctance hung in the air. I began to get irritated and said that if they were the real professionals, then they should at least entertain an alternative theory.

“For Marianne, her husband’s share of a fortune was at stake. Did she not tell you that her dad’s a multi-millionaire on his last legs? If Birchenall is just her advisor, why is he trying to get to meet me?”

“How much did Rofe pay you?” asked Knox, as if he hadn’t been listening. “What exactly did you tell him?”

These two irrelevant questions exasperated me. How could he be so bloody obtuse?

“The only reason,” I said “That Birchenall would make up a pack of lies - about an ex-partner harassing them - would be because he has a secret agenda.”

“Which is?” asked Fox.

“To get rid of me.”

“Sheer paranoia!” exclaimed Knox.

“No, sheer logic. Why can’t you see it?”

With no great enthusiasm, they took my statement - I was too ashamed to mention my stupid texts and Birchenall’s response - and after a while I thought I saw a hint of doubt in DS Fox’s eyes. But even so I felt dispirited. As they were preparing to leave I said that even if the pair were pulled in for questioning about me they’d have some cock and bull story ready. I was sorry that I’d wasted police time.

“I’ve just realised that you’ll have nothing substantial enough to persuade a coroner’s jury. The best you could hope for would be an open verdict. Slim chance. It might not turn out as easy a ride as they’d hoped for, but they’d be in the clear. Poor old Daddy dies of cancer and the next day we’re millionaires - not a brass farthing for the drunken husband. He’s history. Bring on the clowns. Break out the champagne. We got away with it.”

I showed them to the door and as they left they turned to look at me like two figures in a weather-cottage; her all darkening concern, him all smug and sunny smiles. I saw how unambitious he was; that he’d got promoted as far as he wanted to go. He was satisfied. And Fox? Although she’d contracted his cynicism, I saw she was hungry but would doubtless be overruled.

I kept waiting to hear or read that the pair had been taken in for questioning but, of course, it didn’t happen. I wasn’t blaming the police in general - there’s good and bad in every walk of life - but I had the feeling that Knox might well not bother to investigate very thoroughly if I went missing, so that’s when I sat down and wrote the letter to Denis. And yet it was odd. As the days passed and I imagined my statement being stuffed away in some dark alley of filing cabinets and the light being pulled off, I began to feel safer. Why would Birchenall target me when every new day left their crime further in the past and it seemed less and less probable that the police would cotton on? Why take a risk when they were in the clear? But I couldn’t sleep. I kept telling myself what a horrible man Rofe had been. And what a lousy time he’d given his wife. Hadn’t he deserved all he’d got? But still I couldn’t sleep.....

Yet again I had to tell Lesley a white lie. Cousin Jonathan came in handy.

“Les. I’ve got to go down to Leicester. My cousin’s suicidal. His wife’s cleared off again. This time with a woman. I bet I’ll be away all week...and weekend.”

I could tell she thought this was a tale.

“Look, Dave. If you need to tell me something, I’d much rather you told me straight out. I’m not a fool - I could tell there was something else up last week....besides your throat.”

“No, Les...Believe me - whatever you’re thinking about me...about us...you’re wrong and couldn’t be wronger. Trust me on this.”

“What about Puds?”

“I’m taking him. We’ll have one of Ollie’s pizza deals between the four of us when I come back.”

I ended the call. I’d told her another fib. My dad had always stressed that I should be true to

myself when I was tempted to make up an excuse or a downright lie.

“The person you deceive the most, is yourself” he’d always said. So there and then I decided - to ease my conscience, if nothing else - that maybe I could set up a trap for those murdering bastards. Can you guess who the bait might be?

*

“Okay, Mr Birchenall. I’ve cleared a couple of cases. I know The Weavers but I’d rather meet in The Wyre View on the estuary. My car’s on the blink and The Wyre’s nearer home. Do you know it? Say eight o’clock?”

He offered to pick me up and of course I refused. Eventually he agreed to see me in The Wyre. I told him I was tall with a mop of light brown hair. I’d be wearing glasses.

