

SLEEPING BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

As a GP I had sat opposite many patients whose illnesses seemed to be imaginary or psychosomatic but one of my stranger cases concerned a boy called Peter. His mother was a sophisticated member of the upper middle class, in her late thirties. One morning, she turned up with him and his sister, Rebecca. She, a very pretty and perfect miniature of the mother, was dressed elegantly in a buff and blue school uniform, sleek-haired and bright-eyed. She sat bolt upright with knees together, clutching a clarinet case. Peter, without a jacket, with tie loose and shirt half-out, sat sprawling in his chair clutching one of those early electronic games. His hair was a shock of gingery-blond curls and his face round in contrast to the mother and daughter's heart-shaped oval.

The mother said she had been hoping that the move-up to secondary school might help bring about some reform to Peter's behaviour, but at nearly twelve he was still inattentive.

"..And a nuisance! One of the masters told me at parents evening that he thought he might have.....AHDD? Have you heard of it, Doctor Briggs?"

"Ah yes. Just recently. ADHD - Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder."

In those days, from America, the new kid on the block - or vice-versa.

"Well I've brought him along in the hope that you might refer him to a specialist in these matters. I'm at my wits' end."

The daughter was visibly uncomfortable, the mother close to tears, while Peter gazed at the ceiling, swinging a leg, bored with the whole show. I waved and smiled at him and he looked at me with indifference.

"Hello, Peter. Why do you think you don't pay as much attention as you should?"

He shrugged and yawned.

"Peter! Be polite! Answer Dr Briggs."

"Because I hate school. 'Sboring."

The sister blushed and I felt sorry for her. Her face said - why have I got to endure this? - it isn't me who's ill!

Peter was duly seen and put on Ritalin - which is supposed to stimulate the frontal lobes - the cranial home of reasoning and self-organisation. The consultant confirmed both diagnosis and prescription, and the letter was duly filed in Peter's case notes. Far be it from me to imply that there was an unholy relationship between ADHD, its increasing infection of naughty boys, child psychologists and the producers of Ritalin.....

It was when I was driving home one afternoon and passing a group of schoolgirls in that attractive buff and blue that a possible explanation came to me of the mother's decision to bring along the sister too. Was I being told - *this girl is my child...he, this frog, this roundhead, is someone else's! Where is my son? What hell has he been going through??*

I pulled over and felt the fullness of her pain. She must have lived for years with the suspicion, and then the certainty, that the maternity unit had brought her the wrong baby

I never saw the three of them again. One morning, two or three years later, I asked Mrs Marklew, my secretary, to bring me the boy's notes as I wanted to look up the name of the consultant which had slipped my mind. She told me the family had left the area and that the notes had

followed them.

“A neighbour of mine knew them.” she said. “A very sad case. The boy was expelled from school. He shot the caretaker with a pellet gun. The parents split up. The father couldn’t.....believe..... he was his.”

“I must admit,” I replied “I did wonder about that.”

Not long afterwards, I found the local paper on my desk open at a story about a boy prodigy who at sixteen was off to Cambridge to study astrophysics. He was called Kyle and his smiling photo made me start. The hair was sleek, the face oval and the beautiful eyes sparkled with genius. His mother was reported as saying she had no idea where he got his brains from. My secretary had done some sleuthing. Kyle was on my colleague’s panel - we shared the clinic and the services of Mrs Marklew. On a piece of paper was scribbled

Peter Castle b. 12.10. 76

Naunton General Hospital

Kieron Pook b. 13.10.76

That was in the late eighties. Over twenty years later, I had no idea what fate awaited Peter but I could not believe he prospered. But, in spite of his environmental handicaps, Kieron had - and that fact may well cast a little light on a debate I shall have with myself later, into which you are welcome to tune.

I begin with this anecdote because when the young woman who plonked herself down opposite me one day in late March, had finished telling me what ailed her, I could not help but think of Peter and Kieron. She was clutching a mobile phone in a claw of long white nails on the end of fingers so long and slender they might have belonged to a pianist. The nails intrigued me. Where they real, those pearly things? Surely not. Were they stuck on? Did they come off when certain practical - and unpleasant - tasks had to be performed?

Her name was KerryAnne (sic) and by any standard she was beautiful. She too had a classic heart-shaped face with well-defined bone structure, framed by dark glossy hair to which the sun gave navy blue highlights as she looked around my office. Her eyes were very dark brown, her nose was graceful and a perfect length. Her figure was in exact proportion and the crossed legs she unconsciously stroked with her free hand were shiny and tanned, due, no doubt, to some costly procedure in the same boutique which gave her / did her nails. Her sandalled feet were beautiful too, the red-painted toes in rising and perfect alignment from the smallest to the biggest. The voice which emerged from such a creature ought to have been tuneful, operatic, but it was the croak of an Earlstone girl dotted with dark vowels and growls. She was, she said, feeling depressed. One thing on her mind was a suspicion that she was being followed. In view of what she then related, I had to conclude that it seemed to be a classic example of a persecution complex. Her later guilty confession about a dead girlfriend finally convinced me.

“It’s just a feeling - that somebody waits outside my shop on the watch for me?”

“Whom have you told?”

“Just you.”

“Not your friends? Not the police?”

“Thought about it - but doubt they’d take me serious.”

“But what brings the feeling on?”

She said it that it had started with a phone call. Her assistant had called her to the phone - the

male voice had asked for her by name - but when she had picked up the receiver, there had been no-one there.

“It spooked me. The phone sometimes rings and stops before anyone can get to it. The number is always withheld.”

“When was the last time?”

“The other week.”

“Any customer with a grudge perhaps?”

She did not think so.

“But the feelings won’t go away. I’ve even started dreaming I’m being followed. I think I’m going mad. I keep turning round to see who’s behind me. What can I do?”

“Do you ever see anyone acting suspiciously when you turn round?”

“There was a man in a suit last week - like an office type? When I looked behind me he started to jog and came past me as if he was late for something?”

“Can you remember what he looked like?”

“No. I turned to look in a shop window, I was scared.”

“And are there offices - and estate agencies near your shop?”

She began to blush. There were several, she murmured, looking into her lap.

“I suppose you think I’m pathetic.”

I shook my head and told her that it was a genuine fear which she needed to rationalise in order to make it go away; that she was a beautiful woman and that men were bound to take an interest in her.

“Do you ever notice at the supermarket that men go out of their way to double back as if they’re looking for an item they forgot - just to get another look at you?”

“I have that feeling sometimes...do you.....do you do that?”

“Sometimes. A woman of great beauty is a rarity in Earlstone. So I look. It’s natural and harmless.”

She looked at me dubiously.

“The problem comes when it develops into an obsession - and stalking. We need to find out if it’s happening to you - or whether it’s your imagination. So I have a plan.”

In the centre of town there was a café not far from her boutique. I sat there the next day with a inch of coffee left in my cup. My phone announced reception of a text from her - dead on twelve thirty, her usual time for taking a lunch break. I drained my cup, stood up and stretched. Within a couple of minutes, she came striding past the window in tee shirt and jeans, beautiful, looking neither left nor right and determined not to falter and look around. She was on her way, as pre-arranged, to get a sub roll from the shop further along, just before the bank. I counted to thirty and waited for anyone in a suit - and there he was! I went straight out and stood to watch. KerryAnne was just passing the boarded-up record shop and about to turn into the take-away. When she disappeared inside, the man did not stop, did not hesitate, did not look in, went straight past and then into the bank.

KerryAnne came out after a few minutes clutching her lunch bag, walked on and turned left into the main shopping street. The man did not emerge from the bank to follow her. I sauntered after her and joined her on the bench opposite a shoe shop as we had planned. She was studying her roll uncertainly.

“There was a fair-haired man in a dark blue suit - but he was definitely not following you. He just went into the bank - probably on his lunch break too.”

This seemed to reassure her.

The following week, at her request, we repeated the experiment twice. She turned heads but she was not being followed. Finally, I was able to convince her it was a groundless fear. But this was only one symptom of her malaise. After two or three meetings, when I had gained her confidence, she gave me a revealing insight into her private life.

“I’ve realised I don’t love Paul. In fact, I hate him more than love him. He asked me to move in with him last week and I said I would. But he bores the bum off me.”

She looked at me darkly as if wondering whether I was shocked at her frankness.

“You can tell me about Paul if you want - as much as you feel comfortable with.”

“He’s very...into *things*. Too much like me. He likes that big-headed guy on the telly who’s into cars? He even wrote off for tickets to stand in the audience. You know, he actually drove me to a lay-by once on the A5 to see if his new sports car would do 0-60 in so many seconds and made me time it on a stopwatch? It never did, so we had to keep on till it would. How sad is that?”

“And what did you feel afterwards?”

“Anger. Boredom.....I thought you might give me advice how to end it?”

“Is he violent?”

“Nah. He’s a bit like me. Thick-skinned. But he thinks of me a bit like a possession? - like his car? - and he’d hate to lose me?”

“Just tell him you’re not ready for a live-with relationship, a permanent arrangement.. He’ll get the message. Come and see me again same time next week. But phone me before if you need to talk.”

I should have mentioned earlier that I had set up LISTENERS with a colleague who had also recently retired, along with two of our church elders. Mental health services in Britain were woefully inadequate and many conditions, I firmly believed, could be improved simply by listening and giving advice if it was sought. We charged ten pounds an hour which we donated to mental health charities. Whether Earlstone was unusual in its numbers of mixed-up youngsters - we had an age ceiling of thirty - I had no idea, but we were quite busy. If a certain soap opera was to be believed, many young people led very tangled lives, and at the end of each episode telephone counselling was offered. It was a world a million miles away from Picture Book and Blue Peter. Only recently I saw a report which estimated the number of children sub-clinically depressed at nearly a million.

At the point when it became clear that KerryAnne needed many weeks of counselling, she had no objection to me recording our subsequent interviews. I guaranteed to destroy the tapes later. It would be tedious to give a verbatim account of her life-story. Who would have guessed that such a person, sedate and beautiful on the outside, was so confused and unhappy inside? Anyway, she took my advice over the boyfriend but he took it badly.

