

LOST SWEETHEARTS

How dismal would my damsel be
Had she been born some other year,
Had never seen or dreamt of me,
Had never felt my heartbeat near;
Had lived in sun - while I in shade -
And she in breeze - which fierce had blown
To her, soft down, old thistles made,
Which in my summertime were sown?
Vain fancies dreaming sweethearts feel
- For phantoms they cannot possess? -
May be for loves the cruel years steal
And seal within their cold caress.

For many are there sweethearts none.
They pass this way when they are gone.

LUCY

The local paper has won awards but I cannot see why. I always swear that I will never buy another edition. There are worthy but tedious articles about fund-raising events, often with a photo of the portly mayor looking jolly pleased with himself amidst a gaggle of sponsors or supporters, overly cheerful, no doubt chivvied into cheerfulness by the snapper, and always one or two have their eyes shut; a grinning publican, surrounded by a crowd of glassy-eyed drinkers, pints held aloft, is caught in the act of handing over, to someone camera-shy, a larger-than-life cheque; someone has shaven off his hair; or is growing it ever longer in order to raise money for a child who needs an expensive operation in the USA; for a family whose Xmas presents have been stolen; for the organ restoration fund; until Leicester City get promoted again.

The Letters Page is a chorus of complaints about vandalism or litter or noisy youths; or about lavish council expenditure on such things as planting roundabouts with flowers, or about Christmas lights, signed self-righteously RATEPAYER; or the council gets lambasted for its tightfistedness, high-handedness or cack-handedness. The council can please no-one, it seems, but the silent, penny-pinching majority always re-elect it.

In the Obituaries no-one I know or know of has died. There are pages of reports on insignificant local football matches ("Play was halted when the Borington Monday supporter let his terrier off the leash to savage the referee after he awarded Boringham Tuesday a penalty") it might as well say, for not even the man and his dog bother to read the report. From the middle onwards there are advertisements. Occasionally there is a court report about a fight in a pub car-park or of a domestic dispute gotten out of hand. The rarity of these events gives the lie to the urban myth that we live in a maelstrom of urban depravity and wickedness. For, in truth, as in most of small-town Britain, little untoward happens in Earlstone. My neighbour told me that he had moved here, having read The Earlstone Gazette, precisely because life in Earlstone is so uneventful; and the rates are so low. Days come, days go and the town settles down every evening to a virtually unruffled slumber.

Today I have bought the paper again on an impulse and have nearly left it, unpaid for, at the check-out. The startling banner headline FURORE which has caught my eye and caused me to put it into my basket, turns out to be an argument about wheelie-bins and how regularly they should be emptied. It fizzles out into farce with a lady under a beehive coiffure - a senior Conservative Councillor - pictured at the bottom, apparently inhaling her stench-free bin.

“Flatten your boxes and tie up your bags securely,” she advises, leg bent up to her rear, in an absurd saucy kick, “And your rubbish will be no problem.”
Really? I read this as I queue to be counted, am disgusted and nearly dump it.

At home I turn the pages without enthusiasm. On a page which I usually pass over I see a photograph. I pause, intrigued. There are eleven young women in cricket whites in a park. Beyond them there are horse chestnut trees in flower. It must have been May. It is the Sharnstoke Ladies Cricket Team. The picture was taken, the readership is informed, in 1920. So any survivors would now be around a hundred, I calculate.

Old photographs fascinate me. I always wonder what was on the minds of the subjects; I wonder what scenes led up to that instant and what trails they pursued afterwards. I speculate now as I stare from one apprehensive face to another what fate had had in store for each of them. A happy marriage? Betrayal? An early death? Of course, subjects never wonder how they will be viewed, decades after the event, by posterity - their innocence of such deliberations is an added attraction - and they only wonder, in their vanity, if they will look their best when the print is developed. Their apprehension and tension come of trying to look natural.

I study each face in turn and invent a pen-sketch of their characters and fortunes; most are dumpy and unattractive - ugly even. But a girl at the back seems to be staring at me. She is not a classic beauty but she has a beguiling face, open and honest. She holds an open parasol behind her head. Her eyes are intelligent and searching. As ever, when I see a lovely girl in the newspaper, I immediately search underneath for a name. Frustratingly, there is no list. I try to imagine what it might be. What would suit her? Emma? Emmeline? Daphne? Hopefully not Deirdre - and surely not Nora or Noreen! I read the legend more carefully.

The correspondent - a lady called Lucy - who has submitted the photo, is wondering who the girl third from the left is. Can any older reader or denizen of Sharnstoke or any relative, help? I count them. My favourite is two away to the left of that unknown, rather horsy girl who looks about eighteen. My girl is about fifteen, I think. But I am judging her by standards over eighty years later. Girls nowadays look much older in their early and mid-teens. She might be eighteen or nineteen. In which case she would be ninety-five - or, more probably, dead.

I cook myself a curry with juicy king prawns and open a bottle of white wine. As I eat, I return again and again to the photo on the table. And I am also drawn back to my new girlfriend and she begins to look, as the wine fuels my fantasy, as if she is drawn to me.

At about two in the morning I wake. I am in the habit of keeping a pen and paper by my bed in case I have night-thoughts. By the time I have scribbled and scrubbed out and polished my poem it is nearly four and the birds have begun their chorus. I decide not to go into work. When did I last have a day off? Months ago. The bookshop will get along without me. Thursday is always a slow day.

When I wake again, it has gone nine. An early June sun is trying to force a way around my closed curtains. As I roll out of bed, those papers flutter onto the floor. I phone Simon and try to sound as hoarse as I can. I sit in the toilet and I try to decipher my scrawled verses, pen in hand. I even out the bumps in the rhythm and eventually feel quite content with the result; a sort of sonnet.

THE 1920 SHARNSTOKE LADIES CRICKET TEAM

Such open, earnest faces - in an age before “cheese!!”
- White, ankle-length dresses; on their heads, floral hats;
In the innings of their world, whatever happened to these;
Their costumes, their wickets, their ball and their bats?
Does one vestige lie hidden in some old attic chest

Or was each burnt or buried as deep as the rest?

On the boundary, cream candles of horse-chestnut trees
Had illumined the vast sapphire dome of their May,
Fading in June, like those girls, by degrees.
Their season all over, then what became they?
Were they contented or tragic, uneventfully good
In the small parish peace of their womanhood?

The cricketing ladies have long been dismissed
Back to heaven's pavillion; now, sadly, unmissed.

What should I do with it? Send it to the editor of that worthy organ? I decide after much deliberation to pick up the paper and phone the number which invites queries and clarifications. This is the nostalgia page for Earlstone, entitled YesterYears. Without knowing quite why, I am feeling nostalgia for that cricket team. I tell the voice at the other end I am calling about the photograph and am given the address of the lady, called Lucy Morton, who had sent it in. I print the poem out in a nice, old-fashioned font and send it to her with a brief covering note, in which I casually mention I would appreciate some information about the girl standing fifth from the left.

Two or so weeks later I pick up my post and amongst the bills and the junk is an envelope, handwritten, which obviously contains a card. It proves to be a drawing of a cottage, Honeysuckle Cottage. This is also part of the printed address - in Lychgate Lane, Sharnstoke, which I discover inside. Underneath it, in an ornate hand, I read the following greeting.

Dear Julian Miles,

I cannot tell you how delighted I was to receive your lovely poem about the Sharnstoke Ladies. I have put it in a book with my favourites.

Sadly, the last of the team died last month, an event which prompted me to share the photograph with the readership of The Gazette. Alas, the name of the missing lady has still not come to light. What a tiny mark on the world we make!

The pretty girl in the back row was, I am proud to say, my maternal grandmother, who passed on three years ago, at the grand old age of ninety-seven.

With sincere best wishes,

Lucy Morton.

I stare at the card and read the message a number of times. I feel a warm glow. I realise that this charming picture is almost certainly my correspondent's handiwork. Is she a professional artist? I have imagined her to be a rickety old woman. Does she possess a computer and produce her cards as I do mine, with a colour printer? (Not that such technology should be beyond an old person!) I re-read the message for clues. Her style is somewhat archaic and she has written "photograph", not photo and ninety-seven, not 97. I calculate. If the grandmother was, say, seventeen or eighteen in 1920, then Lucy Morton is possibly as young as....50? Intrigued, I search through the magazine rack for the paper. I find the page, look with renewed admiration at the girl and she looks back now even more earnestly at me.

I cannot wait for Sunday. Saturday in the bookshop has been busy and Sarah - our new assistant - has been off with a cold. Simon and I have been chasing around with barely a minute to ourselves. At last I am home. I have a crab salad with a bottle of crisp Muscadet and listen to music, mainly Elgar and Rachmaninov. It is a warm evening and I sit out on the back garden until nearly eleven, when only the faintest rose glimmer of the day remains.

I awake early and listen to the dawn chorus build to a crescendo, from the first blackbird, to the piccolos of the tits and finches, to the final cornets of the crows. I look out on the world. The sun is wobbling up like a great yellow bubble into a deep blue sea. It is only five but I can stay in bed no longer. I make coffee and fry some delicious smoky bacon and sit down to work at my laptop. Soon I have produced all fifteen of my sonnet cards from my printer. I tie them in a ribbon and push them into a large envelope. It is still only six o'clock. I am seized by a mad impulse to deliver my cards to Lucy by hand.

Sharnstoke, not much more than a hamlet, lies about three miles from Earlstone. I have not been there for years, not since we used to ride out along the safe country lanes on our bicycles in the summer holidays. In the Sunday morning stillness I find the church and get out of the car. The rooks are calling and arguing in the horse chestnuts in the cemetery. Their candles are fading and I can just see the tiny sputniks of their fruits forming. I stroll around the church and eventually spot the cottage in a secluded lane. The sun is warm now, almost hot, and is draped in a cape of silver. Not a soul is abroad. The glorious front garden is a series of terraces, filled with delphiniums, lupins, verbascum and multitudes of other flowers. I click open the gate as quietly as I can and creep up the path. No-one is stirring. In the porch I place my envelope against the wall and take my leave.

As I drive back, my early-morning euphoria diminishes and I almost stop to go back and retrieve my cards. What on earth will she think of me taking such a liberty?

I hear nothing for well over a week. I convince myself that I must have offended her deeply by such a blatant intrusion into her privacy. She must have concluded that I am a lunatic! What is this woman to me, or I to her? What romantic nonsense to hand-deliver my poetry cards! My impetuosity - chief amongst my many other failings - had cost me my marriage. I have always tended to act before thinking things carefully over. The bookshop was the last straw for Amanda. Granted, things were not very brilliant between us anyway. Why - she had screamed - why, give up a good, secure job in local government for the uncertainty of a bookshop, of all things - and in Earlstone, of all places?! She had a point of course. Earlstone has one of the lowest percentages of graduates per population in the country. But I was not to be dissuaded. How bored and depressed I was with the futile paper-chase and agenda-driving in the bureaucracy of the neighbouring city, Leicester. How tedious was the routine of the flat-arsed, coffee-guzzling meeting-brigade! So I took the plunge. The near-failure of the business, and the stress, had finally caused Amanda to leave. Fortunately, it was a marital shipwreck without victims - apart from us. Oddly, the sale of our large house, and the timely death of an aunt who thought well enough of me to leave me a few thousand, had kept my head, and my partner Simon's head, pretty well above the waterline. With a sensitive blend of CDs and books - popular, attractive and with a classical strand - combined with pictures, tasteful objets d'art and art materials, internet access and free fresh coffee in a reading corner - we have managed to establish ourselves in the town and make an unspectacular but adequate living. We will never be rich, but at thirty-eight I earn enough to lead a life of reasonable contentment and comfort. I live in a respectable little house with a tidy long garden in a peaceful Edwardian street in a respectable enclave of Earlstone. I enjoy my music and my poetry. I have a small circle of close

friends and a sentimental cat. I am a member of the local birdwatchers and field-walkers; I see my old university friends once a year in Oxford; I enjoy good wine and food; I am not unhappy.

But if I have upset Lucy I shall not easily forgive myself. Have I?

Here lies an envelope on the mat which I instantly recognise as hers. I open it. A short letter falls out - followed by a five pound note! I shudder. I had forgotten to delete my charity appeal from the back of the cards!