“And a tutu.”

“A what?”

“Just joking.”

He laughed very politely. Eight o’clock would be fine.

Wednesday Night

There he was - in the corner sipping a half of something very pale - half a lager shandy with lime? I got myself a Vimto and sat down, looking at my watch, studiously ignoring him, ten yards away. It was quite busy and noisy with groups and families eating in the other section of the room. Eventually, he got up and came over. I looked for signs in his face that he recognised me from that night in The Weavers, nearly two weeks ago, but if he did, he wasn’t letting on. I would feign ignorance too. He began his spiel - some fairy story about a jealous ex partner of his girlfriend Delia - sending her hate texts and emails, mystery phone calls, empty envelopes and packages and performing various other acts of nuisance. I made notes in a jotter as he spoke. He reminded me of a politician belonging to the new breed - suave and affable - working hard to present a nice image to hide the hard heart within. Eventually the real nasty stuff was bound to seep out, like a dark stain on a pink canvas. I just didn’t want it to seep out all over me.

“Oh by the way.” he said casually. “You called me Birchenall on the phone. Did I really tell you a name? I can’t recall I did. My name’s Lennon, anyway.”

What a boob I’d made. This was calculated to throw me and it nearly did.

“Ah well,” I said, putting down my glass as calmly and slowly as I could. “Perhaps I’m mixing you up with somebody else. That flu really knocked the stuffing out of me.”

There we sat, two liars; two spiders, one grey, one black, spinning webs of deceit around one another. I had no way of telling how much he really knew or had guessed. For all I knew, an almighty row had broken out between Rofe and Marianne after my disclosures - and Rofe had declared that he had set a private eye on them. Perhaps there had had a big confrontation in Birchenall’s office. And yet, and yet...in his letter to me Rofe had written that his wife had been showing signs of cooling to her lover. Perhaps she had lulled him into a false - a lethal - sense of security. Where was the centre of this maze, and where the exit? We sat there pretending, sounding each other out. Could I persuade him of my blissful ignorance? Could he me? It struck me that similar thoughts might be going through that well-groomed head, a yard away. He was wearing a pleasant expression - permanently smiley - the sort which phony people easily manufacture. In The Weavers it had been blank but now, as I discussed how that phantom nuisance could be dealt with, he worked it like a puppeteer - raising eyebrows, opening eyes

wide, dropping his jaw to show surprise, admiration and gratitude at what I was saying to flatter me. I paused to take a drink. I needed thinking time...I excused myself and went off to the Gents.

His curiosity in me might be genuine - based on the chance discovery of my card. I'd told him how busy I was, so maybe after our chat he'd conclude that Rofe *had* come by my card from someone else, but had not taken the matter further. There was no proof that I'd ever been aware of an affair - or even of a house fire..... But equally maybe - that man knew precisely how involved I'd been. For all I knew they'd tortured Rofe into confessing all before they'd killed him. If a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, no knowledge at all is worse. I came out of the toilet wondering still what to say to get them off my back. That's when I stopped in my tracks, suspecting that he knew the whole truth. Why, otherwise, would he play that trick with his name? A knight's move! - and he must have noticed my reaction. I heard my dad making his favourite speech to his shame-faced son and I walked straight back to sit down.

"Right, Birchenall." I whispered with a smile on my face.. "Let's cut the crap. I know who you really are and I know you killed Alan Rofe. You're a murderer."

Somebody dropped a knife on the tiled floor with a clang and it seemed to echo for an age. Birchenall stared. That inner creature, that alien lurking behind the hologram looked out at me for a split second full of spite. Then the cloak of self-assurance tried to return.

"What on earth are you talking about, Mr Payne?" His voice cracked only a little but enough to tell me I'd hit a bullseye.

"I set you up for Rofe. To go to The Weavers. Sent you the texts. Pretended to be Marianne. It wasn't Alan at all. I tried - stupidly - to split you two up and that got him killed. I owe him."