“He started crying and pleading and promising stuff - and I was like, *I’m not ready for settling down in a permanent relationship*. Anyway, he has a few drinks and calms down a bit and when he falls asleep I creep out. I took my flat key I’d given him. He sent me a few texts but I didn’t answer. Did I do right? I hate break-ups but I can’t help getting fed-up...with men. I wonder if it’s worth the hassle - getting involved in the first place, after it wears off....the novelty?”

After a few consultations, I began to worry that KerryAnne had a faulty ethical, if not moral compass. If something amused or engaged her for a while, it was good; otherwise bad. If she had an empathy shortfall, it was because all her thoughts were influenced by how people and events affected *her*. The feelings of her boyfriend had been of little concern to her – merely the inconvenience and unpleasantness of the split. It disturbed me that she might not “do” guilt.

She had been brought up, a single child, as the centre of lavish attention, loaded down with praise and presents, and quickly became jealous of anyone else who was popular. At home she had been able to do more or less as she pleased; she had eaten as much or as little as she wanted, when she wanted and where. She had entertained herself in exactly the same fashion and her bedroom had been her own private domain. At thirteen she had had no experience of the world but decided that what she knew was sufficient to lead the life she loved; it was a world of make-up, make-believe, clothes, celebrities, digital relationships, mobile phones, school relationships - tested to destruction, remade, discarded in mutual loathing and replaced.

It emerged that her ex-schoolfriend had hanged herself, purportedly due to KerryAnne's internet bullying, subsequently proven by computer analysis to have originated with the girl herself. Of that event and its effect on KerryAnne, the full story later....

KayAy - her pet name - had been bright enough teenager to keep home and teachers happy. She had begun to go to parties and experiment - unenthusiastically - with boys and lost her virginity by rape which went unreported. Her parents were self-made and any career which involved academic study and qualifications was out of the question; her dad set her up in a beauty salon on her eighteenth birthday, after she had gone to do Nails and Beauty at Tech.

She told me once about an RE lesson where she had drawn herself as a stick-girl with a heart-shaped face in a house. There had been no flowers, no trees, no sun, no moon, no stars. It was not her fault that she was self-obsessed. What else could she be after such an upbringing? Was she unusual? When I told my wife what had brought one of KerryAnne's crises on, she did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"You are pulling my leg, aren't you, Trevor?"

"No. Absurdities often trigger such reactions. Like a whistle might start an avalanche."

"Did you tell her, you'd pray for her?"

"Of course."

"And?"

"She seemed pleased."

So what had happened? Her hairdresser had upset her.....

"We swap. She does my hair and I do her tanning, but she talks such rubbish, Trevor - on and on and on and on she goes about handbags and holidays and stuff. Far worse than me."

"Well, you could hardly expect her to talk about Schopenhauer."

"Who?"

"He was a German philosopher. A pessimist. Carry on..."

"Well, anyway, she told me she had had her eyelashes curled in Leicester. She had an'all. They did look nice, so I told her."

"And?"

"So *she* says - God's truth, as I sit here - she says how she used to worry over her lashes, but since she'd had 'em done, she didn't worry? In fact, she didn't worry about *anything* anymore." She had put a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle - my face must have been a picture.

"That's very reassuring for *her* - but I don't get it. Don't you do treatments like that? Why were you so upset?"

"No idea! On the way home I just started to laugh, but then had to pull over - I was shaking and stuff and crying like a looney. It's crazy, but when I got home I started having suicidal thoughts. Like a song you can't get out of your head? I'm not in control? It's horrible."

"Maybe you should try a new hairdresser."

She laughed through her tears and put her hand to her face again.

“Now you’re taking the piss!”

“No I’m not. You have to i.d. everything that gets you down and cut it out. Have you stopped watching the soaps?”

“Yes, but it was hard.”

“Feel better for it?”

“Think so. And I’m jogging like you said.”

“Good. Whenever you can. The endorphins will make you feel better, as well. At least three times a week in the park.”

“I will!”

She looked out at the cloudy sky.

“You know what you told me about the news?”

“Yes. Did it work?”

“No. It made me feel worse - those Asian girls who get threatened for going school. Horrible.”
With some, it worked to think about the plight of others, with some it didn’t.

“It made me cry so I turned it off.”

“But did it make you angry?”

“Yes, but what can I do about it?”

“But at least you saw what rotten stuff other people have to put up with.”

“Well, it did. Okay, other people’s lives are a lot more shit than mine, but it don’t make mine smell any better for it....I expect you’re sitting there now thinking *spoilt cow*.”

“That’s your prob in a nutshell, KerryAnne. But a lot of people are in the same boat.”

That was a few weeks ago...

Onto another appointment. The conversation had turned again to her childhood.

“So, I suppose you reckon my parents were crap,” she said out of the blue.

“No I do not! Why do you say that?”

She sat and thought for a while as I studied her lovely eyes consulting her memories.

“My dad always kept on and on about how bad his dad had had it. He worked hard and got nowhere. My dad went without - and there was no way his daughter - me - would have to go through that..... patch on his britches’ arse an’ all for other kids to take the piss out of....”

“Right, I understand. And when you went out for the day, where did you go?”

“Alton Towers...Drayton Manor. Skeggy sometimes....Gulliver’s Kingdom? That’s it. Turkey and Majorca in the summer? Dominican - once?”

As in some previous cases, I had expected that if there *was* any history of abuse, to tease it out by asking innocent questions, and I was relieved to detect no dark clouds of bad memories in her open face. She shrugged, as if to say, so what?

“So - on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your childhood - in terms of happiness?”

“Nine or ten. Until Lia...killed herself. But it wasn’t all my fault.”

Suddenly there were tears. She had mentioned the event before only in passing and I had not pressed her to elaborate. It was our policy not to. So I remained silent.

“Don’t you even want to know?” she snapped suddenly, looking up.

“Only if you want to tell me, KerryAnne. Only if *you* think it’s part of the problem. ”

It had all begun as a fall-out to which adolescent girls are especially prone. Boys kick each other and are pals again five minutes later. The social media make things worse, of course, because the

nastiness carries on in the evenings - whereas, in the good old days, a respite of a few hours tended to cool things down. KerryAnne had been Lia's best friend - but the arrival of pretty and fashionable new girl had drawn KerryAnne away, causing jealousy and grief in Lia. Insults were hurled back and forth, vile comments were posted. Parents were called into school and KerryAnne had promised never to contact Lia again by text or by tweet. A fortnight later, Lia was found hanging from a curtain pole in her room by her mother. The police had taken her PC away and found appalling things posted there - apparently from KerryAnne. She had been taken in for questioning, with her mother, and been shown the posts - and had strenuously denied making them. This was subsequently confirmed by specialist analysis. Lia had posted them herself, wanting to leave KerryAnne a legacy of guilt and self-reproach in revenge for her betrayal.

"If you've told me the whole truth, KerryAnne, I think you have no need to feel so bad. It sounds as if Lia was a very troubled girl in her own right. Girls normally put jealousies behind them. To kill yourself in order to exact revenge on a friend is peculiar to say the least."

"Her family never forgave me. They made me stay away from the funeral."

"It sounds to me as if they were part of Lia's problem. You want to tell me about her? You must have been around her house. What were things like there?"

"At the time, I never thought about it, but thinking back, I reckon she was neglected. Not in terms of stuff - she had plenty of that - but in affection. Her mum wasn't very friendly. I remember once she was in a bad mood and she told Lia she couldn't wait till she was sixteen; then she could go off and do whatever she wanted - the mum, I mean."

"Was there a dad around?"

"No. But the mum had boyfriends. Lia come into school once with plasters on her wrist. I think she was self-harming."

"Was she a pretty girl?"

"Yes. The boys liked her, called her an easy cow. Easier than me. And she drank."

"Premature sexual behaviour and self-harming are signs of abuse, physical and emotional. You've described a very unhappy child. She was a suicide waiting to happen and you were only the catalyst, not the cause. Lia used you, so you can stop beating yourself up about it, because that's exactly what she wanted you to do - to make you feel guilty - in a way, she abused *you*." She threw her hands to her face and sobbed. She was relieved to be absolved. I realized that Lia was really only a more extreme version of herself and her predicament.

"Does that make you feel a little better?"

She nodded and I passed her a hanky.

"A bit. Lia's mates had it in for me after she died. They kept following me around the playground and on my way home. I had to move school. I wanted to kill myself, like Lia?"

"What stopped you?"

"I was too scared."

"It all sounds a very nasty business. But you must have made new friends very easily."

"Yes, and new enemies of *their* friends. Why can't people just get on? I still hear a voice - Lia's voice - telling me to do it. Kill myself."

She suppressed a sob. I opened my drawer and pushed three tiny spheres towards her.

"Oh no," she said, widening her wonderful eyes and shaking her tight mane which opened briefly then closed beautifully. "Not tablets. The others made me feel sick."

I smiled and asked her to have a closer look. She touched one gingerly with one of those pearly nails and looked closely.

“Ugh. It’s all shrivelled and crinkly. Is it dead?”

“That’s your homework. Take them home and put them in a pot of soil. Use the end of a spoon if you don’t want to risk your talons.”

“What are they? Seeds? What sort of seeds?”

“That’s for you to find out. Water them and put them on a window sill.”

My seed therapy had worked before with morbidly self-obsessed people. They needed to take an interest in the world beyond themselves. Most did not need hypnosis and drugs. They needed to talk their problems out, to know someone cared about them for unselfish reasons - not for their bodies, their looks, their material wealth - but chiefly they needed to forget, or rather to shrink, their anxieties, as tumours are shrunk, to a manageable size, to a lesser proportion in their lives. What better therapy than the discovery of beauty in a world long ignored or forgotten since their wonder in infancy; to have something else to nurture beyond grudges and self-pity?