(I manage to sell a few packs in the shop on the strength of promising a donation of five pounds to a children's charity. This leaves me a small profit.) Naturally, I always give the promised amount to that cause, but how must this have appeared to Lucy? Moral blackmail? - Here is a gift of verse-cards, Madam, now cough up! Has she deemed this imposition on her generosity the whole point of my getting in contact with her? In some trepidation I slowly open the note. I examine it for terseness and frostiness.

Dear Julian,

Once again you have surprised and delighted me with your charming verses. And you have quite a talent as an artist! How odd that we share the hobby of card-making! Your cards seem very professional. Do you have special equipment?

Please forgive this tardy reply. I have been in Cornwall. I found your envelope on Sunday when I returned. It was thoughtful of you to deliver it by hand. I would really have loved to have met you.

I enclose a donation for your good cause. What a splendid idea! I shall copy it and offer my own cards for sale at church and in the village.

With kind regards,

Lucy.

Lucy. I look at her grandmother's photo and try to imagine how she might look. Do I imagine it or does the lovely, earnest girl seem to be staring even more fondly at me? How old is Lucy? I calculate again. If grandmother had born the mother in 1925 - perhaps, after the first world war the paucity of eligible males may have delayed her marriage - and then Lucy's mother - maybe only sixteen in 1940 - had had to do war work and had only married her young man well after the end of the war then she could not really be much younger than fifty. But when I read her card again I cannot help but picture a much older woman, a lady in her sixties even. I feel inexplicably gloomy. I decide to return the five pound note with an apology.

Dear Mrs Morton,

I had forgotten about the appeal on the back of my cards. I was not expecting or soliciting a donation from you. The cards were a gift in return for your kind words about my poem. Now I feel embarrassed.

I loved your cottage card. I found your lovely house easily in Sharnstoke when I came over that morning.

I do not have specialist software, in answer to your question. My laptop is simply linked to a printer which cost under a hundred pounds. I would like to show you how it is done, but I cannot see how you could improve much on your cards.

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“I get my cards printed in Earlstone. At Brewster’s, near the station.”

It is a confident voice, melodic and intelligent. Lucy’s call has taken me completely by surprise, coming out of the blue this warm Sunday afternoon.

That must be expensive - is all I can think to say.

“Well how much do you pay per card?”

“Not much. It’s hard to say. Twenty or so pence.”

She responds but I am not listening so much to what she says but how she says it. How old is she? There is no tell-tale cracking in her voice and the timbre is not one that I would associate with an elderly woman’s. I have just managed to catch that she has to pay about a pound per card.

“Expensive! I could show you how it’s done if you’re interested. It’s not difficult.”

Suddenly I have an inspired idea.

“Mrs Morton” - but she interrupts me and insists on me calling her Lucy. I mumble a word of gratitude and carry on. “Lucy - how would you like it if I sold your cards in my shop?”

“Shop? What sort of shop?”

I tell her and she exclaims, she had no idea that I was the co-owner of that lovely bookshop! Why, she had been in only three weeks ago to purchase a present for her husband. The allusion to a Mr Morton stops my next idea on my lips, but she has decided to make the proposal herself.

“I would love to think my cards could be sold for charity, like yours. I’ve sketched quite a few scenes in the village. There are so many pretty prospects. I use water colour crayons. Please do not think me forward but how would you like to come over and visit us and I could show you them? You could show me how you do your printing. ”

I immediately agree. Later, I run our conversation through my head.

“Prospects”? Think her “forward”? She might be as old as seventy. Older even.

It is Saturday. The fine weather shows no sign of breaking as June is about to drift over into July. I park underneath a tall chestnut opposite her cottage gate. In the garden a woman - quite a ruddy, peasant-like woman of a certain age - is stooped with a pair of secateurs to hand, dead-heading flowers. I feel intense disappointment. Her voice had promised me she would be all grace and elegance, with poise and a delicacy of feature. This woman would be at home with a pitchfork on a dung-heap. I gingerly open the gate and its moan makes her stand bolt upright. As she does so she puts her fist into the small of her back and winces. I smile.

“Hello. I’m Julian.”

She stares at me and appears to try to place me. I walk up the path with my laptop and hold out my hand. Instead of taking it she rubs her snub nose with the back of her hand and sniffs.

“You haven’t forgotten our tea date, have you Mrs Morton?”

“I’m not Mrs Morton. You mean my mother. She mentioned someone might be calling.”

Without a smile she turns and with a swish of her hand she beckons me to follow her.

“Beautiful garden.” I comment. She says nothing. I follow her down the side of the side of the house into an even longer garden. It is absolutely gorgeous, consisting mainly of lawn banked by massed borders of sublime flowers. At the far end there are fruit trees and hives. Here, by the terrace, there is an ornate white garden table and two empty chairs.

“Sit down. I’ll tell her you’re here.”

I do as I am told and take my computer out. The back of the house is covered with the most prolific pink climbing rose. But there is something else, I notice. Twining around the stems of the rose is a vine - a clematis - which I recognise from the white beards of its seed heads. I take one in my hand and feel its silkiness.

“She’s all finished now, old Nelly Moser.”

Instantly recognising the voice I spin around and see Lucy. It is almost the same face as the girl in the photo. The eyes are grey, intelligent and intense. She is slim, silver-haired and in her early sixties I think. She studies me studying her. Am I disappointed? - she seems to be asking. I truthfully shake my head. She is tall and graceful. She walks past me and picks a dead rose from the stem. She smells of lemon.

“When I planted Nelly with Schoolgirl years ago I hoped that they might come out together one summer. It’s been such a hot June and poor Nelly has finished too soon. A cold June delays the rose. I can’t win. I’m sorry about Katherine. She doesn’t mean to be so abrupt. She takes after her father for that.”

“She looks nothing like you.” I say and instantly regret it.

“Come and sit down. Katherine is making some tea.”

“Do you make honey?” I ask.

“Colin - my husband - used to. He was proud of it. It was delicious. Apple blossom and clover.”

She seems to savour the honey for a while in her imagination as she closes her eyes and then sighs. She looks around the garden in the direction of the empty hives. I try to picture her thoughts. Is she seeing the garden as it used to be in their halcyon days?

She opens a large folder and shows me her pretty sketches. They are sensitive and she has somehow managed to infuse them with a dreamy quality. There is the church tower from various standpoints; views of her cottage and other houses, and, most striking of all, a lovely picture of a brook between bulrushes and reeds, draped by willows, with gossamer in the air.

“They are all delightful,” I tell her. “But this one.....is enchanting.”

“The stream is the source of the river Soar, you know. It rises in Sharnstoke, just beyond the west gate of the cemetery. This was sketched in late August. When I was a child I played there with my sister and friends, netting minnows and sticklebacks.....”

I can just detect the low, dark notes of the south Leicestershire accent in the soft measures of her voice. It occurs to me then that I may have even seen her, a beautiful young woman, all those years ago as we rode into Sharnstoke on our bikes.

“I could scan these through my printer onto my computer. Let me show you.” I clicked on my SonnetCards file and she let out an “oh” as I scrolled through my drawings one by one.

“You can make them any size you want and you can crop them.”

“Crop them?”

“Yes, you can cut off edges you don’t want.”

She reaches across me and puts her finger on the PAGE UP and PAGE DOWN buttons. “How clever!” she exclaims.

“Not really. You would soon get the hang of it. The software is really helpful.”

“But where are your sonnets?”

I minimise the card file and click on another. Instantly my poems come up.

“First I print the pictures,” I explain. “Then I turn the cards upside down and back to front and run them through in the correct order. Hey presto. They take care of themselves.”

Katherine returns with a tea service. She places it with little ceremony on the table, mutters something and strides back to the front garden. Lucy, with a shake of the head, briefly enjoys a private joke with herself, I think, at her daughter’s expense, and then pours the tea into the delicate china cups. The teapot is the palest shade of green and on each of its five sides there are motifs of slender Chinese girls in various graceful poses.

“Are you married, Julian?” she asks with a quick upward glance. I tell her that I had been for ten years and that it had finally not quite worked out. She says how sorry she is to hear this.

“And your husband?” I say in the embarrassed silence. “Is he out at the moment?”

“Colin is considerably older than me. He’s in a nursing home.”

Now it is I who must apologise. She tells me not to worry. He is being well looked after. A sudden breeze makes the tall grasses spring to life and tugs her hair back for me, revealing her temples. I catch a glimpse of how pretty she had been. Her face is not much wrinkled. She has a fine nose and a full mouth.

She looks about her. “Is the weather on the change, do you think?”

In the churchyard the tops of the chestnuts are swaying and the foliage is being dented like the fur of some exotic animal.

“You bear a remarkable resemblance to your grandmother, you know.”

As if to confirm what I have said, she looks at me in the same very earnest manner as the girl in the photograph.

“We were very close.”

“Is she buried in the church?”

“Drink up your tea and I’ll show you.”

The breeze has settled. She has picked up a white hat to deflect the heat from her head. In her white blouse and white pleated skirt she now looks the complete cricketer, but for the first time I notice that she walks with some difficulty. But her calves are shapely. She holds the wooden gate open for me and we walk along the path. The wind, busiest at treetop height, has felled a scatter of tiny spiky pods. The slate graves in the immediate vicinity of the tower are old and faded and slope backwards and forwards, just as the invisible ebb and flow of many forgotten seasons has chanced to leave them. The view beyond the church of the south Leicestershire plain is serene. Pastures and patches of wheat and rape extend for miles and ultimately dissolve into the hazy horizon. I stop. In the very next field I see a small white pavilion. The boundary of the field is marked out by chestnuts.

“Isn’t that the field where the photograph was taken?”

She turns to me and smiles. “The very same!”

I walk to the cemetery wall of large mortared stones and try to conceive the exact spot. The grass has been recently mown and there is a deliciously sweet smell of hay in the air.

“There’s a match tomorrow,” she says, very close behind me. I turn and she is standing at my right shoulder. She shades her eyes against the strong sun. “I help out with the teas…….Come on…… I’ll show you where she lies.”

The gravestone is of a shiny marble. I read LUCY GIBSON 1904-1999. All at once, vividly, I see her extraordinary, honest eyes staring out at me from the second row of the girls. Now she even seems to smile broadly in the glow of realisation that they are so admired.

“You were named after her?”

“Yes.”

“And your mother too?”

“No. She was named after my great-grandmother. Just as Katherine is. My own mother died in her twenties. Grandma Lucy brought me up from the age of ten.” She kneels down and deadheads the pansies on her grave, scattering some of the seeds in the soil. The church clock chimes four. She turns her head and looks up at me.

“You wouldn’t mind helping me up, would you? My knees…….”

I take her proffered hand and help her to stand. She gives me a radiant smile and, although she is immaculate, she dusts herself down. As we walk along her hand unconsciously twines itself around my arm.

“How old are you Julian?”

“I’m thirty-nine in October.”

The silence invites me to ask her the same question but I cannot bring myself to utter it.

“Does Katherine live with you?” I say instead.

“For the time being.”

She does not elaborate. I sense I might expose a raw nerve if I press her.

“Will you take my drawings to copy, Julian?”

“Of course I will. I’d be honoured. But you could get started up yourself for a few hundred pounds!”

She says nothing. I hesitate to ask her my next question. “Do you work, Mrs Morton?”

“Please call me Lucy.” She looks across at me with a penetrating smile.

“You’re wondering how old I am. But of course, you are much too polite to ask.”

I return her smile but feel flushed and uncomfortable. She stops and cocks her head playfully, almost coquettishly. She invites me to guess. I exclaim “I would not dare!” We walk on and are soon back at the church gate. The gnarled roots of an ancient yew have raised and cracked the path. I notice now, alas, that they resemble the veins on her hands.

“Katherine is about your age. She has not had it so easy. I gave birth to her when I was twenty-two. Her brother is older. He lives in Canada. Will you stay for another cup of tea?”

Katherine is gathering up her hoe and secators. The garden really is remarkable.

“The hollyhocks are just coming into flower. And look, those sunflowers will soon be out. It’s been such a hot month!”

I look up to where she is pointing. The great flower-heads look as if they might have just been delivered, wrapped up in green paper, twisted tight in the centre, now waiting to be opened by their recipient.

