

## **Foreword**

I knew my brother Thomas was sweet on our cousin Charlotte Bescott but had no idea how sweet. Last New Years Eve he promised, when drunk (me too) he'd print me off a story he'd nearly finished which might amuse and surprise me. I had my version of Charlotte. This is his. Am I surprised? No, I'm shocked. I almost wish I hadn't read it. How true is it?

## **COUSIN CHARLOTTE**

How old was I at the time of my first memory of Cousin Charlotte? My earliest memories, memories without context, float unrelated in a misty sea. One marker - in this context I shall call it a buoy - ought to serve as a guide, because of our trip with Charlotte, Uncle Jim and Aunt Vera to Weymouth for an August week in the early 1950s. But I cannot find Charlotte there and the one photograph, marked Weymouth in jittery pencil on the back, shows only the four laughing adults raising a glass in the corner of a lounge. I suppose we children were in bed.

I must have been about four because I remember my tiny younger brother Terry being taken out of the packed cinema by Mother because he would not stop talking. I have no idea what film it was and there is no-one left to ask. The only other memories I have retained of that week is of a lion tamer being attacked by a lion, and of my dumper truck losing a wheel, never retrieved, as we hurried to the station to catch the train home. We must have played on the beach but I have no recollection of it. Cousin Charlotte must have been there digging sand with us, but that little girl is nowhere to be found in here - in this ageing skull of mine. Those memories, perhaps one minute in duration, are all that remain of a whole week =  $7 \times 24 \times 60 \times 60$  seconds. It is strange that we remember so very little of the events which formed us and which, at the time, were so special.

No. Although I have made repeated efforts for the sake of this account, my picture gallery of Charlotte only begins some time later, with an image of very pale blue eyes, and of a open face with quite a broad forehead - not deep - and light brown hair, parted on the left, held back on either side by hair clips; she has a shy smile and is playing our Granddad's piano next to me - she on the high, squeaky notes and me on the dark bass ones. We hammer away tunelessly until Grandma comes rushing in with hands clapped to ears, pretending to be in agony. We laugh. Nothing much else remains of that scene. Whether I loved her then in a childish way, or simply regard the memory with affection, it is impossible to be sure. I remember we were given a slice of Hovis and it is ironic that I can still taste its nuttiness now - though the bread no longer tastes as good, either because my palate, or the formula of the bread has altered. Maybe both. I expect Charlotte had either a totally different perspective on that scene, or forgot it completely.

## **1 Boxing Days**

"It's like a horrible worm!" shouted Charlotte excitedly with a giggle of fear. Showing off to her, I leapt back from the great table in mock horror. From the volcano which Uncle Jim had lit with his glowing Woodbine, an ugly black squiggle, like joke toothpaste, was squirming out onto the cloth.

"Horrible!" seconded my mother. "Isn't there a nicer one than that, Brian?"

My dad lifted the lid - with exaggerated caution - of the box of indoor fireworks and had a look. Was there a nicer one? I must have been distracted then for I cannot remember the next moment. Some time before or after, Granddad had shown Terry and me a great game which Charlotte

watched nervously. He had taken a piece of an old nylon stocking and stretched it tight over a pint glass and secured it with a rubber band. In the middle he had placed a bright shilling. Lighting a fag, he handed it to us and we were suitably amazed. It was not to inhale on of course - although Terry, the bright spark, made as if he would - but to use as a tool. Taking it in turns, we had to burn a hole in the stocking. Whoever caused the bob to fall into the glass forfeited it to the other. We played until Granddad was down to sixpences.

We loved Boxing Day afternoons at Grandma's and Granddad's. Great-Granddad Yates would sit quiet and smiling - I can never remember him ever speaking a word - his hand trembling with a glass of brown ale (which put me in mind of dandelion and burdock) and watching benignly our party games while stroking Oscar, his nasty big black cat, who avoided everybody but him.

Then there came Christmases when first he and then Oscar were gone. I remember taking a more special interest in Charlotte. Like some girls in my second year class, she had begun to develop a bust - but somewhat larger than theirs, more like the third year girls - and I was fascinated. I must have been thirteen, she still twelve. Aunt Vera had a very big bosom and it was pretty clear that her daughter would acquire one too. It was strange to me that she was still so thin at the waist. She seemed unconscious of her newly acquired charms. Once I saw my father's pale eyes glance admiringly across at her. He saw that I had noticed him looking and he glared at me briefly before going back to study his dominoes. Surely he was not angry with me?

Charlotte must have noticed though where my eyes kept straying and my mother certainly did. After we had tired a little of our games, she, Charlotte, who had taken up piano, was persuaded to play for us. I had a nice voice and agreed to sing Do Not Forsake Me O My Darling, the High Noon song which appeared in Granddad's songbook - (he played by ear and was quite untrained.)

"What a nice double-act!" declared Aunt Vera when we had done, clapping and looking around at my dad. "What a pity cousins can't marry.....eh Brian?"

Perhaps she had noticed me glancing at her daughter too. The adults laughed. Charlotte blushed and I certainly felt hot. We went to sit at opposite ends of the table. It was then that a marvellous novelty was introduced onto the table. Uncle Jim loved gadgets and this was a reel-to-reel tape recorder with a tiny microphone on the end of a wire. With glee, he played back our song. It sounded as if we were singing from outer space and I sounded ridiculously high-pitched, like a girl. Then there were claps and cheers, and Aunt Vera's comment came over loud and clear because she had been nearest the mike. It sounded like a message especially for me.

The information regarding cousins which Aunt Vera had announced bothered and saddened me the more I thought about it that night as I lay in bed. The voice seemed to be in the wind blowing snow onto the window pane.

I could never marry sweet Charlotte, yet there was no girl at school who came within a mile of her. She was beautiful and calm, and, if she had a deficiency, it was only that she was shy and lacked a little in spirit and personality. I buried my head in the pillow and cried. But we saw so little of each other - our families were friendly but not that close - and we lived at opposite ends of Earlstone, we almost in Fairleigh Parva - the village which the town would eventually surround - and they on the posh road out to Ashby-de-la-Zouch. After that Boxing Day my new, strange and - yes- unsettling love for Charlotte went into hibernation - it would turn out to be the harshest winter since 1947 - and I inevitably thought less and less of her.

## **2 Teenagers**

After I had transferred from Fairleigh High School to Earlstone Upper at the age of nearly fourteen, I began to cycle down to Grandma Bescott's - barely half-a-mile away - for lunch. In the early summer, out of the blue, my loving, lovely Granddad had succumbed to a stroke, meaning that Boxing Days would never be the same. Grandma was grieving quietly and my mother had encouraged me to go down to keep her company. I needed little persuading; a lonely child, I hated lunchtimes at school and was an easy target for bullies.

How cheerless then that room seemed to me - that room I remembered with such affection. As I entered, Grandma sat knitting at the great table around which we had had such wonderful afternoons. Ruefully, I studied the scorch mark from a long-extinguished wayward indoor firework; the walnut piano lid was down; the brown leather armchairs where Granddad and Great-Granddad had sat watching TV, puffing away in friendly silence, were forever empty. "Blimey, our Tom," she said, as soon as I shut the door on the pelting rain. "You're taller now than me."

I took off my wet cape and sat by the fire while she went into the kitchen to fetch my lunch. She was a great cook, my grandma, and was doing her best to maintain my recent spurt of growth. Her faggots, and steak and mushroom puddings were so tasty - with Hovis to mop up the gravy - and I never left a morsel.

"See what you reckon to this then," she said one day.

"What is it?"

It looked like a beef stew. I shrugged.

"Dunno"

"You'll have to guess. It was your granddad's favourite."

I tucked in, afraid then that I would not like it. There were carrots, peas, mash and that meat. It was the most delicious meal.

"Enjoy it?"

"Fab!"

"It were.....brains!"

"Brains??"

I loved those winter lunchtimes and we became great pals. Grandma was chubby and jolly like her son, my Uncle Jim, and blessed with irrepressible optimism. It amused me that she would try to lose a little weight by nibbling slimming biscuits before tucking into her big dinners.

One day, who should turn up but Cousin Charlotte. She had cycled from the Girls High School and when she walked in - I had not seen her for months - she fair took my breath away! How she had changed! Her legs were longer and sturdier in white knee socks and a navy blue pleated skirt. Beneath a yellow blazer, a white blouse was doing its utmost to preserve her modesty, but the buttons could not cope, and I caught a glimpse of a special, soft creamy skin I should not have glimpsed.....and it made me feel so peculiar that I dropped my fork. But her face! The hair, now with a middle, not a side parting - the slides had gone - was longer and of a darker, glossier brown, and her eyes were so large and beautiful - like sapphires, pale blue sapphires set in white marble.

The exertion of riding had brought a lovely blush to her cheeks and her mouth fell slightly open - partly in surprise to see me - and partly, I think, in embarrassment at the expression - I can only imagine it - of admiration and wonder on my face.

"Our Charlotte!" exclaimed Gran, coming in from the kitchen. "I've got some dinner left - come and sit down."

"I can't Gran. I've just dropped in with a message from Dad."

Her voice had changed too. It was huskier and more confident.

“I reckon you’re catching our Tom up. Come over here.....And you Tom.”

She made us stand side-by-side by the pencil marks she had made on the wall - ever one of her Boxing Day rituals - the last time we had been together. I hardly dared breathe. Surely Charlotte would hear my heart bumping.

“Definitely” said Gran fetching the ruler from the side of the piano, completely unaware of what an excruciating delight she was inflicting on me. “Now, let me see. Aha...aha!”

I was five feet nine, Charlotte five seven. We glanced at each other for a blissful second and she smiled very shyly.

She handed Grandma the note she had brought and said that she had better get back.

“I’d better get going,” she said. “I’ve got Maths in half-an-hour and I’ve got to revise for a test.” I said I would ride with her and saw with disappointment that this was not a welcome offer. But how could she refuse?

We rode side-by-side up the long hill in an awful silence, me regretting my offer and so determined not to pedal in time with her that I selected a higher gear. I tried very hard not to glance at her lovely thighs which the skirt could not cover. I knew it was wrong to have such thoughts and feelings about a cousin I could not marry - and she still thirteen - and I sensed that she was very conscious of how exposed her legs were. At the T junction we would go our separate ways, our schools lying in opposite directions. The junction was fast approaching and still neither of us had had a single thing to say. It was November and unusually mild - *for the time of year* - as everyone kept saying, and now, foolishly, I came out with that remark.

“Yes.” she replied.

We arrived at the top of the hill and, planting both feet to the ground, she looked right. We managed to avoid looking at each other as I glanced left.

“I shall miss Boxing Day this year,” I said. “Gran is coming to us, I think.”

“Yes.”

She looked flustered, like her younger shy self. I almost invented an excuse to go her way but it would have been stupid.

“Bye then. Hope you pass the test.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

I turned right, she left. I stopped to see if she would look back over her shoulder. But she never did.

\*

“Yer alright, Joyce? Yer big poof!”

My surname Joyce was quite unfortunate in view of my failure - at 15 - to move on from a rather unmuscular, even delicate stage of development, and I was painfully conscious of my soft complexion without a hint of a whisker.

“When yer gonna start shaving, Joycey? Twenty?”

My tormentor was Linda Newsome - a sworn enemy for no reason - apart from me stupidly calling her Gruesome under one particularly prolonged onslaught in the dining hall. Gruesome she was - large of frame and aggressive - though unfortunately quite popular with certain other stupid people in the lower band. The shaving jibe was based on her pride in being the girlfriend of a lout with disturbing red sideburns who was rumoured to be knocking her off.

Thus confronted by Linda and two other scornful girls on the lawn by the main entrance, I felt very nervous but determined not to show it, particularly when the lout - or, even worse Charlotte,

newly arrived into the Fourth Form - might turn the corner at any moment.

“Leave it, Linda,” said Pete, my one close friend at school. “He’s done nothing at you.”