"What rubbish! I've never heard of a Marianne or an Alan. My name is Simon Lennon."

"Stop it. A week last Friday you sat in The Weavers. I was in the corner by the window. You ordered that drink. I could go now and tell the barman *same again* - and he'd do you a glass of a lager shandy and lime. Shall I? Same again?....You pulled up in a black Audi. Registration PRB 2W. Peter R. Birchenall. Here's a photo I took. You left at a quarter to eight and I texted you to say that Marianne was finished with you and then - stupidly - that she had the pox. Is that what made you kill Alan?"

I showed him my phone. His eyes were very wide. The mixture of wonder, fury and spite was not pleasant. The stain was out. I took a swig of Vimto and carried on.

"Then, a week later you went to his house and probably suffocated Rofe and set the scene up to look like a drunkard's accident with a fag. You probably took Marianne along. You crept home and, at eleven, you and her created some kind of a noisy event to get your neighbour's attention for your alibi. Game, set and match."

He still said nothing. He picked up his glass and emptied it. He smiled very thinly.

"Alright. I am Birchenall. I just wanted to find out what mischief you might be up to. We weren't having an affair, you fool. I'm a homosexual. That's why I knew those clumsy texts could not possibly be from Marianne. I really am her friend and financial advisor. Alan Rofe was a pig. He died as he lived - soaked in alcohol. An accident waiting to happen. You ought to be an author with that imagination. I don't think I'm going to hire you after all."

He had just told me his cover story. As he got up, I indicated that he should sit back down.

"I've not been to the police. Yet. What's my silence worth? A hundred thousand? Two? Not just for me. For Alan. I might donate some of it to Alcoholics Anonymous. How would you like me to show up and give evidence at the inquest?"

"Good night Mr Payne."

As he left I shouted after him that he had until Saturday morning. That he had my number. My body was wet with sweat. I waited five minutes then strolled out to my car. The Audi had gone. On the way home I stopped to get fish and chips for me and Puds, and as I drove away I watched the blue Nissan which had followed me from the pub pull out into the traffic. Marianne? I drove slowly so that she could not possibly lose me, wound my window down and tapped the roof to demonstrate how cool I was. The light was fading as I turned onto my drive and watched the Nissan come speeding past. Brilliant. Now they knew where *I* lived.

Thursday Afternoon

The woman's voice sounded familiar. The last thing I wanted was a new case.

"It's Katie Fox" she said. "I'm calling to check that everything's okay. DS Fox - remember??"

Has anything unusual happened?"

Cautiously I told her that everything was fine and wondered why she was asking. She confessed - *off the record* - that the more she'd thought about my story, the more she believed it. There had been something about Marianne Rofe she hadn't liked or found convincing. She'd been too honest.....

"Too honest?"

"Yes. Saying she didn't care Rofe had gone. Now she could get on with her life. As if she was trying to make herself so suspicious that we'd discount her as a suspect - if you see what I mean. Clever bluff. Too clever for my liking."

"But not for Knox? He believes her?"

"Oh no. Dave can come across as a bit of an arsehole at times. He's coming round to my way of thinking. Trouble is, his boss, - the Big White Chief - won't buy it. He knows Birchenall - golf club and the Inner Wheel. - and all that jazz. He reviewed all the case notes, statements and fire report....*Open and shut case - accident*. So that's that."

"So why are you ringing?"

She said she felt uneasy and wanted me to be on my guard. I considered telling her I'd been followed but in the end decided there was no point. I had her private number and wondered if it might come in handy. I made two more phone calls. I told Les I hoped to be back by Sunday. I told Denis I'd hurt my back and wouldn't be down the Legion that night. He said he'd been worrying and I assured him I'd be okay with Pudsey acting as my watchdog.