“It’s all very lovely. I’d like to write a poem about it. If you like it, perhaps I could print it with one of your drawings!”

“That would be wonderful, Julian!”

I gather together her drawings and secure my laptop. She sees me out to the garden gate. With a curt nod from Katherine and a wave from Lucy I am bid goodbye.

That evening I stare at each of her pictures in turn. It is the brook which first inspires me to write.

SHARNSTOKE OF THE DIVIDING SOAR

In those far-off days before the Age of Haste,
Days aimless as the minnows in the stream,
Through flowing drapes of willows in youth’s dream
Huge dragonflies in vain, for joy, we chased;
Of those golden years gasp memories caught in nets
And splashes and cries as we paddled down to look
At the silvery curios borrowed from the brook
And its wilderness of flowers the New forgets;
In the still of night it saunters through my mind
Through sleepy Sharnstoke where my youth played out
Which the flow of Now cares ever less about
And leaves, in rush perpetual, way behind.

As my stream runs ever further from its source

I reverse in fond reflection here its course.

And then, as the clock turns past midnight I finally put down my pen and feel satisfied with the following

THE COTTAGE GARDEN SUNFLOWER

I love tall flowers with opening spires!
- Freckly foxgloves, blue delphinium
- Hot pokers with their orange fires,
In a subtle, smooth continuum;
What joy to see such colours met
By verbascum and great hollyhocks
Each lemon, cream and pink rosette
Astonishing on sturdy stocks!
But you are crowned the summer king
By ancient wall ascent, great towers
Outpeering every peering thing
By clambering rose and passion flowers...

In terraces your subjects flow
In bright abundance, row on row

The next morning I add these to my Sonnetcard file and, when I am satisfied with the copies I have made of the original cottage scene of Lucy's first letter and of that delightful scene of the brook, I print two cards and sit back to admire the results. On the back I add her name to the credits. They really are stunning. They will surely sell like hot cakes in the shop, particularly as they have local appeal.

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I knock for a second time at her door. There is no reply. I venture around to the back but I find the garden deserted. I peer through the windows. Between dark spaces I can make out an empty red leather armchair and a Chesterfield; and on the shelf a white porcelain clock tells me that it is past twelve. Then I remember what she said about the cricket match. I walk around the church and find the entrance to the field. The pavilion is closed up tight and the ground is deserted apart from a triangle of boys in a corner throwing a ball to one another. I call to them and ask them when the cricket starts. One tells me at two o'clock.

Perhaps she has gone out to lunch with Katherine, or a fellow member of the sandwich-team. I stand around and debate what to do. I could go for lunch in the village and come back at two. A chill in the air makes me look up at the sky. Ominous, dark clouds are rolling in and the boundary trees are suddenly pitching and floundering. A cold splash on my face makes me turn and seek shelter. I walk briskly to The Cricketers Arms and the clouds burst just as I enter. I sit picking at a smoked trout salad and watch the rain streaking the window panes. There will be no cricket this afternoon. At one o'clock I decide to see again, in a brief respite from the downpour, if there is anyone at home, but finding the house occupied only by even deeper shadows, I decide to post my cards and head for home.

The weather of the next few days is unsettled and with the bookshop to run I give Lucy little thought. It gets to Thursday evening before I decide to give her a ring. There is no answer. Perhaps she has gone away again, taking Katherine with her. On Friday I phone again and immediately recognise the manly voice of her daughter.

"Mrs Bridges," she announces. "Hello?"

“This is Julian. Is your mother there?”

“Are you that poetry card man?”

She makes me sound like a hawker, and I hesitate before replying.

“Poetry cards. Yes, that’s me. I delivered a couple of cards for your mum on Sunday. No-one was at home.”

“I didn’t find them.”

I picture her ruddy, snub-nosed face all defiance and see her fat, stubby legs in those tight, dirty jeans. I do not know what to say. I can hardly accuse her of a deliberate lie.

“She’s not here. She’s away.”

She makes no attempt to elaborate and the silence is sullen, hostile even. How can a delightful, sensitive woman have such a daughter?

“Can you mention I phoned when she comes back? When is she back?”

“I’ll tell her you called. Alright?”

And she hangs up on me as if I am a cold-caller! I go into my studio and run off two more cards, wondering what could have possibly happened to the daughter to make her so curt and rude. I try to picture the father. I immediately see a no-nonsense, stocky man with fixed, unalterable views on the world; he has rosacea and runs a small engineering company - or maybe a garden centre; he talks with a Yorkshire accent and draws on stock phrases such as “Time is money”, “A fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” and his panacea to all problems in the workshop is elbow-grease.

I fancy Lucy to be a long-suffering Emma Bovary or Thérèse Desquèreux, harbouring secret dreams and regrets, neither acted on, nor even uttered. Had she been driven into this unhappy marriage of convenience by impoverishment? Her mother had died early. How? She had never mentioned her father. Had she, like Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*, resigned herself to her Reverend Collins as the lesser of two evils, the greater evil being a lonely and impecunious spinsterhood? With a senile, graceless Mr Morton now consigned to the tight-lipped and underpaid care of chambermaids and servants in some exclusive nursing home, had Lucy begun to blossom late in life? She is a handsome, even an attractive woman. I flatter myself that I might appeal to her unrequited need for a soul-mate, a confidant.

Amanda and I - what had we had in common either? In retrospect I find it incomprehensible that we ever married. Once the physical passion had abated and then burnt out, what was there to keep us together? She, a lecturer in Law at an aggrandised, erstwhile Polytechnic, had no great love of literature, and even less of serious music, my developing passion during my thirties. We shared an interest in fine food, good wine and had been active in the local Liberal party. One day I realised, as I tramped the ward canvassing for our candidate - a well-meaning but awkward English teacher with Force 11 halitosis - that I did not much care for the taciturn, suspicious people on the darker side of those horrid white plastic doors. In fact I loathed them. Not long after that I had resigned from the party. Amanda had remained as keen and as active as ever. More active than I could have imagined. Her enthusiasm was all clarified when she eventually moved in with Councillor Briggs, the rival Tory. He was taller than me, drove expensive cars and owned two petrol stations. But apart from his wealth, I really had no idea what she saw in him.

How had I ever thrown in my lot with such a shallow person as Amanda? My impetuosity again, I suppose; and perhaps the fact that at twenty Amanda had been the most gorgeous creature I had ever clapped eyes on.

As I mull all this over I recall that Katherine had announced herself as *Mrs* Something. So, I deduce, she must be staying with Mother after a row or even the break-up of her marriage. Perhaps such a trauma explains her dismal and depressing disposition. Or versa-vice. But, for God’s sake, I almost say out loud, as I sip my wine, what business is any of that of mine? I sit

back and put such trivia out of mind as I listen to Scheherazade begging her cuckold sultan yet again for her life. As the music ends I realise I feel rather low.

July is turning out to be as wet as June was sunny. The flowers I have set such hopes on in my back garden are battered, droopy and swollen like cabbages. I hesitate to call Lucy in case her daughter picks up the phone. On Friday I eventually make up my mind. It is such a relief to hear Lucy's voice.

"An elderly aunt of mine - nearly 95, she is - taken ill last Sunday - she only has her younger daughter alive. And she is not in the best of health. Rather a large lady, if you get my drift. So I had my work cut out. I had to drive to Bristol - a journey I do not enjoy - and I had to stay rather longer than I had anticipated - more for the benefit of my cousin than my aunt. Anyhow, she was taken into hospital as a precaution - it turned out to be just her hiatus hernia playing up after she had one glass of sherry, or three, too many and nothing to do with her heart at all. Sound as a bell! She'll outlive us all, Auntie Maud - almost certainly outlive Cousin Gertrude."

I just listen to the music of her voice and make no comment. Now she pauses, perhaps remembering that I had called her, and out of politeness turns the conversation over to me. I decide to ask her if she had seen the greetings cards. And of course, no, she has seen no sign of them. I picture Katherine disposing of them, as I tell Lucy that it does not matter.

"I've printed another two, anyway. Katherine told me she hadn't seen them. Perhaps they were lost in the post."

She falls silent, seeming to read my thoughts, and probably then realises that I had once again, in my eagerness, delivered the cards myself. She tells me to hold the line. I hear a door open and then muffled voices. Katherine's unmistakable gruff voice rises in anger whereupon Lucy's begins to deliver slow measures of reprimand. Then all at once there is an unearthly scream. A door slams. I feel suddenly hot. I hear the receiver being picked up.

"Sorry about that, Julian. It appears that Katherine might have thrown the cards out, thinking they were junk-mail. She has a habit of jumping to the wrong conclusions."

She has emphasized the word *wrong* very markedly and I think I see what she is trying to imply about Katherine's antipathy towards me. I tell her rather lamely that I would hate to think I had caused an upset.

"Katherine is rather easily upsettable, I'm afraid."

"Well, no harm done," I respond quickly. "I've scanned all your drawings onto my laptop. I'm sure they'll sell well in the shop, with or without my poems."

"Preferably with, Julian."

For some reason at this point I recall her saying that she had bought something from the shop for her husband's birthday. A book does not fit in at all well with my prejudice of him as some money-grubbing, arse-kicking barbarian. I cannot help asking.

"Lucy - how often do you see your husband?"

I can hardly believe I have phrased my enquiry so badly, so impertinently. This was not what I had meant to say at all.

"Why ever do you want to know?" she asks after a long, uncomfortable silence.

"I didn't mean - what I meant was - look, if you want to take him a - a gift - as you told me you did a while back, from my shop... well, I'd be only too delighted to, to supply them at cost price!"

This is worse. What an idiotic thing to say.

"That is...very generous of you," she says flatly. I have offended her and I immediately apologize.

"Lucy...let me explain...I've been trying to imagine what he ...likes. I was just wondering what you bought him. From our shop I mean."

“Colin loves jigsaws. They pacify him.” She paused. “You’re wondering what is wrong with him. And what sort of man he was - is. Why don’t you just ask?”

“I’m sorry. It was a blunder. Please forgive me. I’m always putting my great foot in my great mouth...”

She begins to laugh. It is such a generous, warm laughter that I cannot help but join in. I ask her what I have said to amuse her.

“Oh nothing really. Just the ridiculous thought of you with your foot in your mouth. I could never get mine up that far!.....Julian, let me be bold...I would love to see where you live and watch that marvellous machine of yours churning out our cards. I’ll tell you all my woes and you can tell me yours.”

I am both taken aback and thrilled by her unexpected directness. Tomorrow I have a ticket to see the Bardi orchestra at the De Montfort Hall. They are playing Tchaikovsky 5 and Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto. I reason that if I phone early enough I should be able to convert the one lone ticket into two seats together. My brain works quickly. We could eat beforehand at that Italian place on London Rd. I eagerly tell her what I have in mind.

“That sounds wonderful! Are you offering to take me on a date?”

“I’d be honoured Lucy.”

The soloist reminds me of Andras Schiff. He is a bundle of nervous energy and bounces up and down, almost comically on the piano stool. But the slow movement is so intense and full of longing that I cannot help myself; a tear rolls slowly down my face. I sense somehow that she is aware of my emotion. She finds my hand and squeezes it. I look across at her briefly. Her eyes are bright and welling with tears. At some point she releases my hand but the memory of her grip remains. At the final chord the applause literally explodes in the auditorium and there is a general stamping of feet.

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” she exclaims. I am unable to speak.

In the interval, as the piano is moved upstage, I go and buy us two ice cream tubs. We talk about the music and the performance and never stray onto the personal. As in the restaurant, prior to the concert, she seems disinclined to touch on those painful areas in her life.....

Not that we had sat at our corner table in a heavy, awkward silence - far from it. We had both ordered the salmon and prawns with tagliatelli, and, on my recommendation a bottle of light Chianti Classico. It had been a delicious meal. Try as I might I could think of no obvious, skilful way to steer the conversation around to the quarter I was really interested in. I had finally taken the two cards from my inside pocket to show her. She had read the verse quietly aloud. On her lips it sounded more beautiful than I could have dared imagine, particularly the sonnet about the brook. She looked at me for a while, clearly moved, with those earnest grey eyes and then looked down again at the card. She turned from the verse to the picture and back again several times but had not seen the back itself. I tapped it and she looked.