Our successes outweighed our failures. On the other side of my table had sat alcoholics, gamblers, inadequate people and so on. KerryAnne was an extreme case of a hollow, unfulfilled person who seemed to have everything but had nothing. Her curse was to be intelligent enough to be aware of this. It was my task to try and make up for lost time, for she had realised with the eyelash incident how worthless were the values with which she had grown up. The life-style iconography of the media, irresistibly magnetic, was, of course, shallow and ultimately unsatisfying; the glow and glitter of must-have objects soon faded once possessed; only by discarding them and acquiring replacement duds could the anxiety of utter futility lurking in the consumerist psyche be kept at bay - for a while. The drum-roll of persistent advertising had to be maintained to drown out thought and doubt. I had become gloomily aware that this absurdity at the heart of our culture and economy - like a black hole provoking and maintaining a flow of matter - preserved a precarious affluence and that, if too many people were persuaded to reject it, as I had done, then the shaky walls would tremble and crumble. For that rather selfish reason, I was no crusader or evangelist for wholesale and sudden change - far from it. Enough people were content or stupid enough for the status quo to be preserved and I was happy to help those people like KerryAnne who were not content or stupid. This salved my conscience. I did wonder, however, how people two hundred years hence might view consumerist brain-manipulation and pummelling; with the same horror as we view public executions two hundred years ago? KayAy was a lovely doll, yet bright enough to feel ill. She was a child of her age - an age where, without an obvious conspiracy, forces had combined to produce dependent and compliant automata programmed to consume. It was not fanciful or melodramatic to describe our society as one sleepwalking into a disaster. Why were so many people grossly obese or lonely or on anti-depressants? Why was divorce so prevalent? Why were so many people on the scrapheap, surplus to requirement, demonised as scroungers or unambitious ignoramuses?

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“Trevor,” said my wife one evening. “I think you might be getting too involved with that girl’s case.”

“Oh, why do you think so?”

“Because whenever you’ve seen her on a Thursday, you just sit and stare.”

“I worry that one day she might take her own life.”

“You could just come out with it - and ask her along to church.”

“You know we don’t work like that! KayAy at church - as she is now - would be like me in a disco.”

The chasm was unbridgeable. That was how far we had diverged. A atheist would doubtless argue that I and KerryAnne were equally deluded, barking up trees in entirely different fairy-tale forests. But I might retort that I, at least, felt at home and comfortable - more or less - in mine. KayAy did not - and I could not help wondering again why.

“She appears to be well suited to be what she is. But she’s not.”

My wife looked unconvinced. Her sister had been an administrator in a sixth form college. As far as she could judge, the vast majority of Anglo-Saxon young women, even the brighter ones, seemed quite content to be superficial.

“It’s drummed into them, Trevor. From childhood.”

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I am a shallow sleeper and so have my own room. It was late May and as soon as the first hint of grey had crept into the east, I was awake. My first thought was to look at the clock - 04:11 - my second was KerryAnne. I put her quickly out of mind and threw open the window to hear better the first blackbird piping. There was a faint smudge of silver blue over a distant rooftop. I marvelled again at how astonishingly great the tilt of the earth was between December 21st and June 21st. How had the Ancients explained it - the apparent alteration of the sun in their perfect spheres of heaven? It was inconceivable to me that unorthodox and heretical thoughts had *not* crossed perceptive minds in days when the geocentric illusion had held menacing sway. Had such doubts been whispered and hearers immediately sworn to silence? Had farmers and shepherds, with minds uncluttered by dogma, with time and immediate and continual contact with Nature realized the truth? The moon was a disk as was the sun – but why not a sphere, as apples were disks *and* spheres? If apples, why not the earth? Surely the truth had exploded in someone’s head? Was Venus considered a three dimensional object – and if so, why not the object on which they stood? People confined to hovels and sculleries had not leisure or scope for thought. Those unfortunates in Plato’s famous cave analogy, seeing, like KerryAnne, the world as mere flickering shadows on the back wall of the cave never turned to see it in all its glorious beauty. Did I feel sorry for them – that they would, for example, never hear a Mozart piano concerto or a Schubert impromptu? To wish the Contented discontented was futile and even morally questionable. I felt sorry only for those who, like KerryAne, had grown sceptical and weary of those paltry shadows. Even so, it pained and even disgusted me that so many people staggered half-blind and self-obsessed through such a wondrous creation.

The blackbird was now being answered by another as the silver light spread upwards, revealing pink streaky clouds. An owl spoke once and fell silent. The air was beautifully chill like a draught of fresh water. Slowly, the mid-sky was turning light blue and I could hear the pleasant growl-cum-whisper of the motorway. I thought of KerryAnne again and imagined her curled up in bed asleep and dreaming. It was almost ridiculous to think that her world was a beauty parlour and so she missed the glories before me that crystalline morning; the cream candles in the chestnut trees, the sprays of hawthorn white, the cow parsley in the fields and the trills of songbirds. For her, beauty was contained in boxes, tubes and bottles. In eleven hours I would see her again. I closed the window and shut out the dawn chorus in an effort to have another hour or two. But I kept thinking of the damned letter she had brought me which had been posted without a stamp into her shop letter box. She had had no objection to me making a photocopy, and I had

put it on my bedside table.

The more I think about it, the more I find it odd that women are defined, not by their intellect - as boffins are - (which conjures up a highbrow male image) - not by their size and shape, not by their character and not by their outlook on life - but by their hair. She's a blonde; she's a brunette. Brunette is somehow condescending. Did the word originate in the mouths of men or women? No brainer. Majorette; ladette; Horrible.

Dark-haired women are, i.m. humble o. , the most beautiful. Blue-eyed ones are great, but dark-eyed ones - almost black-eyed ones, like you, KerryAnne - are beyond beguiling and mysterious. And if they are slender and graceful like you, and silent and shy, they are wonderfully erotic. I have seen how the sun adores your hair and makes it shine, and how the breeze ruffles it, and stirs the down on your forearms. I have seen your beautiful eyes staring absent-mindedly at nothing, and I would not give a penny but a King's ransom for your thoughts. And I love your chiming voice, used so precisely and sparingly. It is a sign of intelligence, as is your broad forehead. And what a fine and delicate nose you have - almost sharp - and beautiful arching eyebrows - and such a modest mouth. It is an irony that you waste your time trying to beautify the unbeautiful! How vulgar are those pouting, inflated lips in fashion at present. You have no need of artificiality, no need to enhance your perfect modest breasts or your figure in any way. Your legs are perfect too, neither too thin nor too muscular - but shapely and sturdy. What a miracle it would be to possess you, soul and body, to hear you whisper afterwards "I am devotedly yours. For ever." For I assure you I would please you in every way, but only with your say-so,

Till that time,

Your secret admirer. ?

I had shown it to my wife the previous evening, and it spooked her as much as me.

"She wouldn't have written it to herself?"

"No way."

The language and style were not hers - unless she had depths so well hidden that they escaped my practised gaze.

"Not attention-seeking?"

I shook my head. "She gets plenty of that. Too much, probably. She *is* lovely - to look at."

"*The down on your forearms?* He must have been up close to notice that. Yuck."

"Unless he's just imagining it. She hasn't got a chiming voice either. More like a growl. She probably would have had a lovely singing voice.....if it had been trained."

"Well, I think he's trying to spook her. "*Please you - only with your say-so*"? So he wouldn't rape her?? Very big of him! Looks as if she could have been right all along about the stalking. Is the girl worried?"

"A bit. But I think it appeals to a part of her - the part that loves flattery."

"Poor child. But look at all the sexual innuendo - it ought to go to the police."

The KerryAnne described by her secret admirer was indeed a paragon of feminine loveliness but the sketch only superficially reflected the pretty but troubled young woman who came to sit disconsolately opposite me, week after week, in my office. If the writer had intended flattery, it seemed to have worked, for at that particular meeting she had kept inspecting and stroking,

though perhaps unconsciously, her lovely forearms and slender fingers; if he - I assumed a he - intended a character-study, then he was working with insufficient evidence - far less than I had had so far assembled. Unlike mine, his intentions were far from honourable.

I put the letter to one side and tried to drop off again, but it was no good. At nearly seven I got up and decided to walk the mile or so into town. Her beauty parlour, called **KayAy's Beauty Bar**, was, she had told me, nearly opposite The Grand Union Hotel, one of Earlstone's oldest pubs. I soon found myself staring at a full-size photograph of her in the shop window. Absolutely wonderful. I concluded that her admirer had probably studied her as he sat on the bus or in his car waiting for the lights to change - and had imagined the rest. I had asked her if the writer might be her ex-boyfriend and she had scoffed at the idea. *Him? He couldn't string three words together to save his life!*

I grinned at her in the window and she grinned back. Who would ever guess she was so discontented? Then I noticed the poster next to her and laughed. Amongst other things, it was proposing FACIAL'S and HAIR REMOVALS. I would tease Kerry and ask her to explain the grammatical difference.

"Gorgeous, ain't she pal?"

I started and turned. It was the newsagent from next door who had come out for a quick smoke.

"Not really fair - how some people are so well blessed - and...."

He paused as a dumpy dyed blonde with meaty arms struggled past up the hill. He smiled and blew out a lungful of smoke.

"Indeed," I said. "Very unfair."

"Have you noticed - only fat, ugly women stand at bus stops?"

I went to move away and then had a thought. Had he noticed anybody hanging about - maybe a middle-aged man? In a suit?

"What? You mean a bit like you?"

"No. Well, probably a lot younger. Looking at the poster?"

"Everybody looks at it. You can't help it. It's a wonder the bloody council don't make her take it down as a distraction. To traffic. You know how petty the bastards are."

He asked me if I was some kind of investigator. What should I say? He looked at me in a little less amicably.

"You could say...I'm her guardian angel. She's been getting some odd calls recently."

"Really? Bloody typical. Some right weirdos about."

I remembered I had a card in my pocket.

"Look, if you notice anybody suspicious, can you contact me?"

*

I suspect that if you have read thus far, you might find me pompous and pretentious. Well, nobody is perfect. I hope you can bear with boring old me - skip the next bit if you do not want the psycho-philosophical monologue derived from my notes. The thought that KerryAnne was a misplaced child would not leave me be.