Thursday Night

There was something else bugging me about Birchenall. He'd said he was gay, but what he'd said over the phone to me that night outside The Weavers - thinking I was Alan - didn't square with that. Surely his ex business partner would know he was gay and would therefore never suspect him of being Marianne's lover. Why would Birchenall accuse Alan and give his identity away if he was not giving her anything more suspicious than financial guidance? No, I decided, Birchenall was a bigger liar than Tom Pepper - my grandma's favourite liar....who ever he was. He was getting more than just a fat fee from Marianne. And she was getting more than advice. I wondered whether he or both would come calling that night or the next. The hours dragged for us and by midnight I was very tired. I decided then that it was past normal visiting hours and that they would probably leave it till Friday. Even so, I still took basic precautions before making up the settee. Pudsey looked on in bewilderment as I dragged the heavy fridge in front of the back door. I went outside and dropped two or three dry nuggets of soil outside both doors, front and back, then taped up the letter box. Pudsey didn't seem to mind his basket placed on the front

door mat. I was just settling down on the settee when I thought I heard a noise out the back. I didn't put the kitchen light on but when I tried the door handle I was sure that it made the same noise. I put the light on then and made some tea. Would I be overegging the pudding to send Mr Birchenall a text? No..... *Can't sleep thinking about what I'm going to do with all that lolly. Your failure to respond means the price for my silence has gone up to 500K.* I added a phoney bank account number and sort code and sent it. Less than ten minutes later I was shocked to get a reply. *Ur crazy. Am going 2 the police 2moro.*

I have to admit - this threw me. I thought about what DS Fox had said about Marianne's blatant honesty. To report me for blackmail would provide a new distraction from their crime and be further "proof" of their innocence. Maybe they weren't coming after all. Had I overplayed my hand - even got it all completely wrong? Doubts kept me awake for ages....But I needn't have worried. As soon as I woke, I went out into the chill dawn and went around the back. The two lumps of dirt on the slab had been squashed.

Friday

I'd been given a two thousand piece jigsaw by Sue for Christmas. It seemed a good day to get on with it. Pudsey was a bit whiney, so around eleven we had a quick walk around the block. Big clouds were being driven in on a confident westerly and by the time we hurried back in home it had started to rain. I phoned Ollie and ordered lots of pizza for seven which Stanley would deliver. And I phoned Norman Norman to check something out. Apart from that, it was a day of killing time and watching my jigsaw grow on the great table I'd inherited from my Aunt Dorothy. It was a hobby of mine, doing jigsaws of steam engines - and there, in front of me, that wonderful juggernaut Britannia was beginning to fill a great, dark station, teeming with passengers and porters in gushes and swirls of vapour and with golden windows in cafeterias and waiting rooms. The doorbell rang at just gone seven and in came Stan with our pizza. He wanted to try his hand at the jigsaw but I warned him off. By eight I only had about thirty pieces left to place but my eyes were tired. It had been a horrible day, considering it was August and the twilight arrived way too early. I put Pudsey in the back room and wondered if they would come now it was almost dark. I went upstairs and looked out westwards. The cloud blanketed almost the entire sky and there was only a thin strip of dirty gold on the horizon. As I went downstairs the doorbell rang.

"Who's there?"

"Police" a female voice responded. It sounded like DS Fox, but not quite. "Are you Mr David Lee Payne? We have a warrant for your arrest. Blackmail. Open this door."

Bumchucks. They knew my middle name. My brilliant deductions were all to cock. I definitely would be retiring early. Perhaps I'd be out in three or four years with good behaviour. Who'd look after Pudsey? Would he still be alive when I got out? Would Lesley wait for me? I'd be fifty-four or five. Would she love me enough to wipe my backside? With my heart bumping I opened the door - to find a gun in my chest jabbing me backwards. On the end of it was Birchenall making no effort now to hide the nasty thing within. Following him, and closing the door, was a blonde woman with brown roots. Marianne? Were there any genuine blondes in Blackpool? Her expression was fixed and she reminded me of a doll. She looked different to the photo in the paper. He asked me if the room behind me was the lounge and pushed me in through the door.

"Nice big room," said she, taking a bottle of whiskey out of a rucksack. "Sit down."