“Who rattled your cage, you ugly, box-headed bastard?”

True, Peter was no Adonis, but neither was she an Aphrodite.

Oh no.....

“S’up Lindy? Is Spotty gi’ing yer grief?”

The lout had turned up. He pushed Peter and he fell over the accomplice who had gone down on his hands and knees just behind him. Of course, this was found to be very hilarious. Peter, banging his head, was in angry tears. I might have been slight but I had - and still have - a bad temper. I could not help myself. He - the lout - never expected me to hit him, and in a proper fight he would have murdered me. But down he went under a hail - a rather a light shower - of rapid blows, more surprised than hurt. Up went the cry - *Fight, Fight!* - and kids began to crowd round.

The lout collected himself and, with a vicious leer advertising what he was going to do to my nose, began to get to his feet. I looked around helplessly for a means of escape and only saw Charlotte looking terrified for me. I instantly recalled our Christmas duet and the line from the High Noon song - *Swore it’d be my life or his’n* - and this inspired me to get my retaliation in first, and kick the lout in his grinning teeth. The crowd gasped and fell silent - then began to disperse as Hayes the PE teacher and coach of the under-16s rigger team, strode up. The lout was his scrum-half or prop - what do I know? - for I was asporty, if I can coin a word similar to amoral. Hayes hated me.

“You coward, Joyce! Call that a fair fight? Kick a man when he’s down?”

Kids began to boo. This was turning out worse than a pasting. I felt about as popular as a Muslim today on a bus with a rucksack.

“For two pins, I’d hold you while Wainwright - (*the lout*) - gets his own back! You bully!” shouted Hayes with spittle in his droopy moustache (fashionable after the release of a famous Beatles’ album, and quite beyond the power of my top lip.)

Of course, he did not hold me but sent me to quake outside the Deputy Head’s office. He was called Bates and any milk of human kindness had long since dried up in that austere vessel of a man. Bates was a rigger man too and the U16s were his pride and joy, destined to win some tinny bauble at Welford Rd in the spring. He had taken our class in the Fourth Year for rigger once, and being the last freezing, knock-kneed defender in front of the posts, I had preferred to trip over Kiteley - a great hulking moron - rather than tackle him. This manoeuvre had seemed very ingenious and reasonable to me, but not, alas, to Bates who was so furious that he belted me one and knocked me out.

In view of that, I knew that any explanation regarding bullying would be useless. Ours was a school for hard knocks but not for trips and kicks. Yet again I had broken its stupid rules. I was suspended for two wonderful days.

When I returned, Wainwright got his revenge behind the bike sheds. I put up no resistance and I suppose my lack of fight saved my life, because after a minute he stopped knuckling me. The crowd dispersed, disappointed.

My father was away on business in Yorkshire - otherwise, I was sure he would have gone up to complain. My mother, bathing my face, told me to go into the library and keep away from the bullies. But what hurt more than the cuts and bruises was that the prevailing wind blown up against me had swept up Charlotte too. She pointedly snubbed me in the corridor not long afterwards. My loathing of rigger - no rugby - rigger makes it sound matey - my hatred of that

ugly, sprawling, brawling excuse for a sport intensified at that time, and at the age of 60 it is still as fierce, if not fiercer than ever.

\*

The next time I saw Charlotte - apart from glimpses at school - was that Christmas. She was wearing pretty earrings which sparkled, I remember, but her eyes were unusually dull. She was so silent and glum. Uncle Jim had decided to resurrect Boxing Day at his bungalow with our family and Grandma, who was just beginning to ail and tire after a strapping, independent life. Any notion that the olden days would be recreated would expire more quickly than the little volcano in the box of indoor fireworks. My dad seemed uncomfortable and preoccupied, my mother mainly silent and pensive - (the reason would not be long emerging) - and my brother Terry had broken out of his childhood chrysalis as a gloomy adolescent with a vocabulary of around ten words. But even worse, Cousin Charlotte, having shown her sad face for five minutes at the dinner table, went to shut herself in her bedroom with a slam when spoken to. Whatever Uncle Jim said about her being off-colour since Christmas Eve could not convince me that her mood and manner were not related to her newly found distaste for me. Had not her best friend, Elizabeth Watts, ally of Wainright and the ruggie crowd, shouted something nasty at me as I had passed their classroom window?

But worse news was to come - and it made me feel queasy. Aunt Vera confided to my mum as they were washing up - (did I say *confided*? - whispering was utterly beyond her!) - that Charlotte had a boyfriend - a "serious" boyfriend, and that they had had a *bit of a tiff* the night before. The word "serious" sank my flimsy boat of hopes. It did not require much effort of my imagination to picture the serious things they had been doing.

The indoor fireworks were a damp squib and Terry managed to make us understand by pointing that he wanted to watch the film instead. The tea seemed dominated by celery and beetroot - yuk! - and at just gone six we were pulling on our coats, lying about what a great time we had had. Any mirth had been forced and short-lived. Charlotte never even came out - ignoring Vera's tiny tapping at her door - to say goodbye.

Her distress that Boxing Day marked a change in her, not that I saw her very often that spring. She would either sit more or less in silence, staring in what I can only describe as horror at some inner scene, or she would make an effort to be cheerful, laughing a little too long or loud than a remark or joke warranted, while her beautiful eyes remained sad. Some experience or thought was affecting her features and it was all linked to her being serious with Steven. I kept seeing that lovely, uncomplicated girl on the bike turn left and ride away forever.

Charlotte called her boyfriend Steve - not Steven - which ran parallel in my strange imagination to the ruggie/rugby thingy. But in fact I discovered he was quite a nice lad - nearly a year older than Charlotte - with a droopy moustache. Apart from that, he was better-looking and better-made than gawky me, so that very soon, reasoned with, my pangs of jealousy eased.

I even persuaded shy girls to be my friends for a while, and acquired a taste for Double Diamond and dance halls on Saturday nights, accompanied by a Peter who looked less square-headed with longer hair and dark glasses, and a couple of his mates in tight sports jackets. We aspired to serious things too but made no progress amongst the twisting, wobbling girls and their plaggy handbags scattered around their plaggy shoes. They might accept our offers of a Babycham or Cherry B and then go to the toilet promising to come back, only to turn up, twisting or wobbling

on another part of the dance floor.

In the spring of that year, Uncle Jim and Aunt Vera began to call in on my mother on Sunday mornings after chapel to give her a little comfort and support. There had been more going on in Father's northerly business trips than just business. He had met somebody and left. *That* was very serious.

Some Sundays, Charlotte came too and I was glad that she was quite friendly again towards me, even though she hardly acknowledged me in the school corridors. Terry was now a virtual recluse and had been playing I Am The Walrus by the Beatles over and over again in his room. Charlotte looked up at me from an earnest study of her painted fingernails and we smiled. We both knew what was coming.

"What's this damned row?" asked Jim, wiping ash from his suit trousers.

"Listen!" said Charlotte laughing too loud and winking at me provocatively. "It's really rude." Her sudden forthrightness made me feel embarrassed. Finally - after an agony of waiting, the lyric in question was sung - the line about being a naughty girl and letting down knickers. Charlotte burst out laughing. My mother turned away to the sink.

"Is that it?" exclaimed Jim with a dismissive grin. "We sang much ruder songs than that in the war!"

I was surprised at Jim. He was turning out to be very broad-minded - (I didn't know the word permissive then) - and yet went to church. My mother - his sister Mary - never talked dirty and was an atheist. I filed this rude event under the same heading as the snippet of information which Vera had confided to Mother on another visit; that Jim had set aside and furnished a spare room in their bungalow - *with a telly* - for Charlotte and Steve to do their "courting". Of course, I imagined again all the serious things which must have been going on there and I was surely not the only one to do so. I should have felt more guilty and jealous, but, to be honest I had something else disturbing me; the previous Wednesday, while her mum had been out at bingo, I had gone round Susan Faulkner's house with Pete and I had nearly done the most serious thing possible to her friend Vanessa. In earlier childhood, I had played doctors and nurses with her once on the field and I only really wanted to look at it again. But that modest peach had turned into a gash and it made me feel sick.

The next memorable time I saw Charlotte was in early September, on a baking hot Friday evening. It was at The Steering Hotel, quite an exclusive venue on the hem of our dear old tart of a town. Young men in their sports cars and the in-crowd frequented it. The drinks, you see, were about sixpence more than most other places, and daft people liked to show off their faces there. Normally, we would have steered well clear. We were sixth formers by then and it was Peter's birthday. In the cellar bar there was a disco so we decided to do most of our drinking in town and arrive after pub closing time for the late bar.

But the evening was ruined for me when who should come out of the door but our Charlotte! And she was arm-in-arm.....not with Steve...but Paul Wainwright, my flame-haired nemesis! He had become the big beast on Earlstone's youth scene; his wealthy parents had bought him a sports car, in which he delighted turning up - or roaring up to school, putting other sixth formers - in Minis, on pushbikes, on foot - and our trundling teachers to shame.

He looked down on me in the car park with a smirk. On his freckly arm was the prettiest girl in the Fifth Form and he knew by now she was my cousin. And he knew that I knew - from changing room experience - what a whopper he had. Here he was with my gorgeous cousin,

making tracks for that low slung yellow thing with the open top, parked under the horse chestnut tree, acquired with the sole intention of arousing envy and admiration. What twats the Wainwrights were! Charlotte changed course and ran over to me to plant a kiss on my cheek! She had never done that before. I quickly found out why.

“Don’t tell Steve,” she whispered tipsily in my ear. “Promise?”

I promised but my look of horror made her pause before adding “It’s only a one-off.”

She forced a laugh, gave me another of her filthy winks and skipped back to him. The last image I have of that scene is of her climbing - or rather descending - into the passenger seat and leaning back with her long left leg, bent slightly at the knee, exposed almost to the top of her delightful thigh, revealing the welt of her tights. She slammed the door, and he reversed before roaring off into the sultry night. I cursed my Uncle Jim for being so lenient with her - for her special courtship room, for not being bothered about naughty girls letting their knickers down. Now she was off to do that very thing - with one of the most hateful, conceited gits I knew - who had boasted in the sixth form study that he would be perfect but for being conceited - to do that very thing in some horrid, litter-blown lay-by. I felt disgusted and cheated.

After half-an-hour staring at a stinky keg beer I had not really wanted, I went home cursing her, Jim, Vera, Wainwright....fucking rugby - and last but not least - my seriously disloyal father.

\*

I had started going sort of steady with a girl in the first year sixth in my English class called Sandy. She was a small, frizzy, freckly brunette, a nice girl in spite of her slightly pongy breath, whose father had a business making packing cases. Even though I had a nasty habit of walking dog shit onto their cream carpet, he quite liked me and encouraged me to call him Bill. This familiarity made me unaccountably uneasy, however, as if it was part of a treaty between us of which I had not read the full terms. Sandy lacked a private room to do her courting - we just waited till Bill and Jo had gone to bed. She wore a kaftan and serious was a piece of cake. I was nearly eighteen and at last I had a moustache, though not a droopy one - (I think they were out of fashion by then). Bill was fairly easy-going but put his foot down when it came to pubs - no daughter of his would be seen in an Earlstone pub till she was eighteen, he declared. So, Sandy and I agreed to go to the pictures every second Saturday, leaving me free to go out drinking with my mates on the others. Peter had furthered enhanced his chances with the women by growing a beard, so that even less of his ugly face was on display. As well as two lads called Paul and Dave, my brother Terry, having metamorphosed beyond the adolescent stage to become quite a pleasant, fine-looking chap, had joined the team.

With Grandma in a home, our family Boxing Day was finally abandoned. On Christmas morning, 1968, both families went down with sweets and chocs and spent an hour around her armchair in the stuffy room in which she was wasting away, and then went their separate ways. Charlotte, in one of those moods, had little to say for herself and avoided eye contact with me.