It is pretty obvious that the more the infant brain is stimulated, the more complex become the arrangements and connections within it. How this squares up with a *genetic* fund of intelligence is beyond my ken. Babies' brains vary in weight and size as much as their bodies. Is a bigger

brain more likely to become more intelligent? And in what respect(s)? Or is the *potential* to develop those ganglions between brain cells the key? If so, that potential - *without* adequate stimuli in the environment in terms of toys, adult inputs and experiences - would never be fully realised. A child would come on “better” or “worse” depending on the parenting and ancillary factors. A “less intelligent” child might fare better in a “good” home than a “more intelligent” one in “poor” home around the corner.

I realised, of course, that none of this broke new ground but I deemed it an essential matter to bear in mind in KerryAnne’s case. One other question I needed to pose: what impact did intelligence, fulfilled or not, have on the general contentment of the individual, all other things, such as physical health and material wealth, being equal? Moreover, were philosophers generally malcontents and pigs cheerful? What about the pigs who had never made it academically but who sensed they had been meant for higher things than a sty? And beautiful piglet, KerryAnne? What our vicar Harry said, railing against a godless materialism, was convincing - to me and my kind. To KerryAnne and her hairdresser it would have sounded bizarre; threatening; laughable. And to talk about the wonders of Creation to people who lived amongst urban drab, typical of Earlstone and most of her ugly sister towns, would probably have produced uncomprehending scorn. It was a new generation of a generated digital world, of gadgetry, invented landscapes and imagery, messaging, selfies, trolls and self-projection. In this labyrinth, I surmised that many did feel trapped and the challenge was to find the best way to release them. Harry seemed to think they were sleeping lost souls, like biblical sheep waiting for the right evangelical word to awaken them to the glories of God and a return to the fold. The thought, however, that they had no souls disturbed me. If so, what did that imply about God? If a child was denied access to the Message and to the world of the spirit - as so many had been in previous ages and places - then how could they be blamed and deserted by God? If a multi-cultural, multi-faith atomised society decided to reject Christianity on the grounds that to favour it was offensive or divisive, into what abyss of meanness was it sleepwalking? People seemed grimmer, less tolerant, less friendly and more impatient with one another, and the mood could not be simply explained entirely by the dire recession they had been enduring. People were under diverse and contradictory pressures; to spend and to save; to eat less and to eat more; to work harder and longer and to expect less reward; to jettison the outdated - before it was clapped out - and to conserve the planet’s resources; to travel to faraway places and to reduce their carbon footprint; to look after Number One and to give generously in the Big Society. And all of this, for What? No wonder kids were confused!

*

“I sometimes find it hard to believe there is a loving God,” I could not help but say to my wife one evening when the news had been particularly harrowing. She looked up from her knitting and shrugged. It was a fallen world, she said, and there was only salvation through Jesus Christ. “He endured as much suffering and more than anyone does today at the hands of evil men. But forgave them.”

“But they still rule on earth - or their descendants do. Or the devil rules.”

“In men’s hearts, yes, he does.”

I loved to go to church. It was an oasis of sanity and beauty in a desert of lousy consumerist materialism. The bible reading, the prayers, the sermon, the hymns - they inspired me, but doubt

ever cast a shadow on that radiant plane of the mind. My doubt was a taboo subject between us. I could only tell myself that such spiritual and altruistic beauty of thought could not be explained simply by the evolution of a low-browed apish ancestor asserting his genetic urges, that there must be a part of man - a soul if you like - which was divine. But against that, to my dismay, the self-seeking drive of mankind posed near overwhelming arguments. My wife might argue that the brash materialist assertions of the non-Christian were only a thin cloak to obscure their fears. She might quote the New Testament story of the young prince who was asked by Jesus to give up Mammon for eternal glory, but who preferred in the end to walk away with his riches and take his chances in the eye of that famous needle.

“If a great asteroid appeared in the sky, they would soon run sobbing into church,” she was fond of declaring. I nodded but thought privately that they would more likely head for the nearest boozier.

But where was God - the Creator of all *things* - in this Christian scheme of the world? Jesus never venerated Him for his *creative* genius - only for His obsession with straitening wayward man. The narrow gate, the narrow path....the narrow view. It was all man-centred; restoring the cripple, raising the dead, feeding the thousands, ultimately sacrificing his wonderful self for some quite appalling people - then as now. Never did Jesus stand back and praise the sun, the moon, the stars; a bit like KerryAnne and all her self-regarding ill-bred ilk, it was all to do with personal salvation - an exercise in saving skins.

*

“How have you been feeling, KayAy?” I asked her at our next meeting. “A bit more cheerful?” She took out her phone and with one finger flicked the screen across to a photograph.

“There! They’re growing - look!”

From a brown earthenware pot five or six stems with pentangle leaves were hanging down.

“Very good! Now it’s nearly June, you can put the bowl on your balcony. Stand it on something so the plants can dangle.”

“Trevor, I’m fed up with KayAy. Can you call me Kerry or KerryAnne from now on?what are they? The plants?”

“Nasturtiums. I think you’ll love the flowers. They’re like.butterflies.....”

That’s when I noticed she had removed her nails. I told her about my walk into town and how I had come across her boutique.

“Very impressive. How’s business?”

“Pretty good. But I’ve decided to leave the running of it to Polly.”

“Oh really? Any particular reason?”

She did her lovely shrug and bemused look. “Just have. I needed a rest from it. Bored wi’ it.”

“And so...how will you spend your time now?”

“Go down the gym?...watch telly?...magazines?...dunno.”

I decided to take a chance.

“There was a young woman I counselled a bit back who was really fed up with what she was doing...a secretary. She retrained as an occupational therapist - helping and assessing people who’d had ops on their knees and hips. She never looked back.”

“But I’m only qualified to do.....Beauty....”

Her voice was strangled by a sob and tears came into her eyes. Her life had all been stupid and selfish, she managed to stammer. I took her hand and squeezed it and she did not resist.

“I think we were meant - no *made* - to work together, to share our gifts and do each other good. That’s why I became a doctor....and a Christian.”

She looked at me imploringly and soulfully through her tears.

“You really think there is a God then?”

“I know there is and He loves us all.”

“Even me?”

“Especially you. Because you’re needy.”

Tears and mascara streamed down her nose and cheeks. She gripped my hand tight.

“D-do you think Lia went to heaven?”

“Yes I do. She was lost, too and God found her. Listen....Kerry...Can I give you some homework? Okay? The next nice day...I want you to go to Bradgate Park. Heard of it?”

“Yes.”

“Ever been?”

“Once, I think, when I was small. I’ll ask Mum.”

I drew her a little map and told her to walk along the river from the Newtown Linford end until she came to a boulder where the stream turned a bend.

“You can’t miss it. It’s under a really old, hollow oak tree and it’s flat so you can sit on it - and plonk your feet down on another rock in the water.”

“And?”

“I want you just to stare at the water gushing through the rocks.”

“Is that all? I’ll get bored.”

“No. I want you to see what thoughts come into your head - and listen to the water.”

She looked at me dubiously as if I were a loony.

“But I don’t know where Newtown Wotsit is.....Will you come with me, Trevor?”

I decided to tell my wife about our arrangement - and even invited her along.

“I’m really beginning to make progress with her....getting somewhere..”

She kept nodding her head as I told her of our conversation but maintained an enigmatic silence.

“So what do you think?”

“I think? I think you are a bloody old fool. And as blind as a bat. I went round to look at her shop to have a look at that poster you mentioned. You’ve fallen in love with her, Trevor.”

“That is rubbish!”

“Is it?”

“Of course! What would she see in me?”

“Oh, you’re not too bad for fifty-nine.”

“She’s twenty! For goodness sake, she’s a child, a lost child. If anything, she sees me as a father. Her own died last year. I have a chance to rescue and untangle a muddled-up kid, and you see something sinister in it. If I hadn’t told you about our...arrangement -”

“Date.”

“Arrangement. If I’d kept it secret, then you might have a point.”

“But *why* are you so involved with *her* case?”

“Because I think there is someone within her pretty shell struggling to escape - aware that there is a world to which she has been denied access. She’s....a beauty, but a sleeping beauty.”

And that is when I told her - about my theory that she might have been given to the wrong couple after her birth.

“But that is bizarre! You really think she was? Why?”

“Just a feeling. It must happen. And she told me that she didn’t take after either parent either. I asked her.”

“So that’s it, then.”

“That’s what?”

“You see yourself as an old Prince Charming come to awaken the sleeping beauty....*lost* in the dark woods. You ought to leave well alone.”

This both irritated me and yet provided a good stick to beat her with.

“Hold on a minute. This girl is not well - mentally and *spiritually*. Can’t you see you’re being a wee bit hypocritical?”

“I am?? Why?”

“Because whenever I question Harry’s evangelical zeal about filling the empty pews, you tell me it’s a Christian’s duty to spread the good news.”

This took her back for a second, but she was not to be bested.

“But what good news are you whispering into that girl’s ears? Nasturtium seeds and so on? Is that going to do the trick? She isn’t coming under your spell. You’re coming under hers.

This...mission to improve is just your way of deluding yourself.”

“That is absurd! Look at you! As jealous as a teenager. Kerry is lost and I have a pastoral duty to bring her home back to the fold.”

“And if she was ugly? And smelly?”

I was lost for a reply.

“Come on. How would it go down if someone fat and ugly turned up from her beauty parlour?”

“And how would you and the rest of the congregation react if that someone turned up at worship - drunk?”

She put on her coat with a wry smirk. She was off to clean the church.

In the early evening my wife was taking a shower when the phone rang. It was Kerry having serious second thoughts about our outing. She was feeling depressed and hearing her *bad voice* again. It took all my powers of persuasion to get her to change her mind.

“Who was that?” asked my wife on descending.

“Oh, just Rebecca.....wanting a word about one of her patients.”