I sat in the armchair opposite the sofa on which they settled.

“I can’t drink whiskey.” I said in a voice which sounded like somebody else’s. “It’ll ruin your perfect plan if you try and make me drink that.....”

“That is *very* considerate of you, Mr Payne.”

“.....And you’d better get a move on, because I’m expecting visitors at ten.”

He smiled, got up, quickly admired the jigsaw and picked up the pizza boxes. He thought, he said, that my visitors had been and gone. He put a piece of the jigsaw in place.

“Mmm - it’s a nice engine. Pity it won’t get finished. I was pilled by it once you know. Restored railway in Peterborough. Now, then..... Where’s your dog?”

“Kitchen. How did you know about him?”

“Ho, ho - you’re not the only snooper in town. Little bird told us you’re a bit of a loner. Perfect....Just you and your dog. Liv him, don’t you? ”

I caught his nasty meaning and told him to leave the dog out of it. That rather depended, he drawled, on how well I co-operated with them. He nodded to Marianne and she opened the rucksack again and brought out one of those sandwich bags sealed shut. Inside was a wet-looking piece of kitchen roll. While he trained the gun on me, he threw me a pen and notepad and told me to write what he dictated. Dutifully - too dutifully? - I wrote *I’ve decided I’ve had enough. I’m sorry to upset everybody who loves me. David.*

“We didn’t think we should go into too much detail,” said he, smiling. “Suicide notes tend to be short.”

“Just explain how you got onto me. Was it something Rofe said?”

“Dead licky, really.....with so much minney at stake. We’d been planning to get rid of Alan for a while. When he played a dirty trick on us and tried to split us up, we decided to act because he knew. After he died Marianne was looking in the glove compartment for the M.O.T to tax the car and she found your little card. So we needed to know - *had* he hired you, or had he just been planning to? You provided the answer. Very considerate of you again!”

“And what’s....in the bag?” I asked, trying to sound trembly.

“Chloroform. One deep breath and you’ll be out for the count. When you’re asleep we’ll open your veins. A nice, easy way to go. Then we’ll wash your face and mouth out. Don’t you think that’s clever? It wouldn’t do to start another fire so near to Poulton. Even PC Plod might get suspicious.....They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but knowing too much can be fatal. How dare you try and pit one over on me, you Blackpool pidding!”

“So, who’ll slit my wrists?”

“He will,” said she, speaking for only the second time - and last time - in a pleasant Lancashire burr, and humorously pretending to shiver. “I’ll have to go out of the room!” Still her features barely moved as she spoke and it came to me that she’d had her face lifted.

I toyed with the plastic bag she’d tossed me and finally said “Mmm. You’re ingenious.....What do you reckon, lads?”

The double doors to my dining area burst open and there stood Norman in full clown costume. Desmond did a cartwheel, knocked the gun out of Birchenall’s hand with his tiny foot, then landed in Marianne’s lap, shouting *da-daah!* The faces of my murderers were a picture, as you can imagine. The gun was pretend, but not their astonishment. Norman reached down and picked up the bottle.

“Fancy a snifter, wee mon?”

“I do indeed, Stormin!”

While Desmond fetched glasses I found DS Fox’s private number and dialled it.

16 The Case Of The Retiring Detective

The best that Eric, the steward of the Legion could come up with was some thin sparkling wine. He knew had some champers somewhere, but he couldn't lay a hand on it.

"Here's to you then, Dave" said Denis, raising his glass. "A genuine celebrity!"

I sipped mine and pushed it away. Ray wanted to know if I'd have a career in the media after my interviews.

"Can you let us in on your next case then? Trapping more villains - or is it back to cat-rescue?"

That's when I dropped my bombshell and said I was retiring. Ray gaped, leant back and sighed.

"How disappointing!"

"As disappointing.....as a blowjob.....off a bird.....with a bad cough...." added Denis, knocking back the cheap wine.

"We've really looked forward to your crazy stories."