And so it came round to New Years Eve. Our local, The Comet, the finest of estate pubs, which were novel and popular in the sixties and seventies, had a group lined up and Double Diamond would be served till half past midnight. We settled down at eight with our handle glasses - with their little concave windows - opposite the great mural of a dark blue solar system, lit by a white beacon of a sun, dotted with planets, and streaked by a golden comet - in feverish anticipation of

a wonderful night of laughter and pleasure. (Ah, The Comet - who would have thought then, in 1968, that by 2008 you would become a Costcutter - *Costcutter?* - lying Capitalist bastards!!) The group turned out to be pretty useless and by half nine the lounge was emptying. We looked at each other. Should we go into town - and waste half-an-hour's drinking time? Henry the bartender was yelling above the din of an out-of-tune attempt at Itchycoo Park - "Is there a Tom Joyce in 'ere? TELEPHONE!"

Guess who it was! Cousin Charlotte! She had phoned home and my mum had told her where we were.

"What's up? You'll have to shout!"

What was up was that her NYE had turned out as disappointing as ours.

Before I tell you what happened later, bear with me for a page or two. I'll try to keep it short....

Charlotte had left school unexpectedly. Her O Level results had been disappointing because of *too many distractions* a chastened Uncle Jim had admitted, while Aunt Vera had sat uncharacteristically silent. Everyone in our kitchen thought they knew what those distractions were. Nasty rumours had started to percolate through into the First Year Sixth about her. An angry Steve had taken one lad aside and threatened him.

"Popular girls get talked about - and jealous bitches spread rumours," I told him, without a blink of the eye, when he asked me if I heard anything about her and Wainwright - who had since left the school.

Then, one Sunday, Jim and Vera announced that Steve was no longer her serious boyfriend - in fact no boyfriend at all. She had ditched him because of his jealousy. And she was leaving school - instead of retaking her exams - to begin a secretarial course at Tech. By late October she had become the personal secretary to Arthur Nesbitt, owner of the Nesbitt Indestructable Sock Company - (which the demolition balls would destroy in 1998, by which time most socks pulled onto most feet in Britain were imported.)

Having risen to become a director of Sillitoes - which should really have produced socks but was a knitwear factory - Uncle Jim adamantly denied pulling a few strings for his daughter, when so accused by my brother Terry - who had become an outspoken, if temporary, left-winger. Jim shook his freckly head and smiled ruefully. "You're wrong, Terry. Her typing speed is a bit slow but she's getting there."

I made no comment but it was pretty obvious that strings did not need pulling, and that her slow typing speed had weighed very light on the scales of Mr Nesbitt when considering her other attributes.

"So what do you reckon, Tom? The night is young."

I had never been so favoured by Charlotte. I thought guiltily of Sandy at home watching the White Heather Club.

"I'm with Terry and me mates."

"Bring them as well! It's Nesbitt's office staff do at the Sketchley Park - and it's deadly. There's a group of old blokes playing waltzes and we're sitting here - five gorgeous birds all tarted up - bored stiff. Just mention my name at reception - I booked it. Oh - and there's a free bar."

A free bar?? It was about a mile and a half to that snooty hotel, and I think we would have overtaken Mr Bolt that night with a head start - Bolt, not us.

Charlotte persuaded the dingy group to play some modern stuff and we were soon twisting away and doing those daft, sprawling, leggy dances (which became the middle-aged norm at wedding receptions after the millennium.)

Peter soon had Charlotte's gorgeous mate Elizabeth writhing on his knee in a dark corner. I suppose he was worried he might have to remove his shades if things got too serious. The older employees had begun to drift away into an adjoining room to escape *that sort of thing* and the pop din. It did not take long before we had the room to ourselves. The waist-coated barman, deadpan and grim, had not been impressed with us. It was a "residents only" bar most of the year, and we were made about as welcome as clowns at a funeral. At first, he refused to serve us, and, leaning on the bar, Charlotte had to use all her charm to get round him. She promised to take full responsibility, and an older member of staff, greedily eyeing her cleavage, had tipsily backed her up. Had she looked like his frumpy wife, staring frostily in our direction, we would soon have been legging it back to The Comet. Beauty is the master key to the locked doors of the world.

The hands on the clock above the bar were steadily reaching forward to 1969 and the free booze meant that our drinking pace had hotted up. Charlotte was tiddly too, and after a brief fling with Paul Perry she threw herself into my arms on the dance floor. The slows were a soft and cosy delight with her and at last we kissed. Ah, bliss! Then she turned and went to the band leader to request Rock Around The Clock. She tried to teach me how to jive and we finished up in a heap. The barman was clearly one of the Stoic school. A statue would have been more sociable. I have no idea whether he had signalled to them, but at 11:20 the band leader announced the final dance. The barman then did an unforgivable thing. He rang the bell for last orders. Charlotte managed to wring one last concession from him. He would serve the last drink at 11:40 but the party would end at 12:01 prompt. He had not reckoned with our ingenuity. We ordered two pints each at 11:30.

"Miserable git. ...Happy New Year!" shouted Dave Bradley (who had played the lion in our school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and who would go on to become one of the town's most celebrated alcoholics).

"Why can't you put a smile on your fizzer, pal?" asked Paul.

On a nearby table were some half eaten bread rolls and one was soon describing a perfect parabola to hit him square on the bonce. Charlotte laughed - oh what a joy to see her laugh for once so genuinely - until she was sneezing and choking. More bread, peanuts and beer mats rained down on him. Still he failed to move a muscle - facial or otherwise - as if it were beneath his dignity to show outrage at such infantile behaviour. We subsided into a stare-out with him, until Charlotte took my arm and whispered that it was too smoky for her in the room. We went next door which was by then almost empty.

"You know, I got it into my head that you hated me, Charlotte."

"Why?"

"You would hardly look at me."

This seemed to embarrass her so I changed the subject.

"So, who are you going out with now?"

"Nobody," she replied, faking a glum look.

"I don't believe you!"

She took a sip of her Martini and lemon and said she liked my Sandy.

"Nice girl. Used to play netball with her at school."

"Yeah...nice..."

I looked at her now more full-on than I had dared to for years. She told me not to stare.

"You're making me nervous."

"Sorry, Charlie...but surely you know I love you?"

(Only Steve had been given the privilege of calling her Charlie and suddenly I felt very stupid).

“No Tom. You *like* me.”

“No. When we played the piano together, when you turned up at Grandma’s that lunchtime...and when we sang that song.....”

“That Boxing Day....”

I dared to look again at her and there were tears in her eyes.

“...And then...you go out with that bastard Paul Wainwright.”

She laughed through her tears. “Don’t! You’re as bad as Steve! Wainy gave me a lift home, that’s all. I fancied a ride in his TR5. Not him. He tried it on - but I told him it was my week and all he got was a good night snog and a quick wank. Steve wouldn’t believe me.”

“What? About the wank?”

“I never mentioned that to him!.....Don’t you get it? I’m a virgin.”

I gaped at her in disbelief.

“I just can’t make you out, Charlotte. When are you telling the truth?”

“It’s no good you loving me. There’s a lot I....a lot you don’t know about me. I’m not worth it, Tommy.”

I told her I did not give a damn about what she had done and, licking a finger she put it to my lips to silence me.

“Do you remember when my mum said about cousins not being allowed to marry?”

“As if it was yesterday.”

“Well...silly cow was talking rubbish...as usual....cousins can marry, Tom.”

I felt shocked and alarmed. With shame, I thought of dowdy Sandy staring at Andy Stewart’s capering legs, kilt and sporran, unaware of this disloyal conversation.

“Will you then? Will you marry me, Charlotte?”

My proposal at first made her laugh loud but then sobered her. Her eyes opened very wide and she just stared at me. Was I serious? The spell was broken by a huge burst of laughter from the next room, and, hand in hand, we went in to look. The barman had finally deserted his post which was surrounded by an appalling amount of mess. But the laughter had been caused by Paul Perry climbing on to the bar to unhook the hideous spiky metal clock.

“He can’t shut up shop if he don’t know the fucking time!” he yelled, tossing it quickly to Dave.

“Right! The bar is closed!” shouted the barman, returning from the back. “I’ve just been to call the police - so you’d better be off.”

Charlotte’s hand slipped out of mine and she ran out in the direction of the toilets.

When I went looking for her ten minutes later, someone told me she had gone off with a couple who had offered her a lift.

The first day of the New Year felt like Doomsday. I kept seeing bread flying around in my spinning head as it thumped with pain. Hangovers on keg beer were shocking. I heard a clock ticking really loud as if it had replaced my brain. And why did it feel as if I was lying on a bed of nails? Finally, I managed to open my sticky eyes and found myself hanging half out of bed. I focused my eyes on a spike poking out from my mattress. I pulled at it weakly and found myself looking at an ugly clock.

“Terry?” I groaned. “TERRY!”

“Wha-a-a-t?” came back the agonized voice of my brother from the bed across the room.

“Did you stick this fucking clock under my bed?”

“No. You threatened me and said *you* were ha’ing it.”

Suddenly, I remembered proposing marriage to Charlotte. I felt terrible. Had she accepted? First I recalled her look of horror and then imagined a weeping Sandy throwing the present I had bought her for Christmas – that bloody Hobbit book - into the bin.

We left the stolen clock in a plastic bag under a seat on the Earlstone to Leicester train the next Saturday when City were at home. It might still be on a Diesel somewhere on the network.

The next Sunday morning, Jim and Vera came in beaming more brightly than they had done for ages.

“Great news! Steve and Charlie have made it up. They’re getting married in October.”

### **3 Growing Up And Out Of It?**

I was pleased to miss the wedding, having gone to distant Newcastle to start a degree course. I saw Charlotte briefly, two years later, at Grandma’s funeral and we exchanged a few anodyne remarks. Had our drunken heart-to-heart really taken place? She showed no sign of embarrassment and spoke so easily, although something in her expression and voice told me she was keen not to linger. Steve was at the buffet and I had a feeling he was keeping us under observation. Perhaps she had confessed to him - maybe even in that first week of the year - that she had had a proposal from me.....perhaps that had been the catalyst in their sudden reconciliation?? The notion should have made me feel better, but it did not. Charlotte, coming of age, had added elegance and sophistication to her beauty, and admiring and envious eyes followed her progress wherever she glided in the room. Steven had become a partner in his dad’s engineering business and his wife - oh no, his *wife* - was planning, with Jim’s blessing and support and Gran’s legacy, to open a florist’s. They were - as Aunt Vera confided to the whole room - making their way in the world and buying a four-bedroom house on the new Bradgate estate.

Infected by the feverish atmosphere of dissent and rebellion at university, I felt disgust at this petit-bourgeois self-entirety, against a background of Vietnam, the Arms Race and Poverty. Charlotte’s lack of a Politics and her lack of concern for anything apart from making her way I tried to view as major faults to set against her charm. I compared her to Ursula, my articulate and outspoken flat-mate and occasional bedfellow from Cologne, and almost convinced myself that I would soon have tired of my cousin, particularly as the flaws and foibles of middle age set in. What on earth would we discuss - clothes and chrysanthemums?

Ursula, true, was rather scruffy, a little on the too sturdy side and looked a bit horsey, in fact rather horsey, but she was committed and passionate and we had come to a satisfactory arrangement for co-habiting with each other - and with a shy chap in the attic from Monmouth who lived on toast and Marmite - in our crappy little flat near the shipyard. Was that not almost as much happiness as a disillusioned student could hope for?

Uncle Jim came over and interrupted my reverie. “Don’t look so depressed, our Tommy. Gran didn’t suffer and she had a good old life. She’s well out of it, if you ask me.”

“Well out of it?”

“Yep. Country’s going to the dogs everywhere you look. If Wilson gets in again, God help us. Might as well have the TUC in Downing St and Joe Gormley as PM.”