While my wife busied herself with her Sunday School lesson I grabbed a bottle of wine and sat out in the garden. It was a beautiful calm evening and the sky remarkable; it was as if a nonchalant artist had flicked his wrist to produce brush strokes of white cloud on an even blue canvas. The tall delphiniums of pale and intense dark blue and the foxgloves, pink, white and cream, stood upright and stately and motionless as if asleep; they were as unaware of their beauty as the roses which had slowly and secretly transmuted their essences - co-opted and intrinsic - into their blooms of beguiling shapes and colours. In contrast, the birds were dashing about their tasks before the onset of dusk, and the blackbird, as unconscious of the delight of his evensong as were the flowers of themselves, had hopped into view on the eaves of a nearby house. I could just see his beak opening and closing as the great ash nearby seemed to dance to his music, stirred by a breeze too aloof to touch the garden. Tears stood in my eyes as I thought of Kerry, head in a magazine or absorbed in her phone or wearing earphones like blinkers, sitting on her couch while her television blithered like an idiot.

When I came down the next morning in my khaki shorts and Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt my wife sniggered and then laughed so helplessly she had to sit down and cover her face with her apron. I waited patiently for her to stop as I studied my bowl of muesli. I had always considered my legs quite an asset. Apart from the operation scars on my knees, they were virtually perfect. "I can't decide..." she managed to gasp at last "whether you're trying to deter the girl or ha ha ha ha seduce her ha ha hee hee ha ha..."

"Neither! It's a lovely sunny day. I have to be back by one o'clock to see Joseph. You especially should know my libido is low in the early morning. So just give it a rest now...this is entirely a professional matter and -"

"Oh, don't be so bloody pompous! A young woman realises how empty and meaningless her cosmetic life is - how unusual is that? People have been struggling with futility since the dawn of time! She's just growing up and out of a spoilt, manicured childhood, that's all. She'll get used to it - or over it eventually, whatever."

"So, you honestly think that what I do is pretty pointless? Shall I come to flower-arranging with you?"

"Pointless, no. But I think you imagine you do more good than you actually do do. And not just you. Look at Sandra."

Sandra was a young woman who occasionally turned up at the end of the service - to cadge money. Unwordly Robin, a church elder, had taken her under his wing after his wife, Rebecca, a prison visitor and a colleague with Listeners, had discovered her on the verge of release from a sentence for embezzlement. She had been persuaded to come to church by Robin, and, of course, to turn her away now would be unthinkable, even though her presence caused unease amongst many and scarce concealed irritation amongst others.

"Sandra exploits us. Kerry is a different case altogether. *You* seem to be saying evangelise them but keep them at arm's length, especially if they're poor or troublesome."

"It's going up for nine. You'd better get off to pick up your...arrangement."

She gave me a wicked grin and pecked me on the cheek.

"I have your permission and approval then?"

"I suppose so...but I think you ought to have a better shave...and you'd better put your partial in."

*

The address Kerry had given me was in a smart block of flats overlooking Earlstone Common and golf course. I rang the bell by her name plate several times but answering buzz or acknowledgement came there none. Eventually a man in a hurry came out and kept the door open for me with his hold-all. I climbed the stairs to the very top - the fourth floor and got my breath back. I checked the number and knocked the door. My concern grew in the utter silence and I began to shout her name, a little louder each time. I pushed uselessly against the door. Through the long window at the end of the landing the sun was casting an oblong of light, bent at the angle of floor and wall, creeping slowly but irresistibly down towards my hand. The woods and fields and sky looked wonderful and in the far distance stretched the hills and moors of the park, bathed in a lavender haze.

I heard a door behind me creak open.

"If you're here for KayAy, she went out last night about eight but didn't come back."

"Are you sure?"

“Certain. She promised to bring me a carton of milk from the garage. She never lets me down. So.....”

The woman was pasty and middle-aged, wrapped tight in a pink flannel dressing gown. Quite fat.

“I can’t get out much now, see? I have an OCD.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Can I?...Is there anything I can do?”

Slowly she closed the door, never taking her eyes off me. On one of my cards I scribbled a request for her to get in touch if Kerry returned and pushed it under her door. When I got back to my office I fetched out the form she had filled in and phoned her mobile. It was switched off so I left a message. I went to her beauty parlour and my entry raised a few plucked eyebrows. The colleague I took to be Polly came tentatively towards me, clutching a pair of nail scissors, leaving a rather large reclining young woman whose pudgy feet she had been attending to. I saw with sadness that there was only so much that even a practised beautician could achieve in the war against unloveliness. She asked if she could help me.

“Not professionally,” I quipped, making her frown even more. “I’m trying to contact KerryAnne.”

Her eyebrows leapt up again. Of course, I could not give an explanation because it would compromise confidentiality. She asked if I were a relative, and I searched for a white lie which I really ought to have made up in advance. In reply, I could only gape and stammer. The whole boutique stopped now to look at me in wonder - and in some whispering disgust.

“She’s...er...has she been in this morning?”

I saw the scissors gripped tighter and it was easy to read the gist of her thoughts through her glassy eyes. A woman wearing a face pack sitting near the fat recliner made a low comment and the latter barked out laughing. I looked down at my bare white legs, saw my belly and ludicrous shirt in a mirror, turned and fled.

I had no idea where her mother lived and so no way to contact her. Depressed, I phoned my one o’ clock appointment, Joseph, and cancelled, blaming a stomach upset.

The next morning, at around ten, a middle-aged man with a face well harrowed by experience rang our bell and announced he was D.I. Box of Earlstone C.I.D. It turned out that Kerry’s mother had gone around to her flat not long after my visit, had been concerned to find her Mini parked outside but no sign of her. In the afternoon she had reported her missing.

“So when I knocked on her neighbour’s door she showed me this.”

He took out my card from his wallet and quickly put it back.

“I didn’t have to be Poirot. Detective work is surprisingly straightforward most of the time, Dr Briggs.”

He asked me to explain my involvement with KerryAnne and I corrected him. It was a *professional relationship* - not an involvement. He nodded graciously and while he made notes, I told him in as few words as possible about Listeners and why she had contacted me. The fact that I was totally innocent did not eliminate, to my intense chagrin, a guilty tremor from my voice; and by dint of trying harder to sound innocent and nonchalant, I sounded even less spontaneous. Spontaneity is the precious gift of the unaware. I felt sure, however, judging by those facial craters and ruts, that DI Box was sufficiently endowed with the wisdom of experience to discount involuntary signs of guilt. Most intelligent people felt nervous and guilty in the proximity of the police.

“So - how long have been.....*counselling* her?”

“Since late March. Just over two months - nine or ten sessions.”

“Could you be a bit more specific about what was troubling her? It could well be relevant to her disappearance.”

I told him about her suicidal thoughts - (his eyes shot up) - her guilty feelings and her sense of emptiness.

“Did you make case notes?”

I got up and opened a file on my ancient computer, and he came over to look. He said he would appreciate a print-out.

“I made tape recordings of our conversations. Would you like those too?”

He nodded and I told him to come upstairs - they were in the spare room. He asked me on the stairs if he would mind him having a quick look-round.

“Not that you’re a suspect, but certain boxes need to be ticked, or my Super will have me on toast.”

“No problem. My wife is out. There’s no-one up here.”

He looked in all the bedrooms before coming to join me in mine. I apologized for the untidiness and I saw him glance at the unmade bed. From a box I handed him a couple of cassettes labelled K. Ormerod. It was at that point that I remembered the sinister letter and I disentangled it from the mess on my bedside table, telling Box that she had a secret admirer.

“Early on, she thought she was being harassed. But it was all in her mind. Then this turns up the other day in her letter box, so.....now I can’t say for sure.”

At this, his face hardened.

“It’s a great pity you handled it, Sir,” he muttered, taking hold of it between thumb and index finger. I told him it was a photocopy and that any prints would be mine. He asked me where the original would be and I told him that the likeliest place would be her flat.

When my wife returned from the town she was predictably furious.

“Great. So you’re a suspect in the girl’s disappearance.”

“Only a notional one. Box is too astute and honest a pro to waste time on me and take the easy option.”

“The easy option?”

“You know - to browbeat me into a dubious confession like the idle so-and-sos used to do. He knows I have nothing to do with it”

“But no doubt he’ll be back. Wonderful.”

“It isn’t very Christian of you to be so curmudgeonly. What about the girl? It looks as if she’s been abducted.”

*

Box was back the next day with another detective, intriguingly and appropriately named DI Puddephat. I was requested to accompany them to the station.

“I intend to interview you under caution.”

The horrid word froze my blood.

“It’s a formality, Sir. You could of course refuse, in which case I would have to report it and the order might come down to arrest you. You might be - consciously or unconsciously - withholding evidence. You may have a solicitor present, as is your right.”

My wife was hearing all this in the kitchen. The door suddenly slammed shut and, feeling numb, I went to look for my coat.

Earlstone police station was new and stood next to the old building which had long been up for

sale. It used to be the scarlet fever hospital in the nineteen twenties. The new place was airy and light and comfortable. It did not generate the grim atmosphere required for old-style intimidation and, I surmised, modern interrogations would have to be more subtle - and sly.

Puddephat squeezed himself into the corner by the recording equipment and switched it on, announcing the date, time and the names of those present - before I was solemnly cautioned. I had been silently praying and felt entirely relaxed. Box turned, sat down opposite me very suddenly and thrust the letter under my nose.

“Did you write this, Dr Briggs?”

I was startled. “Of course not,” I replied almost voicelessly.

“Why *of course*? I’ve compared the style with your notes and can’t see a great deal of difference. Quite an educated writer, wouldn’t you say? Spelling mistakes? None. Grammar errors? None. Vocab? Not your average dimmo. *Did* you write it?”

“No!”

My eyes scanned the lines for evidence to contradict him.

“Look here, Detective Inspector...*i.m. humble o.*I had to ask Kerry what that meant.”

“In my humble opinion?”

“Yes. I really hadn’t a clue. She told me it was text speak.”

“I did wonder about that - but then, do you know what?”

“What?”

“I had a bet with Puddephat here that you would mention it. An unworthy thought.”

“Unworthy?”

“Perhaps that’s the wrong word. *Suspicious* maybe. If you were trying to disguise your i.d. , then choosing a phrase like that - not in keeping with your education and style - might do it. Throwing us off the scent. See what I mean?”