“LucyCards!” she exclaimed with almost girlish exuberance, and then read “*I promise to donate half of my proceeds to*”

“To what?” I asked, as soon as she had reached the space I had deliberately left blank. She had smiled but not answered. She told me that she adored the brook sonnet - it had brought back such precious memories of her childhood. I proposed a toast to Fame and Fortune. She joked that they ought really to be called JucyCards.

As we sit in silence waiting for the second half of the concert to begin, I am savouring that experience in the restaurant again, as I rather hope and sense that she is doing. The Bardi is an amateur orchestra and in most pieces you can hardly tell. But in the slow movement of the Tchaikovsky with its waves of intricate pizzicato across the strings the timing is not quite right.

After the fabulous piano concerto the second half is always going to be an anticlimax anyway, and I am almost pleased as the concert comes to an end.

On the way home I suggest that we stop for a nightcap at the Halfway House. She readily agrees. The pub is more crowded than I had hoped but we manage to find a snug spot in a corner. It is getting on for mid July and at ten the light is fading. I return from the bar with two glasses of red. In the soft lamplight she looks scarcely a day over fifty-five in her black dress. Yet I know she must be sixty-three or sixty-four - a year or two older than my mother.

"Does Katherine resent me?" I blurt out all of a sudden, as we run out of nice things to say about the concert. She tips back her head and laughs.

"Katherine resents most things! She feels that life has dealt her a thoroughly bad hand."

"Did she never marry?" I ask disingenuously.

"Unfortunately, she did. Unfortunately for both parties. Katherine is, let us say, not a very easy-going person; she is stubborn and always wants her own way. The man she married was of a similar disposition. We both saw it was going to be a mistake but an even bigger mistake settled matters. Jim got her pregnant and so it was a bit of a rushed, shotgun affair. Twenty-three years ago things were still pretty old-fashioned in a small community. She got married in white and nobody was ever the wiser."

"So what went wrong?"

"Almost everything. He, shall we say, was a little too fond of his beer. His business started to suffer - he was a glazier - he built himself a reputation for measuring up wrongly. In the end he became a bit of a laughing stock. They had more rows and fights than I care to remember."

"Any children?"

"A boy and a girl. They both came out of it pretty unscathed and turned out alright. But they didn't take long to move away as far as she could - Lisa is in Scotland and Mark lives in Kent. I miss Lisa particularly. She is like my side of the family."

"Like the Lucys?"

"Yes, though I say it myself, she is absolutely lovely, with the most engaging eyes and the sweetest nature."

"So how long has Katherine been living with you?"

"About ten months. Jim put her in hospital. He managed to escape prison by a whisker. You might have seen it in the Gazette. It was cringe-making. I thank God that Colin had already gone into care. Well, their house is still up for sale. Jim won't take one penny less than the asking price and it is, to be frank, a dump. It's all very acrimonious. The less said the better." I cannot really see a way of asking the next question without insulting her husband.

"Well, Katherine doesn't seem to take much after you...."

She takes a sip of her wine and refuses to respond to the cue. I try to imply how disappointed I had been when I had first set eyes on her.

"I thought at first she was you, working in the garden...."

Still she makes no comment. I try again.

"Does she take after your husband for her...gardening skills - or you?"

She laughs again. "Julian, I like you much better when you don't beat about the bush. Is my husband like her, you mean."

"But you tease me!" I splutter. "If you know what I'm really after, why don't you just -"

"I could tell you to mind your own business. I hardly know you."

She delivers this slowly, with a mischievous smile, and yet I still feel embarrassed. Of course, I have no right to pry into her husband's character, and, by extension, into the quality of marriage they had enjoyed. She had made it pretty clear that he was suffering from some degenerative illness of old age - perhaps Alzheimer's or senile dementia. She has told me about Katherine's domestic misadventure and I suddenly see a way in. I begin to tell her about Amanda - about how clever she was, how pretty and how upset I had been when she had finally left.

“We grew apart, as they say these days. We lasted nearly eleven years...that’s not bad by today’s standards.”

“Do you ever see her?”

“No. She moved to Market Bosworth. To live with her new partner.”

I see her cringe.

“I shudder when I hear that word. It used to mean a business associate. It sounds so...so matter-of-fact, so...unromantic. I think we live in ugly times; very prosperous, yes, but so ugly.”

“How long have you been married, Lucy?”

The light has faded, and in the mirror of the dark blue window beyond us I have the advantage of being able to look at her longer than I would have dared to otherwise. I can see that question has moved her.

“Forty-one years. Since I came of age. Colin was thirty. He was investigating a break-in at a nearby factory and came around making routine enquiries. He wasn’t exactly handsome but I saw immediately what a good man he was. As soon as he spoke, I knew that he was the right person for me. We were engaged within six months and married eighteen months after that.”

“He was a policeman?”

“A detective. He rose to Detective Inspector and could have gone on even further, had he not had such a love of fieldwork. He loved sifting through the pieces of evidence and making them fit into some coherent pattern. That is why jigsaw puzzles keep him so absorbed. Forty years is a long time. Colin has been gone from me nearly two years. I miss him.”

She drains her glass and tells me quietly that she would like to go home now.

We part at her path. The scent of the honeysuckle in the hedge and trained above the frame of her gate is so irresistible. I break off a cluster of flowers and inhale their fragrance deeply. This will be one of those July nights when there will be no chill in the air until just before dawn. She takes from me gently that tiny hand of flowers - some closed, some breaking, some fully peeled back, like lips, revealing tongues of stamens - imbibes their luscious scent and then attaches them somehow to her hair above her right ear and looks at me more earnestly even than her beautiful grandmother and smiles to observe the effect she has made. The soft light of the street makes her look as golden as the honeysuckle.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening, Julian” she says. She kisses me gently on the cheek, turns and ascends the steps of her wonderful garden and disappears behind the tall slumbering flowers.

As I drive home, listening to the sublime second movement of Mozart’s third violin concerto I burst into helpless tears. I know then I have fallen in love with her. But into what kind of love?

THE TRAGIC LOVERS

By treachery of fate, asunder,
Our spirits should have been as one;
I often look at you and wonder
How I shall live when you are gone.
This image which I steal of you,
Those earnest, candid, glowing eyes,
That lovely girl I never knew,
Who evil spells of time defies,
Can never speak across those years,
From exile in her vanished land,
Can never understand my tears,
Can never take my trembling hand,

Through time our love is unrequited;
Our minds, by rhyme, shall be united.

I have spent most of the early hours of Sunday night working at this sonnet. Now I sleep; but it is a sleep in a shallow pool, a sleep which is always the most productive of vivid, unforgettable dreams, and I begin to dream of tall hollyhocks and sunflowers. I find myself at the bottom of the garden amongst those busy hives, surrounded by bees. The air is slow and golden. I look up and see young, indistinct figures darting around at the top in some kind of game of kiss-chase. The frocks of the girls are long and gathered at the waist; the boys are in short trousers. I see the table. There is honey and thick slices of buttered bread and bubbling glasses of golden lemonade. And then I see in my dream the old grey beards of the bloomed clematis intertwined amongst the thorny stems of its supporting rose. I take a bloom from its cluster and inhale. Young Lucy, smiling earnestly, takes it gently from my hand and puts it into the lapel of her cricketing blouse. She tells me simply, in a very dark accent I do not recognise, how long she has been waiting for me to come. She fades and I awaken to the sound of the birds. The pages on my chest slide onto the bedroom floor.

My euphoria after this dream and at this sunrise is beyond rational description. The harmony of all I see and hear through my open window is like a revelation, a religious experience. I rush down to the garden. The strength of the golden sun, yet the silver blue coolness of the dawn air and yet besides the crystal notes of the dawn chorus are intoxicating. I fall to my knees and weep. For the first time in my life I am honestly and straightforwardly in love!

I have returned to my bed and slept until the heat of the day has finally roused me. The first image I see is of that intertwining - not symbiosis - for neither depends necessarily on the other - of rose and clematis in Lucy's garden. I pick up my pen from amongst the bedclothes and am not satisfied until the following, after many, many redrafts, is written.

NELLY MOSER AND THE SCHOOLGIRL

She writhes and twines her stems about
Her rambler host, abounding in bud.
My efforts to count them, the breeze frustrates!
Pale pink, with candy stripes inside,
Sealed promises of treats for May,
What gorgeous posies they shall be!
But if she could hold them back I'd see
The maid's rosettes in interplay
With Nelly's flowers at Whitsuntide.
My wearied eyes such thought elates -
- Which open wide, as Nelly would -
If both together ventured out!

Yet lovers estranged by generations,
Might embrace in their imaginations.

I go into the garden and sketch the branch of a thrusting rose. I take care to capture the redness of the thorn against the green of the stem and after many attempts I am satisfied. There, beyond my fence, a shaded clematis flower is yet to burst. It resembles a pale green parasol about to be prised open by the sun. I sketch it and return to my table. Now I have to try and combine the two with the many beards of the clematis. I want to suggest that there remains a remote chance

that one of those tiny rose buds may yet open before Nelly Moser's large broly has opened and closed for ever.

It takes many attempts before I have the effect I want. I have one rosebud with a hint of pinkness in its breaking, green carapace. I find the clematis beards particularly difficult. A soft pencil, rubbed, gives the right background, and streaked with broken thin hard, pencil strokes I achieve the effect I want. This will be the next card I shall send to Lucy. I scan the final sketch into my laptop and run the poem with it together. She will not fail to understand the significance of my verse.

Of course, in the afternoon, after I have posted the card in all eagerness I begin to think it has been a mistake. She is devoted to her husband. I have implied that we are unrequited - no - unrequitable lovers, poor victims of a cruel Fate.

What nonsense! At least as far as she would be concerned it was nonsense. This would probably do the trick. She would probably never contact me again. I drink perhaps a glass or two of wine too many that evening. I look around at my shelves of books. I pick one up - *The Well-Beloved* by Thomas Hardy - but I cannot concentrate on it for very long. The theme - about the unrequited love the hero experiences - and then loses - for three generations of the "same" woman - is too close for comfort. I wonder then if it has influenced my thought. (I had read it many years ago.) I think that it cannot have done - at least not consciously. If so, then Katherine, with her ugly, short and thick gracelessness had certainly broken the sequence!

I know that I am in no mood for the gloomy world of Hardy and put the novel back. I put on a collection of Mendelssohn string quartets but as the last bar plays I realise I have not heard one single note. I firmly cork the second bottle of wine I have opened and without even looking at the clock I make my way - rather unsteadily - to bed. As I sort through my papers at my bedside the newspaper cutting of the cricket team falls out. I lie back against my propped-up pillow and stare back at her. I would swear that there is now more warmth than earnest intensity in Lucy's eyes! And it comes to me all of a sudden - it had been playing on my mind from the first - where I had seen such an intense gaze before.

We had been in Weymouth on holiday. In our boarding house there had been a family of girls. The eldest was about my age, thirteen. She was called Ursula and was about the prettiest girl I had ever seen. She was blonde and had been gifted a lovely, gentle slide of a nose. I can still see her today as clearly as she was then. Every mealtime was a secret delight for me, seated as I was opposite their table, with a perfect view of her profile. She must have been able to see me admiring her and yet she was all ease and poise, never looking once into my quarter. Slowly it dawned on me, as the week progressed, the secret significance of this apparent lack of interest; she knew I was looking at her and, of course, out of modesty, or pride, or shyness she would not respond! But once, as I was distracted, I glanced up to see her glance quickly away. How my heart leapt! And then, as I read the paper on our last morning at breakfast, that is when the miracle happened. I looked up absent-mindedly in her direction. Her head was turned towards me and this time she did not look away. She was blushing and her eyes were huge. It was that same earnest stare - an unmistakable look of love. To my utter and everlasting shame I had picked up the paper and blotted the vision out! When at last I had overcome my astonishment and my embarrassment enough to peek around the paper the table opposite was empty. I never saw her again.

Did she ever think of me again? Where is she now? Ursula! I adore you! Lucy, I adore you too.