Hearing such apocalyptic talk from sunny Uncle Jim surprised me. I just nodded. I had no desire to get into a political debate at Gran’s wake. Wilson and Heath, of course, were - as Ursula declared to everybody willing to listen - *two close putrid shades of Capitalism, Comrades!* Workers’ control of councils and government was on the way.....

\*

A decent Maths degree saw me with a plum job as an actuary in Cheltenham Spa, and I discarded my ripped jeans, jean jacket and tee shirt in favour of a suit and tie. The Glorious Day was coming but not quite yet. Uncle Jim had been right. The country was in the dog-house, inflation was rip-roaring and Denis Healey had gone - famously "cap in hand" - to the IMF for a loan. One weekend I visited my mother with my girlfriend - another Charlotte - a brunette from Kentish Town with a lazy eye - and heard some worrying news. Sillitoe's factory - where Mum worked in the accounts office - was struggling for orders.

"The chinkies are undercutting us," she said, repeating what Jim had said. "They'll work for a slice o' bread and a bowl o' rice."

"Well if they can hang on for another six years or so, you'll be okay - with your pension."

She thought this over and closed her eyes, as if reviewing the futile life of which she rarely complained. But there was more surprising news to come. Charlotte was getting a divorce.

"Vera swore me to secrecy but I heard it from her sister Maud in Castle Street last week, so you might as well know. I reckon most of Earlstone does anyhow."

"Divorced? She's only been married...."

"Five years come October. Thank God there's no kids."

"Who's Charlotte?" asked Charlotte.

"My cousin." I said with an unintentional sigh. Mam fetched her copy of the wedding photo to show her.

"God, she's beautiful!" she exclaimed, squinting at me intently - and angrily?

"Yes. I never did much care for that Steve." said Mother "Shifty. Didn't like how he looked when you tried to tell him summat. Trying to pretend to be interested." (I contrasted this with her show of delight when the engagement had been announced that first Sunday of the New Year). Steve had turned out "a bad lot". He never did a "stroke" in the house and wasted their money on stupid things.

"He went and bought a top-of-the-range mower and they only had a pocket hanky of a lawn. He hardly ever took her out, but spent plenty o' time and money on golf - and two evenings a week playing blooming solo."

The nasty boil swelling in their marriage had burst after Charlotte had sprained her ankle, but under pressure from Steve, his birthday party had gone ahead. The next morning while he slept it off, she had gone round on her haunches clearing up the mess.

"Your Uncle Jim was disappointed. The wedding cost him nearly three thousand pound...but, like he says, times have changed. Folks used to say - *you've made your bed and now you've got to lie in it....* But if the bloke's rotten, why should you? I wish I hadn't all them year - put up wi' *him....*"

She meant Dad. I had not thought about him very much. Our birthday cards - with a fiver in - had stopped on our eighteenth birthdays.

I drove back with my Charlotte to Cheltenham in silence. I was thinking about the other Charlotte becoming a divorcee. Was she already casting her nets, or had she made a catch?

#### **4 Blue Skies**

In 1979 she married again. A fine fellow called Roger Bill. This time I went - along with Mum,

Terry and his wife Alison who left their little daughters with her mum for the day. Kentish Charlotte had decided to work in London at Lloyd's and our long-distance love affair had twinkled and gone out like a little star. (This might be the right time and place to mention that this account could be stuffed, like a cushion, with all sorts of details of my largely uninteresting life, but that would dilute the main theme. For example, I reckon you could do without the chapter and verse of all my failed love affairs, so back to the wedding breakfast). Uncle Jim, braces down and puffing an enormous cigar came down from the top table for a chat after the speeches. Sillitoe had got out of knitwear at the right time, seen him and my mother "right" and sold the factory to a developer for offices. But unknown to us, Jim was already suffering with his prostate and this would eventually kill him.

"Things'll change now, our Tom. Maggie'll sort out the damn unions and Lefties."

"Well," chimed in my mum "She can't do much worse than that blooming Callaghan."

I said nothing, not wishing to spoil a wedding with politics. I turned to Terry.

"Who is this guy, Roger Bill? Unfortunate combination of names..."

Terry was well into the Fairleigh Parva establishment, having truly divested himself of his leftist leanings, and launched himself as an estate agent - on the advice of Jim who expected a housing boom.

"Charlotte will be one of the wealthiest bloody women in Earlstone in ten years," he said in a clandestine whisper. "You mark my words."

Roger was a tall, thin man of about thirty-five with dark, curly hair. He looked a little like the actor Robert Powell. (Didn't he play Jesus once?) They were certainly a handsome couple, as they like to say at weddings, and Charlotte at nearly thirty had kept herself in great shape, though upon closer examination her eyes were a bit duller and the tops of her arms were showing the onset of flabbiness, a condition which Aunt Vera was all too conscious of for she was wearing a satin dress with quite long sleeves. I compared the two of them - they were like an elder and a young sister - as they sat chatting at the top table. It was obvious that Charlotte would follow Vera's course exactly, and acquire the belly and the bum and the meaty legs. She was already a chatterbox and by forty would no doubt be talking rubbish at top volume. Had this not occurred to Roger? I recalled the wistful advice of a drunk - a stranger - in a Cheltenham pub lamenting his unhappy marriage. "When you wed the daughter, remember you're marrying the ma."

At the time, I had taken this to be a warning about intrusive mothers-in-law, but at the reception I started to see the remark in a different light. Charlotte would become fat and boring. *She's only half-educated and self-centred....I'm a single man.....I have my freedom and I'm well out of it - I am almost ashamed to admit thinking at the time.*

Roger Bill's mother, Terry told me, owned - of all places - The Sketchley Park Hotel, the very venue where we had misbehaved and where were all now seated.

"You can see it needs a new broom and new money in here. Look at the bloody carpet - and these bloody chairs."

If the mother could be persuaded to step aside, he said, then Jim's money and his daughter's vim would transform the place. Jim had heard from a Tory councillor - and Terry confirmed the rumour - that new housing and industrial estates were planned on the edge of Fairleigh village. The M69 had not been long open, putting Earlstone squarely at the heart of the motorway network. The Thatcher government would boost confidence and investment. The Park - if redeveloped to offer conference facilities, with a brand new kitchen and restaurant, two new wings of luxury bedrooms, a pool, a gym - and yes - even a nine-hole golf course on the field

behind, where cows had long since stopped grazing - then the Park, that snooty old gentleman of an establishment would earn its owners - IF they were ambitious and willing to take risks - "An absolute HUMDINGER of a fortune. Richest woman in Leicestershire - you wait and see."

"While the ordinary folk see their wages slashed, Tez...."

"You bloody Commie! You'll do alright out of Thatcher - what you worried about?"

Mrs Bill, the mother and owner, was sitting in splendid isolation with honey bouffant hair, a blue bow under her chin and a bad smell under her nose. Mr Bill Senior had gone off in the mid-seventies with her best friend, the wife of a meat inspector. At her insistence, a traditional roast with gravy and taters had been ousted for lamb noisettes stuffed with spinach. Terry had sniffed at it and, like many others, had left the spinach on the side of his plate, muttering something about bloody Popeye. Fine dining had not yet quite established itself in Earlstone. Piggy's Hollow, a café in the main street, was always full.

Roger and his bride began their tour of the room as the top tables were dismantled to provide space for the DJ. I sat rehearsing my little speech of congratulation and by the time they were approaching our corner, disco lights were flashing and I realized I was dizzy and drunk. Here she was, getting ever closer, draped in cream satin, creasing darker and lighter as she stooped and turned to address guests. Terry got up and stumbled off to the toilet, pausing to give her a peck on the cheek and whisper something naughty in her ear, because she laughed and gave him a playful slap. My mother and Terry's wife were chatting and Roger was delayed by a boring relative who would not let go of his hand. Charlotte came to me, hesitated, smiled and sat down.

"And how are you Tommy?"

My speech did not come out as planned. "Happy.....and sad."

"Why?"

"Happy for you and sad for me."

She put her hand - her long, slender-fingered hand on my arm.

"Are you drunk?"

"Only a lot. Like we were that time sitting in that corner over there ten years ago. And don't make out you've forgotten!"

"How could I? It was great that night - even though I nearly got the sack. I told old Nesbitt you'd gate-crashed the party. *Not according to what I've been told*, he said. Anyway, I put my hand on his thigh and his crotch and he soon changed his tune ..."

"No you never! You're just trying to shock me again. Why do you do it?"

"To put you off me."

"Well, it don't work. I still feel the same way about you."

"I know you do. And I sort of do about you."

"Sort of do. The curse of my life, your *sort of do*. Yeah, yeah, yeah - you love me like a first cousin should..."

"Oh no. a bit more than that. Who knows? I might tell you one day how much if I get fed up with him. Now cheer up. Promise?"

"Promise."

She winked - oh, God that wink! - and sprang up to go and take my mother's hand. My ears were ringing with my provoked blood - or was it that bloody disco row which had started up?

It was an amazing coincidence - I dislike Dickens for that - but I have honestly not made the next bit up. This happened four or five years later, a thousand miles from Earlstone. I was on a tiny cove in Minorca. The white sand was talcum powder, the sea a dark blue and the sky just a shade or two lighter - and not a hint of a breeze was there to blow even the flimsiest cloud across the blazing sun. At the very back of the cove, sheltered by a cliff, was a beach bar with a verandah. God himself could not have surpassed Airtours in picking me up and dropping me down in a more idyllic place. My colleague and new companion Nicola was reading her moronic magazine and my watch said it was time for a cold lager. I put the straw hat on her mousy brown locks and waded through the sand to take a high stool at the bar.

"I don't believe it!" shouted a man on another stool around the corner of the bar. "Tommy Joyce!"

I pushed my sunglasses onto my brow and stared at him. The voice, the eyes and nose were familiar but were set in a chubby face I did not recognize.

"Don't say I've changed that much, mate! Steve Trehearne!"

Goodness me, it was! Charlotte's ex-husband but bloated like a drowned corpse with beer nellies and in-folding belly, mid-thirties - yes - but looking older than forty. I apologized and blamed the sudden glare of the sun for my failure to recognize him. There was an empty glass by his left fist and a fresh one in his right. He took a handsome swig and toasted me, leaving me little choice but to go and sit by him. We shook hands and he clapped me on the shoulder as if I were his best buddy. His breath was sour with the smell of stale beer.

"Manuel! Two more, por favor!"

I began to think of excuses to get away as soon as possible - but an inner voice told me to hang around; what secrets might he reveal about my mystery-cousin, the drunken state he was in? My decision to let him do all the talking was unnecessary because I had no choice.

"You remarried, then?" I asked as innocently as I could after he had exhausted all the usual holidaymaker themes - airport, hotel, food etc, etc.

"Nah, mate. Mug's game. With my partner, Sharon, large lady over there under the palm tree. Cheers, down your neck, old son!"

"I see very little of Charlotte since she remarried."

"Saw it in the paper. Hear she's doing very well for herself. Nice break for her - divorcing Yours Truly."

"I was really shocked, Steve..."

At last - out it came. It bugged him still to think, he muttered, that everyone on our side thought he was the one to blame for the split.

"Two sides to every coin," I said, sympathetically patting him on the arm.

"Too true. And two sides to *her* as well."

At that instant, I recalled her stretching her long legs out in that sports car.....and I recreated my disgusting image of her leaning across to grab the lout's whopper. Then, as if she really was close to me on the next stool, kissing my cheek, she asked me again, in that unforgettable whisper, *not to tell Steve*.

"I promise..."

"You what? Promise what?"

".....Promise to buy you one back.....A lager?"

"Cheers Tom.....Yeah.....Well, I'm the first to admit I didn't do enough round the house. Mum's fault - waited on Dad hand and foot. Like father, like son. But that's only half the story. She was going behind my back."

“She told you or you found out?”

“Told me. We’d had a big row after my birthday party. Caught her in a room upstairs with somebody. She said it was just a snog - but then she lost her rag when I wouldn’t leave it - flung it in my face about that bastard Wainwright. She turned on me, drunk, and said he’d made her squeal with it...that I was useless...God, you don’t wanna hear the detail she went into. And with others.....”