“I’m...surprised at you D.I. Box. I honestly thought you were more...forensic and logical than.....”

“Than the average copper? Oh flattery, Dr Briggs! The undoing of us all!”

“Look - if I had abducted the girl, would I go around to her flat knowing she wasn’t there - to call for her? Go to the boutique and make myself look a bloody fool?”

“Same game, Doctor. Skylark tactics, I call it.”

“But I’ve given you evidence - freely - which a clever prosecutor could twist and distort...How sensible would that be of me”

“So you’ve thought one out too. More and more devious.”

“This is Alice in Wonderland - and you know it is.”

He sat back and - disconcertingly - clacked his teeth like a rattle, as if he was a weird character in that tale.

“How long have you been married.....Trevor?”

I flinched. To call me Trevor was not a try at friendship, but ownership.

“Thirty-six, no thirty-seven years.”

He put his pen into the spool-hole of one of the tapes I had given him and span it round.

“A long time. Unusual these days.”

I asked him what he meant to imply.

“It’s a long time to have to stay happy and keep it up. Many - most? - don’t. I’m on my second wife, Puddephat’s going through...stuff... at pres. My second one’s a bit younger than me.

Wears me out. How do you do it? Keep it up I mean?”

He winked. The innuendo was deafening. I felt uncertain how to react. Box was a formidable

opponent. He asked me how old my wife was.

“Same as me. Fifty-nine.”

Then he pushed a picture, face-down, towards me and turned it over at the last moment. It was Kerry at the age of about sixteen. In this one she was shockingly pretty.

“Was your wife aware how attractive KerryAnne was.....is, Trev?”

This was clever move - I think in the chess world it is called a Zwangzug - there is only one response possible. It would be pointless to try and evade it by remaining silent. He would no doubt wish to invite my wife in for questioning.

“She went to look at her poster in the boutique window. She was worried....that I had fallen for her. There.”

He raised his eyebrows like miniature triumphal arches.

“Oh? Now why would she ever think that? Would you describe your wife as still attractive?”

I felt angry but realised in time that he was trying to elicit an angry response. In anger and heat, misdeeds might be committed by outwardly calm people.

“Well, if you’re trying to get me to admit that I’d lost interest in my wife, then you’re wrong.”

“It’s just that I couldn’t help noticing that the bed in the spare room had been slept in. By you? A marital upset perhaps? These things happen, don’t they, Puddephat? He tells me he’s in the doghouse at pres, and I’ve been there a few times myself.”

I felt cornered. He was trying to provoke me. What malice you had to possess to be a good copper. In an odd way I even felt sorry for him, to inhabit a ghastly world of suspicion and deception.

“You have a very suspicious mind, D.I. Box. I suppose you have to have - in order to succeed in your....trade. Like an estate agent has to be a shameless liar. But you *know* I’m not your man. Do you get a certain pleasure out of seeing people squirm? Did you pin butterflies when you were a lad? It’s not exactly ethical, is it - this?”

I saw I had scored half a point. A shadow of doubt had driven the gleam from his sharp eyes. Perhaps he boasted in the canteen how he had squeezed the truth out of some reluctant tube of a man. Perhaps some part of him did not really enjoy the squeezing and squirming; the man who had to humanize himself on the drive home to wife and kids.

He turned to his colleague and with his finger indicated he should switch off.

“Interview paused at eleven twenty-seven,” he announced.

“Paul - go and rustle us up some tea,” said Box. “Tea okay, Dr Briggs?”

“Black coffee, strong, no sugar.”

As soon as he had gone Box interlaced his fingers and leant forward with a conspiratorial smile.

“See it from our point of view, Trevor.”

“I do wish you would be formal with me, D.I. Box. What is *your* Christian name?”

“Okay, point taken. But look at it this way. We are both professionals - and surprisingly similar. You ask questions to get to the truth - make the wrong diagnosis and you and the patient could be in the doo-doo. Me, I have to penetrate to investigate to incriminate. Some quite tough nuts sit where you’re sitting. My Chief would have my wotsits if he found out I’d gone soft on a suspect. And if - no - when we arrest whoever took KerryAnne, their defence team will be entitled to ask for everything pertaining. If they can’t hear me on this tape putting you through it, they can raise doubts in the minds of judge and jury as to my competence.....and your guilt - because we’d both be grilled like tomatoes on the witness stand. The bastard might get off. I can’t peer into your head - I’m not like one of those authors who know what their characters are thinking - I like LeCarré but it rankles with me sometimes that he’s a bit like a little god -”

“Omniscient?”

“Yes. That’s the word! Life ain’t like that though, is it? I can’t peer into your head, but if you were a horse, in my book you’d be a rank outsider for this race. I’m pretty sure you’re innocent, but I don’t *know*. I can’t go along to the Super and say *Dr Briggs is a decent bloke - it’s not him*. Tons of decent blokes do something bad and out of character when they’re under pressure. When Puddephat comes back and switches on again let’s just get on with it. Tell the truth cos I shall smell it in your sweat if you don’t. Okay?”

I nodded. I felt relieved - and keen to get the ordeal over with. Puddephat came back with a tray, put it down and announced to the tape that the interview was being resumed.

“Eleven thirty-seven..... present, D.I.Puddephat, D.I Box and Dr Trevor Briggs.”

Box drummed his fingers very expertly on the table and left his palm there.

“Coffee okay?”

“Fine.”

I realised that the question was meant to explain the pause on the tape.

“Right...where were we? Yes. On a scale of one to ten, how happily married are you?”

“Nine, ten...”

“Nine? Why are you taking off a point? Do you still have sex?”

“Yes. Once or twice a week. But I fail to see....”

“Hold on. I’ll come to the *why* in a minute. Good for both of you?”

“Oh this is just....”

He frowned and motioned urgently with his hand to come out with it - as if I were in on the conspiracy and should play the game by his rules.

“Yes, if you must know. It’s good - for both of us.....I wish I could play you a tape recording.”

Puddephat scoffed and Box winced.

“You see, I did wonder why you slept separately. Because you do, don’t you?”

“Yes, but there is nothing sinister in that. I sleep very shallowly and wake a lot so I read. It wouldn’t be fairBesides, just because you’re married to a person, it doesn’t mean you have to do everything together. We haven’t got a double loo, either.”

“Point taken, but you do see that it could be interpreted as a sign of unease in a marriage. You’ve made it pretty clear in these notes how much you value KerryAnne’s beauty and how much sympathy you have for her. You admit your wife suspects ulterior motives. So, if *she* does, why shouldn’t I?”

He had leant forward again, coming in quite close and menacing.

“Can you swear, hand on heart, that you were not sexually attracted to KerryAnne Ormerod?”

“I’m a man. Flesh and blood. Yes, I was impressed but not attracted - as a nail is to a magnet. I would never have made a pass at her.”

“Do you masturbate, do you fantasize about her?”

“No and no!”

“What if she had made a pass at you? Patients do, don’t they at their doctors? Did she make a pass at you - or did you *think* she did? What if - in common vulgar terms - she laid it on a plate?”

“Then I would have resisted. A professional man has to subdue the base instincts or he’s lost. We have that drummed into us. Besides, I’m a practising Christian and take my marriage vows entirely seriously.”

“So you’ve never had an affair?”

“Never.”

“Never been tempted?”

“Never.”

“Then may I say you are unusual then.”

“You may say, and I might reply that I don’t think I am - unusual, I mean.”

He leant back. He took a piece of paper out of a brown folder and began to read from it aloud.

“The man who gave me his card was staring at the poster of KerryAnne outside my shop. He asked if anybody had been hanging around looking. This seemed a bit odd to me because that is exactly what he was doing. He told me he was the girl’s guardian angel and then gave me his card. He wanted to know if anybody else was acting suspiciously.” The newsagent was very cooperative. You like handing your cards around, don’t you!”

“Precisely. Why would I incriminate myself?”

“Why indeed? But I’m not the psychologist. Not like you....even if just an amateur one.”

He pushed the statement across for me to read and I confirmed it was accurate.

“Guardian angel? You really said that?”

“There’s nothing to suspect there. I could not say - *I’m her shrink or counsellor* - that would have compromised Kerry’s privacy and would have been unprofessional. So I said the first thing that came into my head.”

“But why did you go there so early in the morning - to stare at the poster?”

“I had not slept well. The letter she had received was bothering me. It purported to be from somebody who had had the opportunity to be up close to her. A neighbour? Possibly. Someone she worked with? No, they were all female. Someone who could see into her boutique from a building nearby? In the end, I got up and walked into town. When I saw the poster it all became clear. It could be anybody. By the way, have you interviewed her ex-boyfriend?”

He said nothing. He looked at his script.

“The lady in the flat opposite to KerryAnne’s said you called for her on Wednesday morning. Why was that? Your consultations took place on Thursdays did they not?”

I explained the outing I had planned.

“I wanted her to get away from her normal threadbare routine.”

“That was very noble of you. But how did Mrs Briggs feel about that?”

“Ambivalent. She could see the funny side of it - me in stupid shorts taking a twenty-year-old beauty on a trip - but she thought also it was overstepping the mark.”

“What funny side? What mark?”

“She thought I was making myself ridiculous. But my intentions were entirely proper.”

I told him about the therapy I had planned by the river, the close contact with the herd of deer and the fresh air. To my surprise he did not seem to find it weird, although his colleague was frowning.

“Dr Briggs,” said Box at last “have you any ideas of the whereabouts of KerryAnne Ormerod?”

“None whatsoever - and I’m very concerned.”

“Where were you between 6pm and midnight on Tuesday 2nd June, the last time she was seen...”
Alive.

“I was at home. My wife will confirm it.”

I felt at ease. He knew it, and that is why he suddenly leapt to his feet and leant down to come within a few inches from my face and glare like a Gorgon.

“What is your wife’s usual bedtime?”

I almost fell backwards in my chair.

“Ten thirty. After the news.”

“So, after that you could slip out. And she wouldn’t know. Because you sleep apart. How could

she give you an alibi?"