What do people in deep comas dream of, and yet instantly forget when they awake? Is it possible that they dream up a whole world, another life in which the impossible comes true? A complete novel? Our normal dreams are transient, and often generated by the stresses and

anxieties we experience in our workaday lives; and instantly forgotten. What would a sub-conscious mind be capable of, if released from the daily tyranny of the conscious world? Might it be there that our most cherished dreams come true, that we live the life we most fervently desire in another dimension, as a compensation for our withdrawal from the Real? Perhaps it is a world of terror. Or perhaps a world of ineffable beauty and bliss.

I read over these last few lines and turn out the light.

The next morning I feel intensely miserable. The cheap thought leaps into my head, as I sit on the toilet, that perhaps Lucy junior had a thing for the young cameraman. I groan. Red wine is not a good drink to over-indulge in. Not only is there the headache but, much worse, an imprecise feeling of liverishness, malaise and depression. As I drink black coffee before work, the coherence of the thoughts and emotions of the previous day and evening appear vapid, irrelevant and even absurd.

I have made a large copy of Lucy's pictures and my poetry and displayed them prominently in the shop. Simon arrives and notices them. He thinks they are attractive and likely to sell well. But it is a wet morning. The market outside is barely frequented and many stallholders have had enough by about three o'clock and are packing away as the rain lashes down again. Our tills are not exactly brimming and the sum total of JucyCards sold by closing time is nil.

When I get into a low the worst thing I can do is drink. I should have followed my own best counsel this evening, but in the emptiness of my house I can only think of one good companion - the bottle of red I had begun on Sunday evening, and then one of his unopened comrades. At well after ten I seriously think about calling Lucy, but the sober side of me - fortunately - prevails.

On Tuesday morning I stay in bed. At ten my mobile rings. It is Simon. Of course he is irritated. I tell him I am in one of my troughs and promise to drag myself in by the early afternoon.

"We've been very busy," he tells me. "And a middle-aged lady bought up all those cottage cards. So cheer up and pull yourself together!"

He describes the woman. She sounds like Lucy. If it is her, what might it mean?

I am there by two o'clock. I have printed three dozen more cottage cards and two dozen cards of the brook.

"She didn't look at those. She just liked the cottage one with the poem."

"She didn't seem upset or anything?"

"The very opposite; said that they were the nicest cards she had seen for a long time, compared to all the tat on offer in the mainstream, and said she would tell her friends about them.....God, you look bloody awful Julian. Look, just go backstage and sort out the new deliveries. Then go home. Sarah and I can cope."

I apologise profusely and he smiles. By three I have opened all our parcels and boxes and stacked things ready to be shelved. I catch up with our accounts and then on an impulse decide to print a poster of the cottage for the window.

I go outside to admire the effect. I feel much better. I calculate that charging one pound eighty per card we have already raised nearly £35 for charity and still made a tidy profit.

"What a nice card - and what a nice idea," says someone at my shoulder to her companion.

I cannot wait to tell Lucy the good news. The phone rings and rings. Surely she has not gone on holiday again. Perhaps she is visiting Colin. At last, as I am about to ring off, someone picks up. It is Katherine. I ask her if her mother is in.

“You! You’re not to come back ‘ere - or ring ‘ere again!” she says with such vehemence that I sit down on the stair. She has slammed the phone down. I assume my worst fears are realised. My Nelly Moser poem or The Tragic Lovers has upset and offended her. I curse myself for being so presumptuous and forward. I had resolved not to drink tonight. The prospect of hours of silence, guilt and gloomy reflection is, however, more than a weak, lonely man can bear.

The phone rings. I rouse myself from my reverie. It is Lucy. I try to hide my condition but she knows within an instant that I am on the wrong side of tipsiness.

“I’m sorry for you if you’re drunk on my account,” she says after I have tried to apologise for whatever it is that has put the cat among the pigeons. “I’ve phoned to apologize for Katherine’s outburst.”

“What time is it?” I manage to ask.

“Look. It’s best if you just listen, Julian. The manner of how Katherine spoke to you was pretty inexcusable, but she was, as she normally is, rather unhappy, to say the least. But the gist of what she said applies. You are not to come - or phone - here again. I’m sorry.”

Not half as sorry as I am, now that she has put the phone down on me before I can take a deep enough breath to ask coherently for some sort of explanation. I sit on the stair for ages. It must be the bloody poems. How could I have been so insensitive? Her beloved husband is sitting in his own urine somewhere and I have the audacity to imply that we are star-crossed lovers! I stagger to my laptop, find the poems and with a jab of my finger send them to oblivion.

I have managed to get through somehow to the end of the week. My first instinct - to rip down the poster and bury the cards somewhere in the back - I have managed to resist. Simon tells me that they are going really well and are encouraging customers to spend more time in the deeper regions of the shop and more money on other things. I know he can tell that there is something very wrong with me, but he does not pry.

Simon is a lovely man. He had been a music teacher and had had to get out on account of his gentle disposition being much abused by the gale of apathy and malice blowing through our schools, and through the concrete wastelands of our towns and estates in general. Simon is all forgiveness. He probably thinks I’m still at a low ebb. He tells me that Sarah’s sister has asked for a few hours in the shop now she has recovered from her A Levels. Why don’t I take Saturday off and go out for the day? The forecast is glorious. I tell him he is a dear friend. Would I like to come round for Sunday lunch - Melissa was planning a barbecue on the back lawn for a few people? I thank him but know it would be a mistake. Simon’s parties are always pretty boozy and I need to pull myself together.

After many crumpled attempts I finally decide that the following version says what is on my mind, without being insensitive to what Lucy might be feeling. At least I hope it is not.

Dear Mrs Morton,

I am ashamed to think that I may have in some way offended you. I cannot stop thinking about it. I realise of course now that my poems, particularly the one about the rose and the clematis, were dreadfully insensitive and presumptuous, considering what personal unhappiness you have experienced, owing to the ill health of your husband. A lack of awareness of the needs and feelings of others has, I am afraid, been one of my major faults and a key factor in the failure of my marriage.

Visiting you in your lovely garden and going to the concert with you were the happiest experiences I have had in recent times. It is rare to meet someone whose tastes and outlook are

so similar to one's own. The truth is, I am rather lonely. Meeting you by way of that lovely photograph was inspirational in a personal and, as you well know, an artistic sense. Too inspirational as it turns out.

I had no intention of hurting you. Please forgive me.

Yours sincerely,

Julian

By the way, our LucianCards, as I have retitled them, are selling phenomenally well. I enclose a cheque for £45, your share so far of the profit. We have raised nearly £100 for UNICEF in only a few days. I will send you another cheque when we have reckoned up at the end of the month. I shall send your lovely drawings back in a reinforced envelope as soon as possible.

Many, many days elapse without a reply. I imagine her bulldog of a daughter seizing and tearing my poor letter into shreds. At times, I am tempted to phone but am deterred by the thought of her.

It is now late July. I need to get away and am thinking of taking a long August break in Tyrol. I will take the car across and call in on my friends in Belgium and Germany, people to whom I was close at Oxford.

Amanda hated the mountains. She had no soul. (Who, with a soul could possibly love a rich, materialistic Conservative councillor??) And yet, for a time she loved me. Maybe.

We only went once to Tyrol. She loathed it. Since our divorce I have been back many times. I love especially the Brixental, with Kitzbühl at one end of the valley and the gritty, wood-milling town of Schwoich at the other. And high on the slope of the Hohe Salve, between the Brixental and the valley of the Wilder Kaiser, the Wild Emperor - a spectacular, serrated range of peaks, resembling a man lying on his back - there lies the tiny village of Itter. I never tire of my stays up there in the house of the Salvenmosers, in their tiny attached flat, with its south facing balcony. I love the fragrant rolls and delicious honey they provide for breakfast. To sit there on a balmy, clear night with a telescope and a good bottle of local wine, with wonderful music playing, has to be one of the most delightful of experiences. And occasionally they invite me for a meal with them, or with their family and friends; and we always go together at least once down into Westendorf to watch their two sturdy-legged sons, both firemen, perform with their comrades their Schuhplattler routines. This year I have not booked. I have left it too late to go to the Salvenmosers. My life is, as they say, on hold. But I will go any way. There is always plenty of room in Tyrol in the late summer.

Just as I am giving up hope of a reply, I see one Friday evening, as I return from work, a familiar envelope on the mat. It is bulging. Has she sent back my poems? My soaring spirits sink at this thought. I open it with misgiving.

Dear Julian,

Please call me Lucy.

I need to explain and apologize for last week. We had a crisis, to say the least. You blamed yourself in your letter for being presumptuous. To the extent that you jumped entirely to the wrong conclusions, you have a point! When you phoned, your poems had not arrived. When

they did, and I read them, I was moved to tears. The symbolism of the clematis and the rose - and their incompatibility - had already occurred to me; the very first time I saw you. I immediately put the whole idea out of mind. Your lovely poem unsettled me, frightened me even. The other poem saddened me very much. Read it again, Julian. I think you have not seen its deeper meaning.

You had assumed that my husband and I were not well matched. Not so. But what you did not know, and what I was determined not to tell you, or anyone, is that for many years I have been discontented. Read into that whatever you will. Colin aged prematurely in more ways than one, and his behaviour became more and more erratic and unreasonable. Like you, I have been very lonely. Katherine is, to be candid, absolutely no comfort or consolation. There is no-one in whom I can confide.

At least there was no-one.

When Colin was taken into care some twenty months ago for the most part he did not know who I was, or even who he was at times. After he finally went, my overwhelming emotion at first was relief. Guilt and then depression soon followed. My life was over and as empty as the cottage I inhabited. And now after the relief of one burden, I have acquired another; my daughter. She does not take after her father, in answer to your unspoken question. She is much more like her aunt, Colin's sister, who is, shall we say, not especially well endowed with brains or graces either. And it is because of her and her troubles that I shall have to bid farewell to you, Julian.

In a hamlet like Sharnstoke novelties do not go unnoticed. Your calls at the cottage - some at unearthly times as I have recently discovered - aroused curiosity and suspicion roundabouts. The tittle-tattlers at The Cricketers have been busy too. My son-in-law frequents the bar and, getting to hear all about your visits, he rushed, like everyone else, to the wrong conclusions. Besides being a very stupid and bibulous man, he is also insanely jealous. So last Saturday night after turning-out time our normally quiet little lane was treated to quite a special drama and most of the neighbours came out to watch. I prefer not to go into detail about what Jim called you and Katherine, and what he threatened to do to both of you. Of course Katherine herself is no slouch in the insults and retorts department and she managed to let it be known that "that bloody poetry man was after mum" and not the daughter at all. This caused quite a lot of merriment, but Jim failed to see the joke. He wrecked the front garden and hurled a rockery stone through the window. I told the police that I would not be pressing charges. Of course Katherine blames you, and by extension, me. So, as far as the eye can see into the future, you should avoid the village and my home, for your own safety, and for the sake of everyone's reputation.

Imagine how dismayed I feel that our friendship, our association, so idealistically and innocently conceived, should be so utterly and disgustingly misconstrued by such vulgarians, and that we should become characters in a scene reminiscent of a vile soap-opera. The sudden silence which greeted my arrival in the sub-post office and the village store on Monday confirmed that Katherine and I will be the favourite topic of conversation for months to come. I fear my sandwich-making days at the cricket and visits to the local WI are also at an end. My garden, unlike my good repute, will in time recover. How ironic that a photograph in the local paper should lead to such a doleful state of affairs! As I said, we live in very ugly times, Julian. Thank you for the cheque. I am delighted that we have raised so much money. Every cloud has a silver lining.

Yours sincerely,

Lucy Morton.

I can scarcely believe what I have read. What have I done? How can such innocent enthusiasm have led to such coarseness? What an unforeseeable disaster. Where do we go from here? I put pen to paper several times but have nothing valuable or positive to suggest. How hopeless a situation.

I cannot even read that poem to see what hidden meaning Lucy had found. I had deleted it. I begin to turn the corkscrew in a bottle of red but half-way through I change my mind.

On Saturday we are doing steady trade. Our stocks of cards are going so well that I decide to show Sarah's sister, Cassandra, how to produce more in the back of the shop. She is soon a dab-hand at this. The "brook" card is also selling well. In fact my original SonnetCards, with their admittedly inferior sketches, have also been catching the eye. At this rate we will have to employ someone, part-time, to produce them all. I am admiring Cassie's handiwork when I hear a loud voice in the shop. I put my head around the curtain.