I almost contradicted him on the spot - but this version sounded more convincing than the one she had given me.

“I kicked her on the shin. She could hardly walk. I told her she could clear up the mess. That was it. Over and out. I was gone.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out through his teeth.

“You should have told your side of the story.”

“What - and admit she cheated on me?”

“So why tell me?”

“Pissed. I’ll hate myself later. Please - don’t say a word. “

“I shan’t. Who’d believe me anyway?”

“I even thought....”

“Thought what?”

“You and her....you know...”

“Me? She’s my cousin, Steve!”

He cocked his big head to one side in query and I shook mine slowly and sincerely until he believed me.

“Charlotte had her moods and wasn’t easy to please, if you know what I mean. You wouldn’t think it to look at her, but Sharon’s a doddle. Two minutes max.”

I grimaced to imagine such a flabby two-backed beast. He turned to look over his shoulder and she waved, then heaved, walrus-like, her reddened mass over, exposing her chubby back to the sun. When I glanced at him again there were tears streaming down his face. The lager was making his true feelings transparent.

“Steve, if it’s any comfort, I know the story about Wainwright is false. I reckon she wanted to hurt you. Fact is, I saw her get into his car at The Steering. She just wanted a ride in a TR7. A ride home. She gave him a goodnight kiss. That’s more or less it.”

He was staring at me in angry amazement. He wanted to know how I knew.

“Someone who knew Wainwright told me.”

“Who?”

“A girlfriend of mine. I believed her. So should you.”

I walked away from the bar feeling pretty good. I had not lied - just been a little stingy with the truth. I was pleased to have a new angle on Charlotte. But did it really help?

\*

During the early eighties I saw nothing of her. I convinced my new partner Ruth in Cheltenham that I was feeling unfulfilled, crunching numbers for the company’s profit. My unspoken prediction for economic disaster seemed absurd as the consumer and housing boom which Jim and Terry had predicted came about. I was making a ton of money in insurance but, as I said, I felt restless. The catalyst for change arrived in 87 when my mother’s health began to give

concern. We moved to Earlstone and I applied to train as a Maths teacher. With Ruth working in an office, we could easily afford my sabbatical, having sold my Georgian pile for a fortune in two days. Terry was really pleased to have some of the burden of our mother shouldered by me. "You wait till you see the bloody Sketchley Park now!" he said. "Pity Uncle Jim didn't live long enough to see it finished."

"Vera okay?"

"Her arthritis is pretty bad - but not as bad as Mum's. Has a special room at the back of the hotel.....Bungalow sold for a pretty penny...Tell you what! Your birthday soon - I'll buy you and Ruth dinner there."

Charlotte had changed quite a bit. She had had two daughters in quick succession and had struggled to regain her figure. The tops of her arms and her calves were thickening and she held her head high to tighten the skin under her chin. She took us on a tour of the hotel, the public rooms, the pool area and the gym, until we found ourselves standing on the large terrace admiring the landscaped garden, the golf links and the lake in the twinkling November twilight. "A bit different to our New Years Eve here, hey kiddo?" I said as she looked for my approval. When Charlotte blushed and stumbled over her words, Ruth looked at me with her eyebrows raised.

We enjoyed the meal and Charlotte saw to it that we had an extra bottle of wine - Nuits St Georges - compliments of the house. Even so, Terry did not get much change out of a hundred pounds.

Ruth had been mainly silent throughout the meal and I asked her as we drove home if she had not enjoyed herself. As an insurance fraud investigator, she had the gift of insight and I suspected that her pensive silence betokened a judgment she was forming.

"It's a nice place - but she's not happy, your cousin."

"Oh? How can you tell?"

"Her eyes. Pain in her eyes. Trying too hard to be cheerful."

"Well, it's a lot of pressure running that place."

"No. It's more than that. She's scared to death of losing her looks. Plus, I didn't like that slimy git."

The slimy git was Roger Bill who, dressed in a tailored dark navy blazer and cream flannels, had put in a brief, spectacular appearance in the lobby, before hastening off to the car park.

"Couldn't you tell he had a date? I bet you a tenner he didn't turn up at that Rotary Club meeting he mentioned. *And* he kept looking at my tits."

"Well, that's partly what they're for, innit?"

"No. He has other women - and Charlotte knows it too."

"All guesswork! Just because he dresses snazzy....."

"Jiggling his Mercedes key-swab and flouncing around as if he owns the bloody place -"

"He does!"

I laughed but she remained silent for a mile before asking me suddenly - using her well-practised technique for exposing frauds - what there had been between me and Charlotte, forcing me to gasp, as if I had been punched.

"Between me and Cousin? Nothing."

She pulled into a lay-by and lit a ciggy. We would sit there until I told her, she said.

"It was written all over your face how glad you were to see her. And she was embarrassed."

Tongue-tied like a girl.”

“It’s been years since I saw her - and she is my cousin!”

“More to it than that. A lot more. I’m not a fool, Tom. Come on.”

It was nearly twelve. Rain was speckling the windscreen and the wipers intermittently revealed glaring headlights approaching from the village. I realized there was no point in being evasive. Being what she was, Ruth had a knack of squeezing out the truth from a liar like the last drop of juice from a lemon.

“OK - I had a crush on her when I was a young lad. She was the most beautiful creature I’d ever - no have ever - seen. But we were cousins and she enjoyed teasing me. I never really knew how serious she was, but then when we both about eighteen she told me - we were both drunk at a party - that first cousins could marry, so I proposed to her - as a joke.”

“As a joke.....and she said?”

“Nothing. I left the room for a sec and when I came back she’d gone. A week later she was engaged - married in October - divorced five years later - remarried in 79. Richest woman in Earlstone. End of story.”

“And how did all that make you feel? Upset, I bet.”

“How? No *how*! It didn’t matter - and doesn’t. I hardly think about her. She’s getting rather fat.”

“She’s not the real reason you wanted to move back to this dump?”

“No! Of course not. You know why I’ve come back. Now let’s get home.”

She raised both eyebrows at once - a mannerism I was finding more and more annoying - and put her glasses back on. An inner voice kept repeating that she had a point.

Ruth never mentioned that late-night exchange again but I sensed a cooling in her affection for me for quite a while after, and I resented it as if I was being punished like an errant child.

## **5 Dark Clouds**

In 1989, I began teaching in a school over the border in Naunton and at first enjoyed it. We lost Mum in June that year to a stroke, and I considered tracking down Dad but Terry showed no enthusiasm so I dropped the idea.

Then in August we lost our last link to childhood when Vera died of a breast cancer which had been diagnosed late. Her sister Maud told me at the funeral that she had not wanted to bother the doctor, but the real reason, she thought, had been that she grown tired of life without *her Jim*. Charlotte did not come to either funeral. She organized the buffets and had them delivered to Terry’s - massive - house. He had agreed to host the receptions. I thought it strange that she had not offered a room at The Park.

After a couple of drinks, Terry was furious about her non-attendance for our mother.

“She was her bloody aunt - apart from Maud - her only aunt, for God’s sake. Even Vera came for ten minutes, poorly as she was!”

I tried to make excuses.

“Leave it, Tez. She’s a strange bod - you know that. Here - stick a chicken drummer in your chops. Mum would hate to think you were mad at family on her day.”

When, however, she went through the same strange ritual for her mother, I could not defend her. Ruth, who had nodded in false sympathy at Terry’s outburst, did not need to say a thing. With a look of sarcasm and triumph, she raised her brown eyebrows to maximum - a gesture now distasteful to me and, yes, to be honest, physically repulsive, putting me strangely in mind again of dirty hoof prints.

By her absence, Charlotte had managed to surprise me once more. My middle-class sense of

propriety should have been outraged, but the part of me that loved her almost admired her refusal to do the obvious, and contrasted it - favourably, in spite of everything - with my partner's predictability. Dealing with cheats had made Ruth look for the worst in people. In addition, her growing partiality for the SPD had increased the volume of the nagging voice campaigning against her in my head.

It was in September, I think, when Charlotte phoned. Ruth took the call and put her hand over the mouthpiece.

"For you. Your girlfriend."

"Charlotte?"

"A-ah! You admit it then?"

Nice trick, Ruth. She handed me the phone, with her fucking eyebrows at another maximum, and went into the kitchen, closing the door with exaggerated care, with a click, as if wishing not to disturb us. Charlotte sounded almost timid.

"Does Ruth not like me?"

"Of course she likes you - she just had a bad day.....Sorry about Aunt Vera..... You alright?"

"Not bad, not bad."

The tremor in her voice told me that something was far from *not bad*, but whatever that thing was, she kept it to herself and told me instead about a problem with Michael, Roger's son from his first marriage. Years before, he had won a custody battle with the mother over her paranoid schizophrenia and her love of the bottle. Michael was nearly seventeen and attending a private school in Twyford, a posh village on the road to Burton. He was struggling with his maths.

Could I come over and coach him?

"We'll make it worth your while, Tom."

I had never visited Charlotte's house in Fairleigh - even though it was less than two miles away. It stood in splendour, tucked away in an exclusive close which had been created from the yard of a long defunct builder, comprising four houses - one of which was owned by a retired First Division football manager. I looked up and counted seven windows on the first floor, and three in the roof; an extension was rising up behind the garage - a triple garage! Eighties wealth knew no limits or modesty. These were Thatcher's creatures and I would be a liar to deny being impressed. I admired the entrance - a great door standing in recess from the red-tiled dais supporting four grooved Grecian pillars with pedestals and cornices - and felt almost afraid to tug on the bell, the metal tongue of a mocking gargoyle. The window boxes, hanging baskets - and planters on the drive - were overflowing with flowers - begonias and surfinas and geraniums - and the impression created was both attractive and repulsive - attractive, because it *was* - and repulsive because I was being tacitly informed that this house belonged to seriously successful people and that I should stay well away if I did not share their culture of enterprise. And I did not. It was a spectacular specimen of neo-riche-classicism. A sleek Jaguar and a soft-top Mercedes stood on the drive, and alongside them I nonchalantly parked my old Vauxhall Cavalier.

A well-fed housekeeper in a pinafore admitted me into the hall. The floor looked like a chessboard with large black and white tiles, and my gaze ran up the two staircases leading to a landing. Kitty, the elder daughter, appeared briefly, looked down on me shyly and vanished. Apart from the olive complexion and darker hair, she was Charlotte at Gran's piano, a little

beauty. How many hearts would she break?

I was informed by the housekeeper that Mrs Bill was getting ready for a gala evening at The Park.

“It’s the mayoral awards night for service to local charities. Her hairdresser and beautician are with her. I think she expected you tomorrow, but I’ll ask.”

I was ushered into the kitchen which was immense. There was a central seated area with high stools; units of solid elm ran along every wall and the tiles were of marble. I lost count of how many gadgets there were - an espresso machine, a huge food processor, bread maker, toasters, juicers etc. If Steve and Charlotte had been seriously in love, she and Roger were seriously in wealth. I almost dreaded to think how magnificent the reception rooms were.

I heard movement upstairs and doors opening and closing, the brief blare of a television....and into the kitchen walked Charlotte with a face pack on and curlers in. She was dressed in an old brown dressing gown. She tried to conceal how inconvenient my presence was. From behind her, a shy boy of about five foot seven emerged, a smaller version of the father with curly hair and an olive complexion also.

“Say hello then, Mikey. This is my cousin Tom. Sorry you have to see me in this state - expect Grace told you about tonight. You two want to....?”

I asked her to stay for just one minute as the boy was on the verge of tears. Maths has that effect on many children.

“You mentioned calculus. Is it calculus bothers you, son?”

The word obviously inspired terror and the tears began to flow. The stepmother put her arms around him. In the fruit bowl there were some apples. I picked one up.