Had it all been a part of the plot - our coffee-break interlude? Did he truly suspect me? Or was this for the gallery? I stared at him, devoid of an answer. Had I been the true villain, I might now be blubbing and confessing.

He sat down and gave an almost imperceptible nod to Puddephat. It was time for his entrance.

"You see Trevor, you've admitted you found the girl attractive."

"No, impressive.."

"You've admitted your wife was suspicious. So we are bound to be too. If you were in my shoes, *you* would suspect you. Anyone would. A jury would."

"This is an absurd game. Have you nothing better to do than play games? A girl is missing! I am not guilty and you damn well know it"

"No I do not," barked Puddephat. "You know where she lives. Say you went round that night. Rang the bell. No answer. You waited in your car. She came back and you asked her to come into your car for a chat. You'd thought of something - or she was upset. She trusts you. She gets in..."

"Crazy, absurd."

"The conversation starts to go bad when you get a bit carried away...perhaps you put a consoling paw on her leg.....she gets annoyed and starts to call you stuff...you've been her guardian angel and now she's calling you a dirty old man....she tries to get out...you pull her back and it gets out of hand. Only you know what happens next. So tell us. Please."

"I need to go to the toilet."

"Switch it off, Paul."

Puddephat did the necessary.

"You see...Trevor..." said Box, drumming again with his fingers "You see how easy it can be for one's motives to be misunderstood; how easy it is to construct a different reality based on a few known facts; we're both storytellers really, but you want me to believe your version and I have to construct a tale which fits the facts which could persuade an audience of twelve - not particularly discerning people. Most of them couldn't pass GCSE never mind A Level. Whose story is more believable? That would be up to the CPS to decide. I only do what I'm paid to do."

"I have to go to the toilet."

Box came with me and waited outside. He gripped me by the arm as I emerged and whispered - *nearly home and dry*.

He started sifting again through Kerry's case-notes which I had given to him in good faith. With all the various props at his fingertips, this was a play with well-rehearsed facial expressions, gestures and words. Neither had fluffed their lines. I - almost - did have to admire it all. Now he was picking up a sheet of paper and adjusting his glasses which had disarmingly slipped to the tip of his nose, as if he was acting the role of some bumbler in a Dickens novel.

"What's all this guff about KerryAnne's brain being underdeveloped? Not stimulated? How do you know? And this page.....you really think she's somebody else's child? You more omniscient than I gave you credit for?"

"I didn't realise I'd included that - it's just conjecture. But I'm pretty sure it happens."

"And do you really believe she belongs to you in some queer kind of way?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look here... You write about evangelism. *Perhaps when the time is right she could be persuaded to come to church, etc, etc.*"

“I’d forgotten I’d written that. I am embarrassed.”

“So, you see yourself as - what does it say here - her Prince Charming?”

“That is a flippant remark my wife made. I forgot that I’d written it down.”

“It says - here - in black and white - *could I really be taken for Kerry’s Prince Charming? In the sense that I wish to awaken her to the more spiritual dimension of life, release her natural spontaneity - her being so unfulfilled - it might be a fair interpretation of the role I play...* Now, I’m not that Clever-clogs on Eggheads, Trevor, but I don’t think Prince Charming was particularly interested in the girl’s *mind*.”

“It’s just an unfortunate - in the circumstances - a *very* unfortunate way of putting it. I had no idea - at the time of writing- what connotations might be placed upon it by suspicious minds -”

“But Trevor, Trevor...as you yourself said - suspicion is our stock in trade!”

Puddephat held up his hand. He had a question.

“So, you see yourself as a bit of a crusader - a rescuer of lost souls? You hate the modern world – you keep on and on about it. KerryAnne seems very special to you - it’s as if she doesn’t fit the pattern. Most girls would die to look like her - but for some queer reason, she’s not happy. She’s a challenge. Would you describe yourself as a tenacious sort of bloke, one who does not give up easily?”

“That’s a pretty fair assessment.”

“You get annoyed if things don’t go the way you plan them? A perfectionist?”

“I like my own way - I’m like most people in that respect. Like you two are. You’ve got your plan and want it to work....”

Box was licking his thumb and rapidly working his way through my notes, like a bank teller.

“Ah, yes, here it is. You say.....hold on.... you say you think you’re *getting somewhere* with KerryAnne. Right? So, how does it feel when she turns on you in your car that night and loses her temper? You see the whole project failing...these silly bloody nasturtium seeds, the trip to Bradgate. All those weeks - nine weeks and more of patience, softly-softy-catchee-monkey - all your effort and your theorising.....kaputt.... You must have been furious.”

“No. Because it never happened.”

“You’re a bit like a Jehovah’s Witness, aren’t you?” said Puddephat with a sneer. “Self-righteous. Think you know what’s best for everybody? The type who goes into the bar and asks for the music to be turned down? The bloke who writes to the council about litter when nobody else gives a monkey’s? Who thinks he has the key to clean, wholesome living and everybody else has got it wrong? When they knock on my door with their bloody Watchtower - I don’t beat about the bush. I tell ‘em to bugger off. Is that what happened? You came onto KerryAnne with your secret churchy agenda and she told you to get lost? You lost your rag? You felt ill-used. You even - deep down - reckoned you might get somewhere with her sexually because you thought she was coming over to your side...because you were *getting somewhere* with her. Then the horrible truth dawned, did it not?”

To my horror I had begun to perspire. Could Box really smell guilt in sweat?

“Trevor,” said he menacingly softly, “are you refusing to answer my colleague’s question?”

“I thought it was a rhetorical one. Sorry. No truth dawned, horrible or otherwise. I never mentioned going to church to her - I did not go out that night. I never met her and have no more idea of where she is than you do. And you have failed to consider one other theory.”

“Which is?”

I looked at Box and forced myself to say what was troubling me the most.

“She might have taken her own life.”

Until I said this, they had both been staring at me like predators, hoping that the onslaught had exposed a weakness. Now, their silence and the sudden sagginess of Box's face gave me hope that they had fired their best shots and were out of ammunition.

"How likely - on a one-to-ten scale - do you think that she has committed suicide?" he asked, bouncing the pencil off the table..

"She felt very guilty over her friend, Lia. She was missing her dad like hell. She had realised her life was pretty meaningless. I'm not a trained psychiatrist - just a sympathetic ear. One-to-ten? Perhaps five or six."

Deciding not to tell him about her eve of outing phone call, I took in a deep nasal breath and heard the clicking of the recording machine. Box gave Puddephat a quick look, almost as imperceptible as a bid at an auction, and the interview was declared over - at 11.54. I asked Box what the next step would be.

"That's it. You can go. We're done."

"Done? You ticked my box? Am I a suspect?"

"Of course you are. We have nobody else - yet. Unless you can think of anyone."

"The newsagent?"

"Why he?"

"He was admiring her. He looks at the poster of her all day long. Maybe he wrote the letter."

If I thought he might be grateful for these insights, I was wrong. He just continued to stare at the table as if formulating a new theory there.

On my way home, I remembered the man who had held the door open for me at the flats, the man in a hurry. Could he be the culprit? What if he had had to fetch something from her flat - maybe her medication? He would have taken the keys from her, of course.

Once home, I tried to flesh out a proper picture of the man from the glimpse I had had.

Eventually, after many abandoned attempts, I had a pencil drawing which more or less satisfied me. I looked up at the kitchen clock. Just gone one. My wife had come back at half-past twelve, viciously put the vacuum cleaner round and gone out again in an aura of silent resentment.

I picked up my drawing and drove into town. The newsagent was very wary but finally agreed to look. He shook his head - he had never seen my man hanging around. I walked bravely into the boutique. Polly glanced, shook her head and ushered me out.

My next port of call was the block of flats. I rang the bell of Kerry's reclusive neighbour. The intercom finally crackled and nervously she asked who I was.

"I was here two days ago calling for KerryAnne."

"You! The police were here yesterday - and I gave them your card."

"Can I come up?"

"No. I don't trust you."

"Listen. I'm trying to help KerryAnne. I'm a doctor. I want to find out where she is. I need to show you something. You can help to find her. The police are looking in the wrong place. Please!!"

I waited. There was a sudden buzz and the door clicked open.

I found myself in a room unimaginably clean and tidy. I remember particularly how the glass table top sparkled. The lady, still in her dressing gown, placed a towel on a chair near the door and invited me to sit. She had put newspaper on the carpet where I had to tread. She backed off and apologized. It was her OCD.

“I got pleurisy - it was horrible. Now I’m terrified of germs and infection. It’s not personal. If I’m forced to go out, I have to wash all my clothes afterwards. My husband cleared off in the end - because I wouldn’t let him touch me. Hey, hold on!”

She stiffened as I stood and craned to look through her balcony doors. From her room she had a clear view of the car park. I noticed she was glaring at one of my shoes which had made slight contact with her carpet. I apologized.

“It’s alright. I’ll put the hoover round when you’ve gone. Please hurry up. I’m sorry I can’t offer you a drink.”

I took my drawing out of a folder.

“The other morning when I came round, this fellow - in his late thirties? - held the door for me to come in. He was in a hurry. Did you hear somebody on the landing outside? Just before I came up?”

“I heard a door close, but that was probably Paul in the flat further along - he’s always running late. But that’s not him - he doesn’t wear glasses and hasn’t got a tache.”

“Do you recognize him? You have a great view of the car park and must see all of the residents come and go.”

“There are twenty-eight in twenty flats. But he doesn’t live here.”

“But have you ever seen him? A visitor maybe?”

“No.”

“Did you mention to the police the errand KerryAnne was doing for you?”

“Yes. But they just seemed interested in when I saw her last. Half past eight.”

“What did you tell the police about me?”

“That you looked, pardon me, a bit of a weirdo....that funny shirt with the pineapples..”

“Now you’ve hurt my feelings. Everybody thinks I look ridiculous in it.”

“Well, you do.”

“Thank you! You’ve been a big help. Can you keep an eye out for this fellow? He might come back. Can you think of anything that KerryAnne might have wanted so desperately - tablets maybe - that he would risk coming here?”