"Are you the bloody poetry man?" shouts the long-haired, ruddy drunk. He tries to lunge at me, miscalculates and falls on the counter, sending one of our card racks flying. Cottage cards are everywhere, on him and around him. He yells something incoherent in his drunken fury. Of course all browsing and other activity on the premises have come to an amazed standstill. As the man swims around amongst the cards, cursing and trying to get to his feet, Simon is the first to react. He phones the police.

"Are you Jim? Katherine's husband?" I ask, as he paddles around like a dog on all fours. He shouts at me to stay away from her and her mother. I tell him equally as adamantly that I have no interest whatsoever in his wife.

"If I find out where you live...." He screams. As he attempts to stand he sends another display flying. Some people are now cheering ironically. His language - or what can be understood of it amongst all the other incoherent raving - is truly appalling. He finally gives up all attempts at standing and lies blubbering in the mess. A dark stain begins to spread out to the size of a dinner plate around his crotch. As he lies there crying, a man of nearly my age, looking up at me helplessly, my disgust is replaced by a new emotion. Pity. I sense he is asking the world for help.

"Terrific," mutters Simon. "Absolutely terrific."

It seems to be an age until the two constables arrive. They pick him up under the arm pits and drag him, dripping and moaning, out of the door. At the windows crowds of onlookers have gathered. Sarah and Cassandra are standing open-mouthed holding their heads in their hands.

"It's OK folks!" shouts Simon. "It's just a publicity stunt to drum up business. He didn't really piddle himself. It's lemonade!"

We usher customers out of the door and close. It takes a good hour until we have picked up and mopped up the mess. We take the ruined stock - around a hundred pounds' worth - out to a skip in the back yard. We pay the girls and send them home.

Over a cup of coffee I decide to tell Simon the whole sorry story. He sympathises with the predicament I am in through absolutely no fault of my own.

"I just hope he doesn't come back. Definitely not good for business. I don't suppose there's any point trying to get compensation out of him?"

I shake my head and tell him that as far as I know his business had gone bust. The phone rings. I answer it. It is the police.

"We're charging him with being drunk and disorderly, as well as threatening behaviour. Did he do any damage to your stock? We could throw criminal damage at him as well."

I tell the female voice to hold the line. Simon agrees with me that it was an accident. The poor man needs to sort out his drinking, he thinks. What would be the point of adding to his miseries?

“If we show him some mercy, he will be less likely to come back.”

I see the absolute sense of this.

“Look, officer. Need this come to court? The man is an alcoholic. His marriage is on the rocks. Any damage he did here was an entire accident. We have no intention of pursuing him, as long as he guarantees never to return.”

“Whether this comes to court or not is none of your concern. It will be down to CPS. This isn’t the first time he’s done something like this. You’ll have to make a statement.”

“Have to?”

“Look, you called us and we came. He has, in our humble opinion broken the law, and you have a public duty -“

“OK, OK, OK.” I tell her my address and arrange a time for her to call.

Great. So now the whole sorry business will be aired in public, with a much larger audience at Earlstone Magistrates Court and - Oh No! - magnified, of course, through its organ of the press, eager for some leavening of scandal in that flat dough of good works and fundraising. What effect will all this have on Lucy? Who had told him where my shop was? One lumpy, stumpy candidate springs immediately to mind.

“DO NOT put the phone down on me! Did you or did you not tell your husband where I work?”

“What if I did?”

“What if you did? WHY did you tell him?”

“Well, he’s ‘ardly going to believe I’m ‘aving it off with a bookseller, a poncey poetry man, is he? You’re not exactly my type.”

“You did not make a very good job of persuading him, Katherine. He came in and wrecked the place this afternoon.”

She has nothing to say to this.

“I can’t hear you Katherine. Did you say sorry? I missed that.”

“Sorry?? What for? You came round ‘ere, prowling about at dawn and all that. It’s all your fault. I told him you were pestering us both, just to keep ‘im out of our ‘air. It’s not my fault if he thought you were trying it on with me.....you’re my age...who in the right mind would think you’ve been after my mum all the time, you bloody pervert! You’re a bloody.....oldo-phile! YOU STAY AWAY. My dad’d KILL you if he knew, you BASTARD.”

At this point she begins to scream and cry. I hear the phone wrenched from her grasp.

“WHAT ON EARTH is going on?” shouts Lucy. “Is this you Jim? Don’t you think you’ve done enough damage for one week?”

I quietly tell her it is me. What can I say now to make the truth any better? Nothing. So I tell her exactly what has happened and what will happen next. There is a silence and then the soft sound of weeping.

“Listen, Lucy. Give me Jim’s address. I’ll do a deal with him -“

“He would KILL you.”

“No. I will PROVE to him that he has made a horrible mistake. Trust me. I’ll show him my poems and our letters...”

She scoffs at this and tells me that he can barely read. But I am determined. This is the only way I can think of putting things right.

“He needs to say in court that he added two and two together and made ten...that he was upset, has a drink problem etc, etc, and now he accepts that there is absolutely no truth in whatever rumours he had heard. I’ll offer him some financial support. ANYTHING to protect your good name, Katherine’s.....and mine.”

Silence. Has she put the phone down?

“Lucy? Are you still there?”

She is. Gradually I counter all her pessimistic arguments and make her see that this is the only way out of an awful situation. She gives me his address, but advises me to write first.

Dear Mr Bridges,

May I first of all say sorry. My business partner should not have called the police. I need to explain to you what an awful mistake has been made. I know now my behaviour has caused suspicion. But all this can be put right. I will be a witness in your defence and help you to come through this, I promise. Please call me.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Miles

On Monday Simon sees the funny side as usual. "How the bloody hell can you be a witness for the prosecution and the defence at the same time?"

I have not considered this. I had made quite a damning statement on the Saturday evening, when my indignation was still red-hot.

"Well, when the defence wallah cross-examines me, I'll give the court all the arguments in mitigation, and admit that my behaviour, on the face of it, was likely to rouse Jim's suspicion."

"You'll come across as a bit of a wet fart, Julian. A bit of a saddo, as they say on the streets these days."

"I don't care. As long as Lucy gets back her good name."

Sarah comes out and says that Mitch Waring from the Gazette wants a word with the proprietor.

"OH BRILLIANT!" I exclaim. I go into the back and pick up the phone.

"A little bird tells me you had a difficult customer on Saturday, Julian."

This is the same Mitch Waring I had threatened to take to the Press Council over the misreporting of a speech our foul-breathed candidate had made at the 97 election. We are not bosom-buddies.

"Just a drunk, Mitch. Shit happens. You should know that. You write plenty."

He laughs. "Very sharp this morning, aren't we. Just a drunk? Just wandered out of The Admiral Benbow and decided to attack a bookshop? Wasn't wearing a brown shirt by any chance? Pity he wasn't a militant vegetarian - he might have had a go at the butcher's next door instead."

"And?"

"Well, my little bird tells me that you rather got your just desserts. Been messin' where you shouldn't have been messin', as Nancy Sinatra might say."

From bad to worse. Was his little bird called Jim by any chance, I ask. I hear him suck, to my utter disgust, a whistling, melodramatic breath through his crooked teeth. "Can't reveal a source, Julian. You know that."

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of this call this fine morning?"

I can feel my throat artery pounding as I speak. What are you fishing for, you ugly bastard?

"What do you want, Waring?"

"Just a comment."

"How about No Comment?"

"Well, I tell you what, Julian, let me read this draft to you and you can decide how No Comment sounds after it - "A man was arrested on Saturday afternoon and charged with being drunk and disorderly and using threatening behaviour in Bookmarks in Castle Street. He has told this newspaper that he was acting on a rumour that the owner of the shop has been having an affair with his estranged wife. The man has been bailed to appear in court in August. The co-

owner of the bookshop, when contacted, said that he had “No comment” to make on his allegation. You likee?”

“You can’t print that, you bastard!”

“Shall I quote that from you then, instead of putting No Comment?”

“I’ll sue your fat arse off, you bloody HACK!”

“It’s only an allegation, Julian. So, I take it you deny it then? Is that what I should deduce?

Shall I put that?”

I slam the phone down, press 1471 3 and get the switchboard of the Gazette. I ask to speak to the editor. I tell him that Mitch Waring had better be careful; that he was conducting a personal vendetta against me; that he was indirectly besmirching the name of a very respectable Sharnstoke lady, a past contributor to the YesterYears page; that I would report the matter to the Press Council; that I would contact the Leicester Mercury and complain about the Gazette’s shoddy standard of journalism.

I peruse the paper on Friday. To my huge relief the story has been suppressed.

As I sit picking moodily at my food my mobile rings. It is Jim Bridges. He is drunk. I tell him to get back in contact when he is sober, but he is wallowing in self-pity. He tells me he still loves his wife and wants her back. He is sorry about losing his temper. He stands not only to lose his wife but his home. He can’t pay the mortgage. He refuses to sell because that is their home. And on and on he rambles.

“Look, Jim - can I call you Jim? Can I come round and talk to you? Do you promise me that you won’t lose your temper? I want to help you through this. Please.”

He gives me his address. I jump in my car and within a quarter of an hour I am sitting on the edge of Sharnstoke, outside a shabby looking bungalow with a dormer bedroom in the roof, which, I notice is rather concave in the middle. The garden is utterly overgrown. The window frames are in need of paint. Whatever he is asking for the house it is thousands too much. I knock on the front door and his dark shape appears in the hallway. Nothing could have prepared me for the stench. It is vile, a mixture of rot, stale beer, cigarettes, dirty feet and damp.

“See. You can tell she’s been gone a long while. I can’t keep on top of it.”

He moves an empty pizza box from a sagging armchair and gestures for me to sit down. He lights a roll-up and offers me his tobacco and papers. I shake my head. Do I want a drink, then? No thank you, I’m driving, I tell him. Where to begin? He draws on his cigarette and lets out a rasping cough. What a degraded individual. Will he be able to grasp my argument?

“Jim. You’re a mess. If you want Katherine back, you’ve got to put the house and yourself in order. I’m prepared to offer you a job printing cards. I’ll show you what to do. I’ll pay to get the house tidied up. I’ll stick up for you in court and tell the beak that it was all a terrible misunderstanding; that you are putting your life in order with my help. All you have to do is to make me two promises.”

He has taken the fag from his mouth and is staring at me in apparent confusion. Why, he asks, would I do anything for him, a stranger?

“Because I love Lucy Morton, and will do anything to prevent her from being hurt.”

He draws his neck backwards like some startled tortoise.

“So it’s true then. You are after the old gal! She’s old enough to be your mother! I hope you’ve got plenty of Vaseline!”

He laughs at his revolting wit. I can hardly bear to look at him. I tell him that he has got completely the wrong idea. I love her as a friend and want nothing of her. He thinks this over. I can tell he thinks I am either lying or mad.

“If you ain’t after her...old sixpence...haw, haw.....you must be after her ha’pence! Well, you’d better get to the back of the queue. Her ol’ man’s got to peg out first. Last I heard from Katherine, he’s got ‘eart like a stirrup pump. Might not ‘ave his marbles -“

“Listen, Jim. I’m after nothing. I love Lucy in a much different way to how you imagine. You must believe me. I want nothing.”

I glare at him with as much sincerity as I can summon up. After a while he averts his eyes and throws the stub of his cigarette into the fireplace.

“What two promises?”

“Right. One - tomorrow you will stop drinking, call the doctor and make an appointment to discuss your problem. Two - you will admit in court that your suspicions about me and Katherine were entirely wrong. If you come into the shop in your best gear on Friday I will be able to tell straightway if you are off the juice. I’ll set you on. If you can do the job and stick at it, I’ll give you whatever it takes to put this place right. I will help you to write to Katherine and tell her you want to make a brand new start.”

“Will you write me a poem for her, poetry man?” he says slyly.

I smile.

“If you want. Are you serious? Do you want to give it a go?”

I take his silence as assent. I do not press him.

“Take me on a tour. Show me where you keep your booze.”

I follow him into the kitchen. He watches and only half-protests as I dare to open and pour several tins of strong lager away. “Any wine?” I ask. He says he is not a wine drinker - hates the bloody stuff. I open a few cupboards and find no more bottles. I survey the filthy array of plates and pots around the sink.