“Mikey. Do you play cricket?”

He nodded.

“Bat or bowl?”

“Keep wicket.”

“Great. Here, catch.”

I threw the apple gently towards the ceiling light and as it fell he reached out and caught it.

“Well done, that man! Howzat?”

He looked puzzled at me, then her and smiled through his tears.

“Thought you said you had a problem with calculus?”

“I do.”

“Well, you just did it. Every time you catch a ball you do simple calculus. You work out the speed and the curve of the ball as it travels towards you. Come here.”

I put a piece of paper onto the work top, drew one axis for time and one for distance and sketched in the approximate curve the fruit had described - then drew me as a stick man where the two axes met, and further along the bottom line I drew in Mike as a stick boy where he had caught it. He laughed.

“Okay, Mum. You go and make yourself gorgeous and I’ll do a bit more work with Mikey.”

Her eyes were beautifully wide and moist with love and gratitude. She came forward and hugged me. At that instant, in came Roger in a rush and stopped in his tracks.

“Making yourself at home, I see,” he said, less pleasantly than he probably intended.

“Oh, Roger! Tom’s just explained that maths thingy to Mikey in seconds. That damned teacher at The Elms - just sticks his feet on the table and reads the paper - how much are we paying a term?”

“Obviously too much. Seen my diamond cuff links? God, Charlie - is that how far on you are?”

Got to be out at half-six!"

"Ro-ger," she said in an embarrassed hush "Tom's here....to help *your son*."

"Right. Thanks Tom. Send us a bill. Sorry - we're in a rush. Talk soon. Hey, come for a meal, you and....er..."

And out he dashed, yelling *Grace* at the top of his voice in a temper. Charlotte blushed as she used to do at Gran's and apologized.

"Rodge is het up. Big night at The Park. Press will be there. We need the publicity. Business has been slow recently - and that damned Romans place has just opened on the Watling....Survival of the fittest....bloody Thatcherism and all that jazz....."

Through her face cream, her eyes were staring at the marble floor as if her worries were reflected there.

"I thought you loved Margaret Thatcher, Charlotte."

She looked around the kitchen and sighed. "Absolutely..... Right, I'll have to love you and leave you."

"You crack on, kiddo."

"How much do we owe you?"

"You already paid me. Big hug was enough."

It turned that Terry had attended that gala charity dinner, not that he was especially charitable – in fact he believed that charity began at home – his home, extending not much farther than the front gate. He told me that Roger Bill had made a bit of a fool of himself.

"All bloody teeth and handshakes – ridiculous! Draping himself all over the women..."

Charlotte had looked ill-at-ease, not helped when a rather tough and dry topside of beef was served with al dente potatoes. Any beneficial publicity for the hotel would be undermined by grumbling – folks like nothing better than grumbling about rotten food.

"That bloody new chef couldn't scramble eggs! Not good, not good. Choppy waters round the corner, our Tom, you mark my words. Alright for you bloody striking teachers, though. Cloud cuckoo land! "

What Terry had missed – and he was furious with himself for leaving early – was an incident between Roger and a drunken Tory councillor – another Nesbitt, cousin of the indestructible sock-man – who had pushed him for draping himself rather too closely over his pretty young wife. Roger had landed rather heavily on the edge of a round table – exposing the poor corkboard of the pedestal – and sending a sticky toffee pudding hurtling through a perfect parabola to land on the ample chest of the mayor's wife some twenty feet away. Mikey could have explained it to her.

\*

It was the spring when Charlotte called again. In early December we had been invited for pre-Christmas drinks but Ruth had a convenient headache and I had no wish to force her to go there looking glum - increasingly her specialist subject.

"Tommy. It's me. Business is a bit slack - and....oh God!" - she broke off in a sob- "We're in a bit of a tight spot. Can you help?"

"How?"

"I can't say on the phone. He's just getting dressed and he might pick up the extension. He'll be gone by seven. Please come round."

Ruth came out of the lounge and folded her arms.

“Look at you! Like a lad on his first date. No prizes for guessing who that was, Thomas Joyce.”

“Don’t start, Ruth! She’s upset. I think it might be the hotel. And Roger. I’ve got a feeling you were right about him.”

“Well - how can *you* help? What do you know..... about *business*? Why hasn’t she phoned Terry? He’s the roaring success in this family!”

“How do I know? He probably gave her a piece of his mind about Mum. I ought to pop round. Come on, Ruth. Be fair.”

“Well, you’d better go running round to her then - lap dog.”

“Don’t be silly, Ruth. You know it’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it? You don’t know yourself very well, do you?”

She slammed the door. Ruth had become a nasty, jealous woman. And that was crazy - she was younger, slimmer and prettier now than Charlotte. Against my will, I had begun to hate her - her and those silly bloody eyebrows of hers.

I drove over, recalling what Terry had told me. He thought that Charlotte and Roger were taking a bit too much on. Not content with The Sketchley Park Hotel, they had bought a large house in the middle of Fairleigh, demolished it and built a mini-close with seven starter homes, just at the time when first-time buyers were scarcer. People further up the housing ladder were staring at negative equity.

“It’ll all end in bloody tears, Tommy. You mark my words,” had confided Terry over Christmas dinner.

Grace the housekeeper had been cashiered. The soft-top Merc had gone. The little daughters were upstairs and Mikey at a friend’s. Charlotte’s face was blotchy and almost ugly. She had made no attempt to dress to impress, and her ampleness was free to flop as it pleased. There were two glasses and a bottle of whisky on a table. She had one poured ready for me and I took it from her shaky hand. The long fingers which had played the piano so innocently were hard bitten and nicotine-stained. She stubbed out her cigarette and cleared her poorly throat.

“We had a really bad row. The girls are upset. He’s probably giving *her* his sob story right now. Rotten bastard...”

I pretended I had not heard, and anxious not to show how pleased I was to hear about this *her*, I sauntered to the window to admire their daffodils and tulips, bent backwards by the wind.

She rallied herself and began to tell me her tale. Roger was refusing to take seriously a crisis which she could only visualize turning into a disaster. They were mortgaged up to the hilt with more than one bank and had payments pending at the end of April of thousands of pounds. But there would hardly be enough to scrape together to keep themselves afloat. Receipts at the hotel were down, they had wages to pay and the sale of a house on the new development - providing money they had been relying on - had fallen through. Suppliers and tradesmen were pressing for the settlement of long-outstanding bills and threatening all sorts of sanctions.

“We had no fish in the restaurant of any description after Wednesday. Hudson’s refuse to supply. Guests walked out. These stories get round. I can’t sleep, can’t eat...feel sick all the time...”

“Charlotte, Charlotte, I’ve never seen you like this.....ask the bank for some respite. Go in and talk.”

“Can’t. Main one’s in Paris.”

Roger had kept telling her to stop worrying - any danger of repossession would not materialize.

“He keeps telling me another couple are sniffing round a house. Sell one - he says - and we’ll be laughing. Two years ago we missed a big payment to the bank - the main one - because of a mix-

up with a standing order - by *one day* - and we got a really nasty letter. He reckons the same will happen again - just bluff *he* reckons - but things are a lot tighter now.”

“But surely they wouldn’t want to repossess a massive hotel. Would they want the bother of putting in their own management team? How easy would they find a buyer?”

“That’s just what Roger says. *If it were a house, it’d be different.* But we stand to lose this place as well. It’s collateral against the loan for Meadow Close. I’ve even offered a house there to Maud’s niece’s son at a big discount and I’m waiting to hear. I keep praying he’ll get in touch. I couldn’t bear to have to leave here.”

I looked around at the white leather, the porcelain, the dark wood - the plushness of the carpets and hangings. And this was only one of three large downstairs rooms.

The preamble over, she came to the main theme. She wanted me to loan her five thousand until they were straight. As soon as they were - in a month or two - she would pay me back six.

I had eighty thousand in instant access accounts. The cash would be no problem, only Ruth. Should I refuse and explain to Charlotte that my partner disliked her - because she was jealous and thought I was in love with her? Could I keep the loan a secret from Ruth and put the money back without her ever finding out?

“Dad would go bonkers if he knew. Thank God he didn’t live to see it. He warned me about trying to grow too quick and taking on too much debt. Rodge thinks he’s in the big league now, but the truth is, he’s fucking stupid. His mother knew it - that’s why she kept him out of the business. He goes driving round in that bloody Jag showing off, like, like....”

“Like Paul Wainwright?”

Instantly, I regretted saying it, but it had just popped out. She covered her face with her hands - and burst out laughing.

“Trust you!” she said. “I’ll never forget your face when I got into his flashy car.”

“Well I was worried for you with that git...and felt sorry for Steve.”

She looked at me slyly. “Only for Steve?”

As if to say - *what do you think?* - I raised my eyebrows and reminded myself horribly of Ruth - at her crossest, with arms tight-folded.

“You won’t believe where I bumped into Steve a few years back.”

“In a pub no doubt.”

“No - well kind of - in a beach bar in Minorca. Pissed as a rat - crying like a girl.”

“Him or you?”

“Stop teasing!”

“Why was he crying?”

“Got a porker for a missus on a sun-bed.”

“Oh, like me now,” she said, patting the tops of her arms,

“Don’t be silly....he was crying because he still loves you.....”

I felt tempted to add *like I do* but stopped myself in time.

“He mentioned you throwing Wainwright in his face. I told him nothing happened that night just to shut him up.....”

Although I left the sentence in mid-air she refused the invitation to add a thing. She patted the sofa cushion next to her, and, obediently, I went over.

“Just a hug, Tommy. I’m desperate. I need a hug.”

She was delicious to hold but her breath was obnoxious from weeping, fags and drink, arousing, thank God, no un-cousinly (?) desire for her. Comforted, she drifted off into a little sleep. After a while I untangled myself and went to the drinks cabinet. A brandy was very welcome. I debated

whether to lend her the money. The deal sounded okay as long as one of those houses sold. I knew they were going for around seventy thousand. For a second, I even entertained the idea of buying one myself as an investment, possibly to rent out. The image of Ruth's eyebrows made me instantly delete the thought. Then I thought of Aunt Vera - barely six months dead. The proceeds of her bungalow and her savings had gone entirely to her only child.

I went over and gently woke her.

"Charlotte, what about Vera's money?"

"I'm ashamed to say."

"Go on."

"Roger bought holiday properties in Spain. All our money's tied up."

"Can I ask you why you didn't come to the funeral?"

"I'll tell you some other time. I can't cope with that as well now. *Can* you help? Aunt Mary must have left you loads."

"She left me and Terry a hundred and twenty-five or so each. Mine's in a three year bond, so I can't touch it."

She covered her face with a cushion.

"But.... I have other savings. I'll lend you the five - but it's got to be our secret - like Wainwright."

She threw her arms around me again and whispered "Just like Wainwright."

Getting up to go, I said I would post her the cheque.

"No. Bring it round tomorrow! It's got to clear and be on account as soon as possible. Can you make it out to Roger? It's a business account in his name."

"I'd feel happier making it out to you."

"Don't worry. The company secretary has to countersign all cheques. I'll phone him. Roger won't be able to touch it. It will be alright."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I did as I had promised. Ruth knew nothing of it and did need to know as long as all went to plan. And we would be a thousand better off! I lied to Ruth that I had agreed to check something in the hotel accounts - their man was ill - and, unbelievably, she believed me!

One evening, a few days after I had put the cheque into Charlotte's grateful hand, Terry phoned me. He told me that Charlotte had phoned him that very morning, crying, to ask for five thousand. My blood froze.

"And did you agree?"

"Not on your Nelly!"

"Why do you say it like that?"

"A little bird told me that Roger is so deep in the shit, he can't possibly dig himself out. I've just phoned to warn you not to lend her any - I know you've got a bloody stupid soft spot for her - you'd never see it again."

"Okay. Thanks for the warning."