But I could tell Denis wasn't really surprised. It had been a brief career, a spring and a summer, and it had transformed my life. "I've had some amazing insights into human nature, lads...."

"...*In the court of public opinion*..." said Ray.

"Shurrup! Listen for once! I'm being serious. Walk down any street - what secret problems do the people walking past you have? Could you help to solve them? Who knows? But it strikes me that a lot of folks would love to be helped but daren't ask."

In a few months I'd realised not only how many cheats there were, but also how many lonely people and how lots of folks had no way of fitting in. None of it could be solved by politicians.

Ray was shaking his head sadly, as if he'd been reading the thoughts I kept quiet.

"How many people say, when they get to sixty, if only I could have me life again?"

Denis refilled his glass and asked Ray what he'd do with a new lease of life.

"Nothing much different really. Odd-jobbing suits me. If I'd been brainy though, who knows?"

Denis stared at nothing, maybe at the life he would have had if he hadn't wasted his talents.

"What about you then Den?" asked Ray, unable to read his face. "Jockey maybe, or summat dead clever, like a lawyer? You've allays got an answer."

Denis pretended to yawn and said it was pointless thinking about it. We were getting too heavy and we ought to change the subject. *Who were Leicester playing on Saturday?*

Ray ignored this. "How about you, Dave? Career in the police? Social worker? Miracle worker?"

I was really glad he'd asked because I wanted to tell them about my new plan I was hatching and - no doubt - have it exposed to ridicule, which would make me all the more determined to prove them wrong again.

"Me? Well, I've learnt there's no way of putting the whole world to rights, like....but it would be nice to make a little corner of it a bit more comfortable for folk...."

"You're going-to-stand-for-the-council!" sang Ray.

"Council? No way! Bloody *debating* society! And which political party would I be in? Labour?"

I'm not against folks getting rich - I ain't done too bad myself - as long as they use it to help others. Look at my cousin - a millionaire, he must be - but he just keeps it locked away. Look at the bloody banks - who are they helping but themselves? I know we can't all be the same but there's too big a gap. What chance did Accrington Stanley ever have? I saw a programme about a Bradford bloke called Somebody Salt. Millowner. Looked after his workers and housed them proper. Built 'em a church - "

"Aye - but wouldn't allow a pub. They had to be tea-total - I thought Joseph Salt might appeal to you, moralising old git!"

“Let me finish, Denis! Okay - perhaps in some ways he were too interfering, but I think he were on the right lines. Today there seems no rhyme or reason to what goes on. Blackpool’s a madhouse. It’s like a crazy party, a fair ride out of control, a big dipper not safe and lots fall off....I remember driving one night along the prom and watching all the rubbish blowing in the wind off the Irish sea and the bodies lying and staggering on the pavement. I’m no killjoy - I hope - but to me it’s plain ugly.”

“Oh come on,” said Denis. “They let their hair down and then it’s back to reality. *That’s ugly*. You’ve no need to feel bad about it, you’ve done your bit - set up some of them ne’er-do-wells like Ollie in business....and bought them clowns a van. *Laurel and Hardy - Shopfitters*. Ha ha! Now you should relax, take Puds and Les out walking and watch your share of the pizza profits pour in! You’ve helped enough scroungers.”

“Laurel and Hardy?” said Ray. “Never! How will they get any work?”

“No! *Norman and Whitworth*. As soon as they’ve paid me back, I’m off the scene.”

I could see it wasn’t the right time to talk about my big plan. Denis was drunk.