“Come on. Help me to wash up. Then I’ll wash the floor. You can take the rubbish out.”

Within half-an-hour the kitchen is fairly straight, but the rest of the house is going to prove a huge challenge. As I leave, I give him a tenner and make him promise to get his hair cut the next day.

“And for God’s sake have a shower and change your clothes.”

As I drive back I can hardly believe that I have been so direct, and he so submissive. Whether he will comply is entirely another matter.

The next morning I fax the following to the Gazette.

For the attention of Mitch Waring. Please copy to the editor.

Dear Mitch,

I have spoken to Jim Bridges. He now accepts that his allegations against me are entirely unfounded. I am prepared to help him overcome his problems. I will represent him at his hearing and speak for him. You wanted a comment; print this.

Julian

I tell Simon I have got to go out on urgent business. In the evening, when I return from Leicester, I phone Lucy. Katherine picks up.

“Don’t say a word. Just listen. I am helping your husband to sort his life out. As you well know, he is by no means a bad man. No! Listen! He wants you back. He is giving up the booze. I’m giving him a job and training him in IT. I’m going to court with him. Tell your mum that everything is going to be fine.”

“She’s not here. She’s with my dad. He had a stroke.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t sound it.”

When she has rung off I phone Jim. To my immeasurable relief he is sober. He tells me he has been in the garden, chopping down the grass and weeding. I tell him how pleased I am to hear it.

“For tomorrow I’ve booked a domestic cleaning firm from Leicester to come round your house. They should leave it spotless. I’ve told them that I was Jim Bridges, the brother of the man who lived there, that he has been taken into hospital, that I - or rather you, of course - will be there to supervise things. You make sure that they do exactly as you want - carpets and upholstery steam-cleaned, walls washed down, rubbish removed, etc, etc. Make a list. Open the windows. Take control. I phoned Katherine. I’ve put her in the picture.”

“You phoned Katherine?” For a while he says nothing and then shyly asks what she had said. “Nothing much. She will take some convincing, I think. It’s up to you to make her believe in you, like she did once. Don’t worry about paying the cleaners. I’ve given my address for the bill to be sent to.”

“How can I pay you back?”

“By keeping your two promises. And by producing our greetings cards. I’ll show you on Friday. Be there at nine. Be smart. Be sober. Get your hair cut.”

“I did.”

By Thursday I have managed to convince Simon that I am not barmy, and that Jim could be an asset. My visit to the bookshops and art shops in Leicester on Wednesday had produced many an agreement to take a stock of cards on a sale or return basis. The charity angle I had deleted. That evening I had even had an email from Burrows in the High St, ordering 200 of each LucianCard. My share of the profit will be Jim’s wages, I tell Simon, cash in hand.

“How is Colin?”

“Very poorly. He’s in the Infirmary.”

“Will he live?”

“Touch and go. The consultant thinks he might have another stroke.”

She takes a deep breath. “I’ve asked that he not be revived, if...”

“Did he agree?”

She ignores the question and tells me that she has phoned to say thank you. I tell her that there is no need.

“I got you into this mess...”

“No. It was nobody’s fault. Life sometimes plays strange tricks on people. You’re a Hardy fan. You know that.”

“How is Katherine?”

“Hard to tell. She’s been hard at work putting the garden straight. Jim came round and put a new pane in.”

“He came round?”

“He offered to, so I let him. I waited till Katherine went out. Just to be on the safe side. When I told her he had fixed it I think she was pleased. And it fits perfectly.”

I tell her that my share of the card should pay Jim a decent wage. She immediately offers her share too. She asks about the charity.

I consider. “Well, maybe in this case, for the time being at least, charity really should begin at home, Lucy.”

She readily agrees. She knows for a fact that he has not paid the mortgage for more than six months.

“I’ve decided to send the Building Society a cheque. I haven’t told Katherine yet.”

“Six months?”

“Oh, it isn’t that much. If he can sort himself out and take that morose daughter of my hands, it will be worth every penny! Maybe he can pay me back sometime, but I won’t count on it. Besides, I haven’t paid Katherine a bean for being my gardener.”
I laugh. “Lucy, when all the dust has settled, would you like to come around.....for a meal?”
She whispers something I can’t catch and puts the phone down. I think I must have put my foot in it again.

On Friday, Simon does not recognize Jim. He is clean shaven and his mop of hair has been smartly trimmed. In his jacket, white shirt and tie he might even be a red-faced rep in a hurry. I watch him from my corner approach the counter. Simon asks him pleasantly if he can help him. “I’m looking for Julian Miles. But first of all I want to say ‘ow sorry I am. For Sat’day afternoon.”

I watch with growing pleasure Simon’s face turn from its usual affability to one of utter astonishment. At this point I step forward out of the shadows.

“It’s alright Jim. Simon is very forgiving. He used to be a teacher. Come into the back office and I’ll show you how we operate.”

We seat ourselves at the table. Two PCs are linked to two scanner-printers. I show him some basic commands and he gets the hang of it pretty quickly. I have identified and slightly adapted two sonnets in my collection to complement two other drawings of Lucy’s, one of the church and a very charming one of a country lane in May. I show him how to scan in and size up the pictures; show him how to copy and paste them onto my Images file, and how to do the same with the two sonnets onto my Lyrics file. I reverse the process and let him try. After one foul-up he manages to do it. The two files are set up to have two columns in order to print a card. I click on the print command and show him how to select “photo quality” under “properties”. I set the machine to print and within ten seconds the image of the church has been faithfully reproduced.

“Right. Now watch carefully. I maximise the Lyrics file, click on “print” under “File”; alter the “property” from “photo” to “text”, click on “current page” - otherwise the lot get printed! I put the card with the picture back onto the stack, back to front and upside down and press the “OK” button. Now watch.”

The printer whirs and almost immediately spits the completed card out. It is perfect. I show him how to change “one copy” to however many.

“Using the two printers you can produce loads in an hour. This is how to fold them - line up the two corners and bring your finger slowly down the back. Then put each one in a plastic wrapper with an envelope and seal it with the sticky tab.”

Slowly at first, under my supervision, and then with more confidence he begins to build up a sizeable stock of the two old and the two new cards.

On my laptop I check my emails. To my delight we have received two more large orders of the brook and the garden cards. I have a sudden brainwave. I confirm the order and in an attachment I display the two new cards and sonnets, with a couple of missing lines, on a special file I create which is not printable in a card format, just in case the recipients have the crafty idea to copy them. I explain to Jim what I am doing and he raises an eyebrow.

“If you ‘ad more contacts you could send them new cards off to them as well. To drum up more business, you know.”

I cannot believe that he has said this. I tell him, to his consternation almost, that he is a bloody genius! I search for “bookshops” on the Net and up comes one website after another! I rush out and tell Simon. His eyes open wide, and wider still, as he sees the potential market for our cards.

“Well. If this grows as big as I think it might,” he says “That little office with two measly printers is never going to be big enough.”

I have given up all thought of going to Tyrol this August. We are too busy. Katherine has moved back in with Jim. In his old glazier's workshop we have installed a flat-bed printer which Simon, Lucy and I have financed.

In court I tell the magistrates what a transformation has taken place in Jim Bridges' life. A plump, beaming Katherine sits behind me as proof of this. Lucy had promised to come, but feeling rather ill and tired, as her daughter explained, she had stayed away. Her husband had not succumbed to his stroke, but needed almost constant nursing care in his new home. Lucy has been backwards and forwards many times to ensure that he is comfortable and well looked after. I have not seen her since the evening of our concert.

When the magistrates return from their deliberations, the news could hardly be better. In spite of his previous convictions for drunkenness, assault and threatening behaviour Jim is given a Conditional Discharge for two years.

*

Lucy sounds rather breathless. I ask her if she has been gardening. She tells me that she had tried to pull up a few weeds but had had to give up.

"I think I might be getting a cold or something. I'm a bit wheezy."

I tell her to take care of herself and then summon up the nerve to offer to take her for lunch out in the country. To my great delight she readily accepts.

That much anticipated September Sunday arrives. I pull up beneath the great horse chestnut tree. The spiky pods are swelling now like green sea-mines, and soon gangs of children will be throwing up sticks and stones to dislodge them. The garden has lost some of its June glory but there are dahlias and great clumps of rubdeckia and echinacea blooming in the stead of the foxgloves and hollyhocks. By the front door the great heads of the sunflowers have dropped and are staring in their oblivion into the ground. I ring the bell. I see the hazy shape of Lucy slowly gather substance as she moves towards the frosted glass of the door. When she opens the door, as if the sun has been swallowed by a cloud, the smile on her face fades, as, I immediately realise, mine must have done. I switch it back on. She smiles back wanly.

"It's been a long time Julian. Your face tells me all I need to know."

I am speechless. I offer her my arm but she refuses and takes a walking stick from the coat stand. Slowly she negotiates the steep steps of the path. I steal a glance at her profile as she places first one foot, then the other, on the next slab; perhaps it is the light being unkind to her; she looks weary and drawn. She stops and waves her stick in the direction of a clump of black-eyed susans.

"You can hardly tell what it was like in July.....after what he did. It was a terrible mess.....Come on."

She is short of breath and watching cautiously every new step she takes.

I have booked a table at an inn in Ravenscroft. I make sure she is comfortable and help her on with her seat-belt. She lets out a deep sigh as she is finally strapped in and ready. We drive off. I tell her that she has had so much to put up with recently and that now she can start to relax again.

"You need a break - a nice holiday." The mountains of Tyrol flash across my mind's eye and I see her struggling up a steep path. I feel intensely depressed. I had spent many daydreams there with her in the weeks since I had last seen her; but not with this new version of her. She tells me that it is the pain in her joints - particularly her knees - which keeps her awake at night.

Incensed almost, I tell her to get something done about it.

“My mother had a knee partially replaced last year. Made a new woman of her! Make an appointment. You can’t go hobbling around at your age! With a walking stick!”

“How very gallant you are, young man.”

“No, honestly. You’ve got years of good life left. You should not put up with it!”

We leave the village and take a winding lane between short-cropped fields. The harvest is in and they resemble carpets of gold. It is one of those dreamy days which only appear in the countryside of the early autumn. The air is warm and drowsy; the sunlight is gently bathing the generously stocked hedgerows and tall grasses in the verges. I am put in mind of the ambience she managed to create in her drawings.

“It’s been such a lovely summer. What a pity we couldn’t enjoy it more,” she says quietly, almost to herself, as she looks away from me out of the window. I am not sure whether she means me to answer this but I make some reply that sounds so wooden, so glib, about making the most of what is left of it. The word “irreversible” will not stop tormenting me - like some appalling jingle, locked in the mind.

We arrive after about twenty minutes at The Wheatsheaf. Slowly we make our way through the tables of diners to the corner table we have been pointed to. She asks to sit with her back to the window, out of the light. I join her at her side. I can see now in the slight puffiness and redness of her eyes that she might have shed a tear.

I have booked the restaurant on the strength of a wonderful outing I had once had there, many years ago with Amanda, Simon and Melissa. I soon realise, with a sinking heart, that there is almost no escape these days from the vulgarity which is clutching at the gentle heart of Britain. The background music is no longer Vivaldi; instead, some girl, who cannot sing, is ululating about some intense desire she is possessed by; the table nearby is occupied by a mixed party of noisy, fast-drinking people; the men are wearing their shirts outside their trousers; the women are all blonde and imagine that their bulging midriffs look attractive below their short strappy tops. I am a snob these days, but not by choice. I give Lucy a meaningful look and roll my eyes around in the top of their sockets. She smiles and shrugs but does not react when somebody to the left of her calls their neighbour, to hoots of approval, a knobhead. The place, I tell her under my breath, is, like England, under New Management.

“Julian. You are turning into an old fogey - or an old f-a-r-t, as they all say these days!”

We order a bottle of white wine, decide not to bother with any of the tired-sounding starters, and manage to locate some fillets of sea bass amongst the murk of roasts and steaks.