A week later, at the turn of the month, Roger Bill went to the hotel and found his way barred by heavies. The whole place - restaurant through to gym - belonged to the bank. It was front page news in the next edition of the Gazette. I tried to phone Charlotte but the line was engaged every time and finally disconnected. The empty sick feeling I had was beyond description. In the end, I

had no alternative but to write, not wishing to go round to the house and risk not being admitted.

Dear Charlotte.

I am sorry that things have turned out so bad. Perhaps now is not the right time to be asking for my money back..... If there is anything I can do to help in any other way, please let me know.

Two weeks elapsed before she replied.

Dear Tommy,

The last few weeks have been hell. We have to be out of here by the end of June. Roger and me are finished, it's been a long time coming. I'll pay you back even if I have to get down on my knees to scrub floors. I found out Roger bought a place last year in Leicester to set his tart up in. He put pressure on Ghent, the secretary, to sign him all the money out of the account. Ghent phoned me up, begging me not to go to the police - Roger was blackmailing him over something. I don't want to know, greasy little man.

Roger only wanted me for Jim's money. His snooty cow of a mother turned out to be in debt. I've had to learn the hard way again. This is the last time,

Love

Charli

So there it was. That flash bastard had pocketed my money for his own despicable ends. I hated to think that he had put Charlotte up to it and I kept imagining my hands around his slender neck. I decided there was no point trying to keep the secret from Ruth – when she found out, deceit and concealment would be added to my crimes of evasion, naivety and obsession. Her eyebrows would vanish into her hair-line.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed she, in a fit of sobs and tears. “So, I have worked for months and months.....in this shitty little town for nothing ...all because....you're cuntstruck with HER. We are FINISHED.”

But we had been for some time. She packed and went back to Cheltenham the same evening.

That was, however, not the end of my weakness. Three months later, Charlotte phoned me in near-hysterics. After difficult weeks crammed into her Aunt Maud's house, she had found decent rented accommodation and now needed a £500 deposit. I had been considering offering her rooms at my house but Ruth's angry outburst was still ringing, with justification, in my ears. Caustic-tongued though she was, I was lonely and missing her – and even my old friends, the eyebrows. As well as Ruth's respect, I had lost my self-respect. It did not help a bit when, not long afterwards, Terry learnt from Keith, the landlord at The Red Lion, that Charlotte had met a friend of his, a carpenter called Jules.

“Keith says it's serious. She's moving in with him. S'posed to be a clever guy. He does kitchen units. Bespoke.”

“You don't say.”

“French mother.....Drives a red van. *Him*, I mean.”

“Really.”

“You should be pleased for her, Tom.”

“Oh I am.”

I thought of her contrite letter and laughed bitterly.

“Maybe I’ll get my £500 deposit back, then, if he’s such a clever guy.”

“You lent her five hundred quid? You bloody moron!.....So did I!”

\*

Charlotte married her carpenter quickly and without a family fuss and we only found out much later, on the Fairleigh grapevine. They had moved out to Stapleford further along the road to Ashby. I asked Terry to try and find out her address from his many contacts but he never did. He said he had decided he never wanted to see her again. I started to think that would be my fate too.

In the nineties, I began to fall out of love with teaching. It became more target-oriented, like a business, and the pressure grew to do that magic thing “achieve.” I shall not bore you with the ethics of that, but by the age of forty-eight I was thinking of getting out. On the personal side, it would be an exaggeration to claim that I loved my solitary bachelor life, but I avoided permanent - or rather semi-permanent arrangements with the opposite sex. I decided to adopt a cat.

I wondered sometimes how Charlotte was, but told myself she had only wanted to know me when I might prove useful - which was, of course, more or less the painful truth. Terry was getting sanctimonious, having been elected as a Tory councillor for Fairleigh-cum-Fairleigh Parva, (a neighbouring hamlet where poor people were shot on sight). He was disgusted that Charlotte had allowed her elder daughter, Kitty, to appear as a pin-up in a tabloid. He showed me.

“What sort of mother is she?”

“My word. The same as the daughter, Terry. Absolutely gorgeous.”

Then when I bumped into Charlotte around 2000 at Safeway I thought I had travelled back in time. She had shed her middle-aged spread, had had a face-lift and a few other tucks. She was fabulous for fifty! Her laughing eyes told me with what degree of amazement I was staring at her. She had obviously been nowhere near the promised scrubbing brush and bucket, and I christened my £5, 500 Clementine - lost and gone forever. I was certainly too proud to bring it up and she was still suffering from severe amnesia where debt and obligation were concerned. Jules had been substituted by Guy, a gentleman with a cosmetics business and Charlotte was his model-cum-rep.

“I got sick of the smell of resin and his broken finger nails..... He helped me out back then, but it was time to *move on*.”

“Do you ever hear anything about Roger?”

(Where has he moved on to with my money?)

“He’s a drunk. The girls don’t want to know him. Kitty’s nearly nineteen now, you know.”

“Did Roger remarry?”

“No. Lives on benefits in a flat near the football ground. His tart was a con artist like him. So much for the grand entrepreneur. His mother warned me to put the brakes on him.”

She looked at her mobile phone and said she had better be off.

“Listen, Charlotte, it’s been years. You said once it would be nice to get a bit closer. I’ve got a friend who teaches biology - I think you’d like her. She’s into tropical fish. Bring Guy round for a meal and I’ll cook my special sweet and sour.”

“Guy’s not much of a conversationalist. Mainly perfume. He’d probably sit there like a pudding with you two clever-clogs.”

I protested of course that we were down-to-earth people but I saw she had no intention of getting closer.

“So, you never want to see me again then?” I said mock churlishly but not mock enough to make her smile.

“I know where to find you if I need you.”

If it all goes wrong again? I felt hurt and cheated. She must have seen that in my face because she came closer and said “There’s something I’d love to share with you, Tommy, but now is not the right time.”

“We’re fifty! How much time do you think there can be before the right time comes? Why are you teasing me again?”

“You shouldn’t say that. You make me think you hate me. Give my love to Terry when you see him.”

Before I could protest that I did not hate her, she turned her back on me and went. The words stuck in my throat. I watched her get into a very nice Audi, blow a kiss and drive away.

\*

At the age of fifty-five, I decided to retire on a reduced pension. I could afford to. It would not be the life of Riley - whoever he was - but I had simpler tastes than him. I began to write stories for my own amusement and took up pastels. I even sold a few - mainly of birds.

A phone call one morning two years later made me feel ill. The voice on the other end was cracked and high-pitched, like a voice from another world. And so it proved.

“Terry. Me. Are you sitting down?”

“Why?”

“Dad called. He’s terminal and he wants to see us.....”

“Well - I don’t want to see him - you tell him to bloody well do one!”

Dad was in a home near Doncaster. His wife and carer had died suddenly, leaving him helpless.

“Terry won’t come, but I will. I need directions.”

“Here tell the nurse. I can’t hear you very well.”

I got details and made arrangements. The following day I went up to see him. As I drove up, I kept trying to fix a detailed image of him from our last remembered encounter. It is peculiar that, while we forget events we would prefer to remember, we register memories of no importance, as a camcorder, left switched on, will film feet and floor; I had a pointless image of him swearing under his breath and sweeping up a cup I had broken, but it was more or less a blank face, topped by wavy hair.

The shrunken figure in the bed - I cannot call it a man - was as much a stranger to me as I was to him, and only our knowledge of a shared past began to prove that we were father and son. I had to get close to understand his whispers. A spotty, shaking hand - a claw - emerged from under the covers but, repelled, I would not take it. He said he could not believe how I had altered.

“Were you fourteen when I left?”

“Sixteen. No fifteen.”

“You were as thin as a lathe. Now look at you.”

I was about to say he had messed me up but did decided not to give him the perverse pleasure of knowing.

“It’s a pity you broke off contact. Not a word for forty years. Mum died end of the eighties. Stroke. You’re the only one left now, with Vera and Jim both gone as well.”

His old eyes glistened with tears and he said he would not be much longer. He had lung cancer. I told him about Terry and his family and he listened without commenting. We sat in silence wondering what else was worth saying. I did not wish to ask him about his disloyal life in the north and he showed no inclination to ask what I had done with mine. I began to wonder why he had asked to see me. There was no affection in him, only self-pity.

“And how’s our Charlotte?”

“On her fourth marriage....made a fortune, lost it and now she’s making another....I have to ask you something disagreeable...do you want to be buried or cremated?”

“Not bothered. A ditch’ll do. I’ve been a bloody fool....”

“Have you made a will?”

“I have. But there’s not a sight left. Enough to take care of the funeral.”

“Do you want me to take a message to Terry?”

“Is he really mad with me?”

“I think.....” - I broke off unable to say - for spite - that Terry did not care, because it was as untrue as it was hurtful. My brother had suffered more than me - “I think he’s still angry with you. But I’ll tell him you’re sorry - if you want me to.”

“And you’re not angry?”

“No Dad. It’s been such a long time.”

His hand shook more violently and then I took it.

“You were my favourite Tom. You and Charlotte. Terry was mardy - moody like Mary’s side -”

“He was *thirteen* Dad! How can you judge him for that, you of all people?”

“A bit of a dunce at school - not like you.”

“Well! He’s a millionaire now - I’m not! How can you prefer one child to the other? How can you prefer a niece to a son? That’s unnatural.”

I let go of his hand - and suddenly I recalled that scene at Grandma’s - of him stealing glances at Charlotte like I had. But my glances had been out of curiosity - what sort of thoughts were behind his? I leant back in my chair, feeling disgust.

My letting go provoked a strange reaction - something between a whine and a choke - and with horror I realized he was crying - a sight I had never seen in childhood. I was afraid he would expire before my very eyes and I told him to calm down. Slowly, he brought his emotions under control and beckoned me to come closer.

“I’ve always felt that Charlotte belonged to me...”

“You what?”

He began to tell me of a holiday in Skegness when my mother was a few months pregnant with me.

“It just happened. We were in the lounge at the boarding house. We’d had a drink. Mary had gone to bed early and Jim popped out to buy fags. Vera was a big, lusty girl. She just grabbed me. I couldn’t stop myself - in them days you stopped having sex when a woman was in the club - it was all over in a minute. After, we were both ashamed. A month after we came back, Vera

was pregnant...It's such a relief to confess. I can die easy now."

I sat back and stared, my ears ringing. He begged me not to tell Charlotte.

"Do you swear, Tommy?"

"This is rubbish! You can't know she's yours for sure! Jim and Vera must have been...having it. She was probably already pregnant. Of course I shan't tell her! That would be bloody stupid and pointless."

"Jim told me once that he envied me. He wanted a son and I had two! They kept trying. I started thinking - what if he's a Jaffa - no pips? In them days, folks didn't go to clinics - at least not our sort. As she grew up I felt more and more sure she was mine. Nothing like Jim - fat-faced Tory twit. And I started to see in Vera's face she felt the same way - but we never mentioned what had happened. And -"

"That's enough. You're completely wrong - she's just like her mum. Terry's like Mary - it doesn't mean you're not the father. I shall never, ever tell her. Is that why you phoned me to come? You secretly *do* want her to know, don't you? Yes you do! You think I'll just let it out sooner or later! You want to bugger her life up, like you bugged up ours! You never played with us, never went to a parents evening, never came to see me in a play. Always away on business, fucking business - with your tarts."

I stormed out. Driving back through the snow, I began to regret my outburst. I decided to send him a card with a note of apology. Two weeks later he died and I went up for the funeral with Jill, a lady from Tittensor I had met on the internet - (who turned out to be quite a lot more ample than she looked in her uploaded photograph).

Apart from the nurse who had been his special carer, we were the only ones at the crematorium. She told me in a whisper that he had been given extra morphine to ease his passing, but her rueful expression told me that it had not been a good death. Whether it was that which made me cry, I cannot say. We cry for many reasons at funerals, perhaps the love of the departed - as in my case - not being the main one. I think I was crying mainly for me and my sad life but afterwards I told myself that, whatever he had done or not done, he remained my dad. But who else's was he?