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How about you, Dave? – Ray’s voice was saying over and over as I lay there, keeping me awake. And I couldn’t get this farm out of my head. I’ll tell you about it now. It was out past Poulton-le-Fylde - a few acres - and seemed to have been for sale for ever. How Puds would love to end his days out there, near woods! He was seven and Labradors don’t live much longer than eleven. The farmhouse looked pretty derelict and the meadows overgrown. Every so often rumours would start up that it would become a posh retail park or private housing estate - which would trigger over-my-dead-body letters to the Gazette. I think it was green belt land, anyway. As I lay there in the dark, I toured the place and imagined all the jobs that would need doing, and skills that could be practised and learnt - plastering, roofing, painting, decorating... I saw the grass scythed down and the land rotovated and watched crops sown to grow food for the inhabitants..... and the wider community..... Then the original image of the farm returned - derelict, like so many other buildings in our area - pubs boarded up, and that old dance hall near the station - which could all be reopened as community centres and youth clubs - if only the will was there! As a dirty light fringed the curtains I made a wish - said a prayer - and fell asleep.

There I was, sitting there, chewing my teeth and dividing my attention between the rainy window and the snowy old western on the box, when my phone rang. Who should it be but my cousin Jonathan! For a dread moment I thought he was going to tell me he wanted directions again, but no. It was worse than that.

“David...I’ve seen the light...”

Literally. I told you, didn’t I, he lived in a mansion overlooking woodland? Well, his wife, Janice hadn’t come back and she’d filed for divorce. She’d moved in with a much younger man in an obscene-sounding place near Stoke, called Tittensor.

“Not that I’m bothered. Not any more. He’ll soon get fed up with her being always on the want. No...I’m a changed man. I really am.”

It turned out that he’d felt himself drawn - “*no dragged*” - out of bed by the dawn chorus and had witnessed “*an amazing sight*.”

“As I looked at the woods, a light, a shimmering light, rose slowly into the sky - and in the middle of it.....there was a cross.”

“A bit like one of our Illuminations, like. Had you been on el vino?”

“No, David. This was real. I heard a soft voice telling me to lead a new life and give up my things. A Christian life. So I will. Near Ashby there’s a monastery. I’ve applied to join.”

“This a wind-up? What’s the date today?”

“No, listen...”

He was going to donate his share of their fortune to charity. His son could complain as much as he liked - he was a dentist - (*Payne!*) - and rolling rich. And besides, Janice would leave Peter - (*he should have been an urologist*) - hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds - if she didn’t spend, spend, spend it.

“You’re really going to do this. Johnny?”

“I am. I’ve been a misery-guts all my adult life. Remember how we used to go nesting and tadpoling? Not a penny in our pockets! Did we care? We were more than cousins - we were brothers.”

“We were, Johnny! We were.”

I began to blub - I couldn’t stop myself. The noise on the other end sounded like a blunt drill. I realised he was blarting too.

“David, David...I’m g-giving you all my programmes...I don’t care now about football - overp-p-paid cheats.”

“That’s really kind of you...”

“...And I shan’t charge you very much...”

Suddenly, in a flash of light similar to his, I saw not a cross but the farm! There were figures hoeing and watering; there were men in overalls doing all sorts of jobs inside and outside the house. I began to tell him of my pipe-dream and he listened without interruption. When I’d finished it was so silent I thought he’d gone.

“Mmmm...I see. So you want me to give *you* my money? For a load of deadbeats?”

“No. They’re good at heart. Mostly. They need a hand-up, not a hand-out. Give it a day to think it over. Ask You-Know-Who...”

*

I knew my dream wouldn’t be easy. There would be setbacks, failures, arguments and worse. My Vimto rules would no doubt be flouted. But it was worth a try. Ray and Denis looked at me gone out when I explained it all that night.

“You don’t realise what you’re taking on” said Ray. “Have you completely lost your marbles? What makes you think you can win with hopeless cases?”

“A lot of them are. But some....who knows? If my cousin agrees. I’m going to make a crazy offer for the place. With the recession and all, it might get accepted. And Ray, you asked what you’d do if you could have your life over again...I could put a lot of work your way...and you could help with advice and training. Would you be up for it, at a special rate for a mate?”

His incredulity vanished and his eyes showed sums were being done.

“Maybe...Mmm... *Might* be a starter.... So, would you move in over there? Wouldn’t we see you?”

“Not so much. I mean to ask somebody else as well.”

“Lesley?”