As the alcohol takes a tighter hold on the party adjacent the noisy laughter increases. I need to get very close to Lucy in order to make her hear. I notice, for the first time, grey whiskers protruding from her ears. She finds it very hard to hear what I am saying and after a while we effectively give up attempts to communicate. Banal comments, repeated, acquire such an imbecilic quality. I study her eyes as she glances around the room. They have faded. To my intense disappointment I tell myself, against my will, that the young Lucy has disappeared. For good.

Waitresses appear carrying in the starters of the neighbouring party. After a loud “Ah” the noise begins to subside as they tuck in. I cannot resist the comment to no-one in particular:

“What a blessing that people cannot shout and eat at the same time.”

But I misjudge the volume, due to my irritation, and one of them must have heard.

“Did you hear what that fucking twat just said?”

I look around at them and make a gesture and pull a face, designed to appeal for a little bit of restraint and consideration for others. One of the blondes decides to say “So - rry!” in that disgusting parody of an apology, so popular with the ill-mannered these days. Lucy looks across at her. The young woman is fat and swinish in the face.

“Your apology is accepted. Thank you,” says Lucy at her most gracious.

One of them mutters something about live-and-let-live and another says “boring old farts” and giggles. I ask the passing waitress if there is another table we could have - we are not entirely comfortable in the present company, I explain, sotto voce. She regrets that they are fully booked, but that we could eat in the garden, if it was too noisy inside. Lucy seems at first reluctant, but when one of the guests belches she changes her mind. The others in the room are so engaged in their conversations that they take no notice of us as we make our way out. Only one gentleman in the other corner, a large old man in a mustard cardigan, shakes his head slowly at me as we pass, in obvious approbation of our disgust.

“They were young - and only having a good time,” says Lucy as we sit down in the warm sunshine. She has sat with her back to the sun.

“So you don’t believe that the end of culture is at hand? Didn’t you say yourself what awful days we are living through?”

She throws back her head and lets out a peal of delicious laughter.

“Julian! I was just being pompous - like you! You were young once.”

“I know but - “

“Oh, come on. Hand on heart, did you never offend anyone when you were their age?”

I cannot put my hand on my heart. She pats my hand and takes a sip of wine.

“You have read Anne and Charlotte and, of course, Jane - their youngsters are just as obnoxious - think about Thorpe in Northanger Abbey, the one who has designs on Catherine Morland. His manners are appalling.”

I allow that she has a point, but counter that I had wanted to go somewhere quiet and elegant with her. She looks around and gestures at the neat lawn and borders. She smiles and I nod in silent agreement.

The food eventually finds its way out to us. To my surprise the fillets of bass, the green beans and the grilled tomato with rosemary are delicious. My spirits rise. I watch with pleasure as she eats with obvious relish. What a beautiful day it is. The sun is hazy; at the far horizon my gaze pauses to admire the pale green splashes, the trees painted onto the silver-blue porcelain edge of the sky; the air is honey; threads of willow herb or maybe thistle-down float in and around us from the nearby field; one lands on her plate and finds its way into her mouth. I watch them landing, trembling, in her silver hair. She seems to know I am observing her, for now she looks me straight in the eye.

“What do you want of me, Julian?”

The question startles me with its frankness but I quickly recover.

“I’ll tell you after our pudding. When the girl comes, order me whatever you want. I’ll be back in a moment”

I get up and take a paper from my pocket and slide it over to her. What do I want of her? In the toilet I think this over but can come to no clear formulation of what I intend. When I return she has left the paper open on the table.

NELLY MOSER

In parasols each darling swells
To burst with gaudy, candy stripes,
Mauve on pink, eight-petalled belles
Most startling of clematis types;
Cast for light they bare their souls
To beckon bees to dark red hearts
Till hot June suns shall take their tolls
And ardent mauve to fading starts
Till all resemble flowers of silk,
Like soft and gentle skin, pink-veined

Memory-pale as white as milk,
With May's sweet essences retained.

Grey-whiskered they shall congregate
To gossip in the breeze, sedate.

Lucy is weeping. I read the last-but-one line and go very hot. Have I be so insensitive and stupid to offend her yet again?

"Julian. I love you."

I take her hand but she will not let me keep it.

"But I cannot reverse the course of that...damned.... Sharnstoke brook!"

I suddenly feel an overwhelming pity for her, in her frailty and isolation.

"Lucy, I love you very much."

"No. You mean to be very kind, I know. You love someone else."

I deny this fervently. She looks up and asks me if I had re-read my Tragic Lovers poem. I had forgotten all about this and have to admit that I had deleted it after we had broken off contact that terrible day.

"Here. Read it again." She takes it out from her handbag and with a pang I look it over. I feel very hot again.

"You see. You do see, don't you? You love *her*. The young image of Lucy. You thought you could catch her glimpsing at you through me. Today you know she is no longer there. I was your conduit to her. This has all been a poetic fancy"

I try to persuade her that she is wrong; that she is my soul-mate, the most precious friend I have. She nods. She knows all that, she says.

"I'm sorry; I think the wine has gone to my head slightly. I ought to be grateful - and I am. You brought Katherine and Jim back together, for better - or worse."

She takes her handkerchief out and dabs at her eyes. Then fresh tears well up there.

"When you looked at me as I opened the door, I saw straight away that the person you thought you were calling for was no longer me. Or rather in me. I'm not stupid, Julian!"

She says this last with such vehemence that the girl coming with the puddings almost drops them. Lucy recovers by magic her sangfroid and excuses herself from the table. I offer to help her into the building, but almost savagely she hisses that she will manage by herself. I watch her cross the lawn and, swaying very slightly, disappear through the door.

I watch as the ice cream gradually melts and submerges the fruit pie. I know I should not really have more wine but I empty the bottle into my glass. I go to take a deep draught but stop as the glass is at my lips. I look at my watch. Where is she?

Suddenly the serving girl rushes out and tells me that my mother has fallen over in the Ladies. I run in with her. Just beyond the toilet door I can see her legs splayed out. She is not moving.

"What's happened?" asks a nearby voice in a dreadful whisper. That young blonde woman from the dining room announces – *Oh, it's just some old lady collapsed in the loo.*

*

"What is your relationship to Mrs Morton?" asks the doctor.

"None. She's just a friend."

"Who can we contact?"

"Will she be alright?"

She does not answer. I begin to remonstrate with her. Surely she can tell me whether she will be alright or not? That I am a close friend of the family! She flicks hurriedly through the papers on her clipboard.

“She has a fractured hip. And quite a severe concussion. We’re doing tests.”

I give her Katherine’s telephone number which I had left a message on.

“Is there any chance I can see her before I go?”

But she shakes her head and wanders off.

Two days later Katherine finally returns the last of my many calls. She sounds uncharacteristically bright; cheerful even. She tells me that she has just come back from the Infirmary.

“And how is she then? On the mend?”

“She has bone cancer, Julian. And it’s spreading.”

An icy chill invades my heart.

“Yeah, she’s riddled with it. She thought it was just a touch of arthritis.”

In the background I can hear the television blaring; she thinks that she has completely muffled the speaker but I hear her yell at her husband to put the other side on for Coronation Street.

“I’ve got to get on now -“

“Hold on Katherine...Have they told her?”

“Not yet. She’s still pretty woozy. She really clouted the wash-basin with her head when she fell. ‘S a wonder she didn’t kill herself. ”

“Not told her? When then?”

“Dunno. When she’s feeling a bit better, I s’pose. I just thought I’d let you know, know what I mean? Can’t go tomorrow night; got something planned.”

“It’s alright. I’ll go...unless someone else....”

“No. Fine by me. It’s seven till eight.”

She is propped up on a pillow when I arrive. There is a brownish-purple swelling over her right eye. She looks rather yellow. I notice also that a tube with a plaster over the end leads into the back of her hand. There is a large pale green plastic button attached to it. Above her head hangs a plastic bag, half full of a clear liquid. She is staring dreamily. Her grey eyes are huge and serene; they have regained the earnest, searching quality of old. Now she recognises me and gives me the loveliest smile and tells me quietly how pleased she is to see me. Had I eaten her pudding as well as my own?

“It was a delicious meal. I was quite looking forward to my cherry pie. My wretched knee just gave way. The next thing I knew I was lying in bed in here. They’re looking after me really well.....The nurses are lovely.....Katherine and Jim came. They hadn’t got much to say for themselves. They brought me one of your SonnetCards, look.”

On her sideboard was my picture of the lily.

“It’s one of my favourite flowers,” she adds. She presses the button on her wrist. “Well, I never thought they’d turn me into a drug addict!”

“What are they giving you?”

“Morphine. I just press this button if the pain gets too severe. I feel as if I’m on a cloud. And it makes me have the strangest dreams. And I remember them! I never used to!”

“What do you dream?”

“Ah! Now, that would be telling! Lucy always said that if I told anyone about my dreams, they would never come true.”

“Just tell me one.”

She studies me and thinks it over. She will tell me, she says, the unlikeliest one of all

“I was on a mountainside surrounded by forest. Then it was night. You appeared and told me about all the stars. But I couldn’t see any of them.”

I gasp. I whisper that this was more or less my dream too.

“It’s alright Julian..... I know.”

“You know?”

“The pretty lady doctor told me everything this morning.”

I mutter something inane and childishly optimistic. She looks back with a smile and what looks like pity in her eyes, as I move from one brief reassurance to another, like the white notes on a piano, carefully avoiding the black. I am almost pleased when the bell rings for the end of visiting. I lean forward and give her a kiss on the cheek. As I leave the ward, I turn, wave to her and blow her a kiss. Does her beaming smile mean that she notices or is she wandering in her mountains again?

It is the last time I see her.

*

Katherine and Jim wanted to make a fresh start in a place where they had no history. He expanded his printing business with a brand new workshop on some industrial estate near Oadby, not far from their new house.

I pleaded with Katherine not to have her mother buried, but instead cremated; but she was as stubborn as ever. It was none of my business, she was keen to remind me, of course. So now she is trapped for the rest of time beneath this shiny slab.

At least she allowed me to have a sonnet engraved upon it. And she does lie beneath a chestnut tree in a corner by the cricket field. Colin joined her there within a month of her passing, mourned by no-one as far as I could tell.

I sold my share of the business and all copyright to Simon. It will not be long until he makes his first million, I dare say. My comfort and joy is that I could muster enough to buy Honeysuckle Cottage and the furniture in it. I have found much inspiration there, and in and around the pretty lanes of Sharnstoke; and much consolation on the banks of the brook, where Lucy, and all those Lucys before her, had played in their brief summers, in currents of water which flowed on and on and on to rain down again and again on the restless world. Into that ancient stream I have scattered Lucy's ashes many times in my dreams.

Searching in a drawer one day, I found the original print of the Sharnstoke cricket ladies. On the back row Lucy now appeared to be staring past me, into the distance. I could not decide what to do with it, so have left it in the darkness of the drawer for another year. In a rare kindness Katherine agreed to send me a picture of her mother, taken when she was a girl. It was disappointing. She looks awkward and ill at ease; and its over-exposure has left her eyes glazed.

To sit in the garden on a sunny May afternoon and look beyond it at the swirling branches of the chestnuts surrounding the house, with their ice-cream cones in great abundance, is my chief joy. I have kept the hives at the top and intend - some time - to take up bee-keeping. I make no hasty decisions these days.

*

Her lovely granddaughter Lisa and her husband called in a month ago. They stayed for an hour while she had one last look around the garden. After her tearful departure I took out the old photograph. Lisa is everything that Lucy had said she was and I cannot seem to get her off my mind. She looks quite different - rounder in the face, more extrovert and less pensive - but she had inherited those beguiling grey eyes and their earnest sincerity from the Lucys. I have kept her address but have not found a decent excuse yet to write to her. Would she be offended if I wrote her a sonnet?

Some days I get very depressed. I have no-one to share my life with. In spite of many attempts, in many new seasons, I have never yet quite managed to get the clematis and the rose to bloom together.

THE GOODBYE

Upon my path your steps I hear
Yet where, yet how, shall you step in?
On Sunday mornings, soft and clear
You cry my name again....again....
I wander by the chestnut tree
In case I see you pass it by...
But cannot whisper - turn to me -
However oft and hard I try.
Then by the hand this candle May
A smiling stranger you did bring;
And sternly, to us both did say,
You were my love, my everything.

You kissed your hand and gently blew
Then turned.....the last I saw of you.