The secret my father had confessed shattered the fragile peace produced by my retirement from the hurly-burly of school. I could not help returning to those memories to try and find evidence or signs which might corroborate Brian's tale. Why had Vera tempted fate by turning to him that afternoon - to him especially - lamenting that cousins could not marry? Over and over, I "replayed" her words, listening to the tone and intonation. Yet I heard no bitterness, no recrimination, only irony in the word "pity", and an examination of her eyes for any hint of remorse or sadness was impossible because she had turned away from us. I tried to see my father's face but it was a blank. I looked at Jim. Was he already suspicious from other clues, perhaps left to be found that night in the hotel - a guilty or faraway look in Vera's face, a quaver in her voice, a desire to please him beyond the norm - a feeling...an unusual smell, or worse? But Jim, close by, was only laughing like the rest; I saw his brown, rounded spectacles - but no eyes - his open mouth, the gap between his upper front teeth, his fat cheeks. I saw Oscar the cat staring. What about my mother? She was closest, laughing loud - as Charlotte had begun to do after my father had left - but her eyes were cold. Had the truth dawned on her?

I remembered then a vicious, whispered row one night coming from my parents' room. Which night? Which year? Before or after that Christmas? I had no way of telling, but the conviction grew that it was related to that brief boarding house encounter. Did it partly explain the break-up of their marriage? I could not stop listening to Vera - I sang songs to try and drown out her voice.

Then, one night it came to me why my brain would not shut up. “What a pity cousins can’t marry.....eh Brian?...” She had stressed the word *cousins*, as if leaving it for him to supply the rest – “.... Let alone brother and sister?” Was it a warning? She had seen me looking at her daughter. Was she saying that she was leaving it up to him to put me off, if the unthinkable ever looked likely to come about? Vera’s delight in announcing the reconciliation and marriage between Charlotte and Steve took on a new significance. Had Charlotte – laughingly or seriously – told her mother of my proposal?

We only have a glimpse, a fraction of the true history of life. I cursed Brian for landing me with this insoluble brainteaser on his deathbed. It was a second act of cruelty even worse than the first.

## **5 The Right Time**

I put the obituary in the Gazette a week later.

*Brian Joyce, father of Thomas and Terry, uncle of Charlotte. At Doncaster, after a long illness patiently born. At peace.*

As I had hoped, a few days later she rang. She had seen the notice and wanted to meet up for a drink - for old times’ sake.

“Shall I ask Terry?”

“No.”

“Is what’s-his-name coming?”

“Guy? No. I just want it to be you and me. Guy’s got somebody else. Thinks I don’t know but I smell her on him, in spite of his after-shave. It’s number seven in our range – Slim Moon. I’ve renamed it Slimy Moron.”

“Oh Charlotte - I’m really sorry....”

“Don’t be. I’ll get a nice pay-out when we divorce. Fed up with him anyway - all perfume and make-up, boring bastard. She’s no doubt a lot younger and the scent might be his way of telling me. I pretend I have no idea - and I’ve got a secret or two I’m keeping from him.”

Charlotte was now nearly fifty-seven but still looked fabulous. Having been with a girlfriend to Tenerife in January, she was tanned. She had started working out at the gym - the gym, to my surprise, of the Sketchley Park Hotel, which, according to Terry, was in financial difficulty again due to the banking crisis. We met in the bar there at seven sharp, and more or less had it to ourselves.

“No hard feelings about coming back here then?”

“Why should I have? The bank did what it had to. It was our stupid fault. Water under the bridge.”

I looked around and remembered our barman-pelting and clock-theft with great shame. But Charlotte had her hand over her mouth, chuckling at the same memory.

“That poor chap...”

I told her what we had done with the clock and she let ring out a wonderful peal of laughter, just as she had that New Years Eve, melting me all over again.

After a decent silence I told her that Brian had died of cancer, but that they had eased his pain.

“Did you go up to see him or did they contact you?”

“He phoned me out of the blue. Terry refused to have anything to do with him.”

“And what did you talk about?”

I tried to hide my anxiety. “Just what you’d expect. The olden days. Told him Mary, Jim and Vera had all passed on.”

“Did he ask about Terry and me?”

“I told him how well Terry had done in business, about his daughters...Alison.... He didn’t ask about you *directly*, but I told him you’d had a fairly...eventful life....but that you were settled after some disappointments. Is that wine okay?”

“Not bad. He didn’t mention then.....that he was probably my dad?”

I knocked my glass over.

“What on EARTH makes you say that?”

She began to weep - not *sob* like she had that time over their debts. I realized this was genuine sorrow.

“I’ve lived with it since I was a girl. I was about twelve. Started wondering why he paid special attention to me. You were a lad. Perhaps you didn’t notice. Jim did though - and I could tell he didn’t like it.”

“Is that all? That’s nothing! He just liked looking at you - you were really pretty -”

“Shut up for once - and listen. I expect you’ve forgotten that last Christmas when we all got together. I wouldn’t come out of my room?”

“I remember. I thought it was because you hated me. Over kicking Wainwright.”

She looked at me in puzzlement. “No, of course not! I was bloody glad you kicked him!”

“What was it then?”

“That Christmas night Jim and Vera had a row - well, not a proper one - they never really fell out. I was with Steve in our little room and I heard them in to the lounge when I went to the lav. You know how loud Vera was. Well, Jim had been surprised - and really put out - because of a Christmas present I’d had from Brian. Dearer and nicer than his.”

“He sent you a present?”

She opened her handbag and put a tiny velvet box on the table.

“Open it.”

I opened it and saw, for the first time in nearly forty years, those two glittering, pale blue earrings.

“I’ve never worn them since but I could never throw them away. They’re topaz. I heard Vera saying - I can still hear her now - *he’s just a generous uncle - she’s his one and only niece*. But I could hear panic in her voice and I crept closer to the door to listen. (Why, oh why didn’t I just go back in to Steve?) She kept saying - *he’s always wanted a daughter* - because Jim wouldn’t leave it - like a dog with a bone. I was creeping away when my dad.....burst into tears.....*She’s his isn’t she?* - he said - *I’ve always suspected it*. She kept denying it, telling him to shush, but I could tell she was lying. I knew that tone....That night I never slept a wink but the next morning *they* were as right as rain. Jim believed her. I looked awful - I told them I’d had a row with Steve. I couldn’t bear it at the dinner table. Brian kept smiling at me. I was sure the truth was bound to ooze out - like that horrible stuff from our volcanoes. Then when Vera told me to say thank you for the earrings - don’t you remember?”

“No. I only remember you jumping up and running out.”

“I had to run to the toilet and be sick. I nearly threw them down the pan. I took them off and put them in a drawer.”

“But none of that is proof....”

“So, how could I marry you, Tom - if I’m your sister? Did Brian not say anything about it?”

“No.”

“I can tell you’re lying! What did he say? *Look* at me, Tommy. I mean it! I have the right!” I could not look. I put the earrings back in their box, closed the lid and told her, as I mopped up my beer, what Dad had said..

“That is.....almost the same story that Vera told me when she was on her last legs. I asked her point blank and she confessed. *A moment of weakness after two glasses of cheap sherry. That’s all it was.* She swore she had not mentioned it to Mary.”

“I have a horrible feeling she knew though. I remember her and Dad having a vicious row in the middle of the night, but I can’t place it. It might have been after the earrings. What a stupid thing to do. Was he trying to force it all out into the open? Why?”

Because he was a bastard. He knew he was going and would not have to put up with the consequences.....

“No idea. But your mum never showed any affection for me – not a kiss, not a hug and barely a smile or a word. I think she did suspect. That’s why I couldn’t come to her funeral. I don’t want to hurt your feelings...but Auntie Mary didn’t mean a thing to me. Sorry.”

“What about Vera’s funeral? Terry was furious.”

“I felt so angry, I wanted nothing to do with her. I loved my dad .....Jim. He put up with her and her silly rattle all those years. For what? She betrayed him - and hardly two months wed! Mind you, am I any better?”

“Or worse?”

She smiled and tapped her nose.

“Wainy spoiled me. A tiny brain, though. Been looking round ever since.”

She pointed at my face – it must have been all red amazement and disgust – and laughed.

“We both know you’ve been trying to find out what happened that night. Tommy, Tommy – you take life too serious. We’re flesh and blood...”

“You’re so superficial, Charlotte. God knows why I.....”

“Come on...you know I love shocking you. You’re such a prude. So I exaggerate.”

“But when – and by how much?”

I thought over what had been said. It was no laughing matter.

“None of this is absolute proof you’re not Jim’s. He was such a good dad to you. Pulled strings for you, set you up in business.....”

“Jim....was the best dad a niece could have. And Mary probably knew all along. How did she bear it? How did Vera bear it?”

I went to the bar for two double whiskies.

“It still doesn’t prove -”

“Leave it. I’m not going for a DNA test. It’s true.”

I saw her mind was not to be changed. She looked at me for a while seriously, and then, raising the glass to her lips, she laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“If it hadn’t been for that sherry.....I wouldn’t be here now.”

I put my hand on hers and dared to ask the obvious question.

“So, where do we go from here?”

“Where can we go?”

“You said once we ought to be closer.”

“How much closer can we be?”

She swallowed the rest of her whisky in one gulp. Ignoring the other guests, she stood up and

walked to the mirror, beckoning me to join her. We stood side-by-side smiling at ourselves and each other. Our faces were different shapes, mine longer, and our eyes different shades of blue, hers paler, more like Brian's. But no-one would take us for sister and brother. I am sure, as I write this, we were both thinking that same thought.

There was a baby grand in the corner. She sat down on the stool and lifted the lid.

"I'm sorry, you can't play that," said the young barmaid.

"You just try and stop me. I'm going to be your new owner."

I looked at her in astonishment and she gave me one of her outrageous winks. Slowly at first, with some wrong notes, she began playing our old tune and I joined in singing. I begged her, *O my darling*, not to *forsake me*. One or two drinkers applauded briefly.

She stood up and smiled at me through her tears.

"I've tried to tell you for ages."

"Would you rather be my half-sister or my cousin?"

"I'm not sure I care. Do you care? Does it matter?"

"At our age? I'm not sure it does anymore."

We embraced and swayed as if in a slow dance. All the images of our past encounters - they were far, far too few - raced through my exhilarated head. I bent down to her ear to whisper.

"I love you Charlotte."

"I love you too, Tommy."

"And always will."

"And me. Will you marry me?"

"How can I?"

"Only we know that I'm your sister".

"No, Charlotte. I meant, you're already married."

"Not for much longer.....then it's your turn."

I laughed.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

She had given me - what a precious and intimate gift! - her email address. I got home and wrote her an effusive message which I only sent after much alteration and toning down. I cannot bear now to look at it because she never replied. It dawned on me that if the sherry had been responsible for her very existence, then the double whisky she had downed was no doubt responsible for her declaration.

With a feeling of horror I realized that I had no other way of making contact with her - no telephone number and no address. Guy who? I did not even have her new surname. Terry did not know or care. In despair, I drove to Stapleford, where she had lived with Jules, but no-one at the only pub there - or at the four or five houses where I knocked - had any news of her. My depression deepened as the weeks and months elapsed without her. Her latest promise was proving as empty as the rest. Had my darling Charlotte forsaken me forever?

I never saw her again. We are the creatures - many would say the captives - of our families. The genes, good and bad, which determined the life and finally the death of the mother had already struck - the bad ones - to break, irrevocably, not two years later, the daughter's promise to me. Charlotte succumbed to breast cancer just before her fifty-ninth birthday.

Rest in peace, Charlotte. Yours and mine - particularly yours - were strange lives, but probably no stranger than most.

\*

This account was found amongst the effects of Thomas Joyce, who, living alone and apart, took his own life on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2010, the day our lovely cousin Charlotte would have been sixty. **T.J.**