I blushed. I hadn’t had her in mind, even though she’d said the other night she wanted out of Human Resources. Mmmm...She was a great cook, wasn’t she?

“No. Norman Norman. He could live in. He’s a big bloke. I might need his help. He could be the warden. I dunno - it’s all on the drawing board.”

Denis hadn’t spoken but had a curious, sarky smile.

“So - are you going to drive round and yank layabouts out of doorways sleeping rough?”

“Look, I’m not sure how it’s gonna work yet. Don’t push me. I’m not the only one who has to come up with ideas, surely? It’ll probably all end in tears. Sod it. Forget I mentioned it.”

Then Ray tried to be helpful. “Well, your pizza places are doing well! Who’d have thought in April that Dave Payne would be in catering by August? Who’d have thought Kackpool would ever get into the Premiership? You have to believe!”

Denis looked at us both and smiled even more sarcastically. “Yeah - and look where they are again now.”

“Doesn’t matter, Ray’s right. They had a go! That’s all we little folks on the ground can ever do. Come on!”

While Ray fetched our drinks, Denis’s face changed. I asked him if he was okay.

“Suppose so. I was just telling meself the answer to Ray’s question from the other night. Fact is, I’ve always wanted to be a market gardener. I might even come in with you, Dave, if possible ever changes to probable. If I have to drive to bloody Belgium again, I’ll scream. I’ll have a chat with the missus – but don’t hold your breath.”

Later, I was just settling Pudsey down when my mobile sounded the gloomy Posthorn Gallop. The display said *Jonathan* and my heart nearly stopped.

“I’ve had second thought about joining the monastery, Dave.”

Typical. The light he’d seen had gone out. I saw the farm fade away too in my imagination.

“Alright, Jonathan. No worries. I might come down at Christmas...” (In 2020)

“No! Hold on. God spoke to me again. He likes your hostel idea. The money’s yours - I mean ours. He told me to come up and help you.”

Bumchucks. I did love Jonathan, but more the *idea* of him than his presence. What a dilemma. He must have heard me think it, because as quick as a flash he said he’d put a caravan on site for himself, so he could be private.

“We could even go blackberrying again. Not been since we were kids! Money doesn’t matter anymore. Well, it *does*, but not in itself. And I could teach bridge and chess. So could you. Once somebody learns chess, they’re a new person.”

The next Sunday morning, Stanley came round with Angela. They were getting engaged. He was a different bloke compared to that sad matchstick man I’d once found crying in a tram shelter. He’d put proper weight on and his hair and face shone with health. I remembered those foul, dark clothes I’d washed that night. The ones he wore now were smart and cheerful.

“I’ve heard there’s a shop empty in Burnley, Dave. Ollie felt so guilty about the way ‘e used to push me around and sit on me, that ‘e’s showed us ‘is secrets. Only, this shop’s two ‘undred a week to rent. How about investing in us - just for a bit, like, till we’re on our feet? Share in the profits? I’m going to help me deaf and dumb sister out an’ all. And go round and see me ma, and show her Angie.”

Angela was smiling so prettily, what could I, a big soft pillock, say?

“I’ll ask Puds. If he barks, the answer’s yes.”

I bent down and whispered “rabbits” in his ear and of course he barked like mad. As soon as they’d gone off in their car, I asked Puds for advice. Should we go round and ask Mistress Lesley

and Ricky out for a stroll? He padded off into the kitchen and came back with his lead. I reckon that beast is more intelligent than a houseful of cats.

“We’re going to live in the country, Puds... Yes we are....and chase rabbits, rabbits, rabbits!”

He barked for joy and pranced up and down on his front paws.

“And I’m going to ask a lovely lady a very important question, Puds!”

As you know, I’m hopeless at chatting up. As we drove the short distance to Les’s house, I kept rehearsing my little speech, hoping it would come out right. I can’t read Pudsey’s thoughts, but I was pretty sure he had his paws crossed for me, and was hoping that his little friend would be over his touch of flu.