She thought this over as I gave her another card. She took it without thinking about the billions of microbes crawling on it. I went to leave - then stopped.

“By the way, Mrs.....?”

“Grant, Carole Grant.”

“You do know that in every breath you breathe in there are getting on for a billion germs and that you, like me and everyone else are full of them - and that we need them inside us so we can live?”

“Honest?”

“So a few more from touching stuff and from the soles of my shoes - and the card - hardly make any difference.”

The card fell from her trembling hand.

“No difference?”

“Negligible. So, you might as well stop worrying and get on with your life.”

I had driven about a hundred yards when an obvious thought struck me. I got out of the car and walked back into the car park. There stood Kerry’s Mini. I rang Mrs Grant’s buzzer and she sounded very cross.

“Me again. Sorry. Did KerryAnne go out in the car that evening or did she walk?”

“I don’t know. I was watching telly. How nosy do you think I am? I can’t believe it...”

“What?”

“That the world is so full of germs. And *I* am!”

“I’m sure you’ll get over it.”

I went back into the car park. If she had been abducted from there, it was logical to assume that the crime took place either before she left or when she returned. At eight thirty it would be broad daylight, so a later time was more probable. And what would she have in her hand? The verges were tall with grass choking the shrubs. I traced the route she would have taken from her car around to the front of the flats. Her assailant would do best to hide in the large rhododendron near the corner. Starting at the end of the verge, I kicked through the grass until a white object appeared. It was a litre plastic bottle of milk. I turned it face upwards with my pen. The use-by date was June 4th - today - and the sell-by date was June 2nd. I was about to phone the police station when Box’s words rang in my ears like an alarm - *skylark tactics*.

Box looked embarrassed when, overcoming my understandable reluctance, I did return to Earlstone police station and told him what I had discovered. With a final flourish, I handed over my drawing and he looked at it with the jaundiced eye of one who had been too long in an art gallery. But it was my turn to feel a sad kind of triumph. I decided to say nothing, however, content to let him stew in his own thoughts. He spread out the drawing on the table and rested his chin in his cupped hands, clacking his molars again; a horrible habit. A sign of stress? He looked up and fixed upon me those sad, wearied eyes, reduced to cloudy beads, no doubt, through staring at too many images of the sordid side of life. I know the cynical copper is a stereotype in crime dramas; Box was much cleverer than that; under-promoted, even, I surmised, unambitious, and his demoralisation in the face of the overwhelming odds of our imperfection made me pity him.

“Why *on earth* did you not mention this man this morning?”

“He slipped my mind. I was under quite a lot of pressure.....thanks to you. He was just a chap politely holding the door open at the flats. Why should I have suspected him - at the time?”

“The milk is still there? You didn’t touch it?”

“No. I only looked at the dates. They fit. He must have grabbed it off her and thrown it down. If she’d dropped it, it would be on the tarmac.”

“It’s been raining. Even if there were prints, they’d be compromised.”

“You don’t seem very impressed with my little bit of sleuthing though.”

“I am not. You should have come straight back here. And left the rest to us.”

Now I saw my chance for a bit of revenge.

“D.I. Box...how thorough would you describe your investigation at the flats...on a scale of one to ten?”

His face set into a scowl.

“How thorough your questioning of Mrs Grant? Ten? Or are you taking a point off? For not asking her about the errand?”

“Enough!The lady refused to let us in. Just slid your card under the door.”

“That’s because she has an OCD. She’s afraid of dirt and germs.”

“Another of your patients?”

“In a way. I think I may have cured her though.”

“Did Mrs Grant mention milk to you when you first called?”

“Yes.”

“And then, two days later, you manage to find a carton in the grass, making it look as if a struggle took place. Amazing luck. Making it look as if someone was lying in wait - not *your* personable, cosy, come-and-have-a-chat style at all.”

“*Making it look?* Surely you’re not implying that I planted the milk? You think I did?”

“Depends what you mean by “think.” Have an opinion - or entertain a possibility. I can think something without believing the something. I can *think* there’s a God, even if I don’t believe it. I can imagine him up there with a beard and so on. I’ve told you - it’s my job to find explanations based on known facts, even if I don’t really accept them. I told you this morning that you were an outsider but I’ve been sitting here thinking ever since and listening to our interview on tape. Trying to find an irrefutable argument that you’re not the villain. Know what?”

“You can’t.”

“I can’t. And your suicide theory had a strong smack of the diversion about it. So, in my book your odds have shortened. Now *this*.”

He picked up my drawing and waited for me to speak.

“Shouldn’t I be looking through pictures of known sex offenders?”

“Oh, yes. We’ll have to go through the motions on that one.”

“The motions?”

“Oh for goodness sake. Watch!”

He grabbed a pen and sketched a face on the back of mine - with a square face and just a fuzz of hair. A little like me. He pushed it across almost contemptuously.

“You drew a round face, Trevor. I drew a square face.”

I turned the paper over and over. His effort was crude in comparison to mine. I refrained from acting the indignant party - again - in favour of a better argument.

“Well, answer me this one, then. If this chap doesn’t exist, if he didn’t hold the door for me, how come I managed to get into the block of flats?”

“Trevor, Trevor..... You had KerryAnne’s key from the night before. The man, the milk, the picture. It’s the lark ascending. Or is it? If I can think it *up*, so can you. I don’t come across many clever villains in Earlstone.”

“Perhaps that’s why you think too much.”

“How devious are you, really? It’s frustrating not to be able to see into you. You know, I read a Tolstoy novel once. Surprised?”

“Not at all. Why should I be?”

“I didn’t finish it though. I threw it away when he described what the hero’s fucking dog was thinking. Do you know *yourself*, Trevor? Is there a compartment in you you keep locked? From yourself?”

The question disturbed me but I kept a straight face. I got to my feet.

“Well, D.I. Box, I’ll leave you to your thoughts then.”

*

Days elapsed and then weeks. Doubtless, a few men with glasses and moustaches and police records were arrested and subjected to Box’s barbecue. I was taken in again and re-grilled but did not sweat and could not be forced into a confession. I was the only real runner - to use his analogy - apart from my poor wife who was also deemed to have a weak motive - jealousy. She was taken in for questioning too. Oh, and the ex-boyfriend who must have undergone torment after torment.

I gave up Listeners not long afterwards. My involvement with Kerry could not be kept secret. Uncertainty crept into the faces of people at church and even of friends. Within the year we left the area but, as is often said, one cannot move away from one's problems. Our marriage soon foundered on recrimination and - yes - unspoken suspicion. The temptation to charge me and let a jury decide must have been strong. And I would not have been surprised to have been found guilty. I felt very guilty even though innocent, and that in itself will be a life sentence. So, maybe Box, who could not break me down would be pleased in his approaching retirement to allay his own guilt for not finding Kerry's body and her killer, if he knew of mine. Perhaps he was depressed that he had not asked an obvious question. For example, *Will you swear on the Holy Bible that you did not abduct KerryAnne Ormerod?* And I am depressed by the thought of how much that wonderful creature might have achieved had her beauty of spirit matched her beauty of body. In which instrument might she have excelled?

*

I sit here in my garden, bringing my diary up to date, and am almost afraid of the slow but irresistible onslaught of time on my flowers. It is an irrational fear and I can only think that I am too sensitive and too aware of the evanescence of beauty as opposed to the persistence of evil in all its forms. I wonder sometimes if Kerry had considered a future in fading away. She must have done. How dreadful had she felt? Dreadful enough, disturbed by the inevitable decline of her beauty, by her paradoxical feelings about it, and by her own guilt over a friend.....to kill herself? But the police had dragged all the stagnant ponds in Earlstone woods....and she could hardly bury herself.

I look again at the perfect apricot rose before me, just out of its bud. Time is both its deliverer and its destroyer - and is utterly without a conscience. Shall I take it off at its point of perfection - where is it??- or when its beauty has faded?

It is God's commandment that nothing living can last for long, and hence that the beauty in the living must be gone in a blink of an eye. To the beauty of the inanimate, in all irony, He has granted a very different timescale, so that the glory of a mountain valley hardly changes, perceptibly, through all the generations of mankind. I sense His genius at work in both the Animate and Inanimate, in the urgent energy of the one and the permanence and form of the other. Does He regret as bitterly as I do that His most ingenious work is His most flawed? The ingenuity of man is but a pale shadow of His own, set to work to improve his comfort at the expense of the rest of creation, or, latterly, to mitigate its dire consequences. Christ's mission as teacher, model and martyr-redeemer was for the sake of man alone; but to my mind, man was no better for it. For His followers the battle for souls was surely lost.

The sun is setting swiftly now behind the great monkey puzzle tree, wheeling from branch to branch. I watch the last bumble bee slip deftly into the white sleeve of a foxglove and back out again. The dunnock interrogates the box hedge, seizes a mite and flies, via the rambler rose into the bay tree, provoking a sweet cacophony from her chicks. The rooks in the giant ash argue briefly and fall silent in the chalky light. Neither bee, nor bird, nor insect make any spoiling impact on this, my tiny patch of the earth. Here, within my borders, all is at peace; beyond the pale, the news is bad, so bad that I have ceased to listen; much of humanity is in uproar and in foment, toe to toe, fist to fist, tooth to tooth, ignorant, dismissive and scornful of the earth's wonders; but beyond the pale, the turmoil and conflict is far enough removed for me to hover in a shimmering mirage, an oasis of calm.

I have recently been diagnosed with a dilated heart and told I will not live quite as long as I had expected. I have left instructions for my ashes to be scattered in a nearby lake; I shall become the reeds, the fishes, the dragonflies and survive in them. The thought of a petrified cemetery and heaven appalls me in equal measure. I do not wish to associate with any chubby cherub's or beautified angel's - nor those desiccated and sanctimonious tut-tutters.

The dark red crocosmia and white daisies sway helplessly and gracefully in the breeze and I cannot help but weep at their unconscious but miraculous beauty As the gentle bee zooms in all innocence away, as bees had ever done before we showed up and would ever do after we had gone, my flimsy faith in Christ's divinity vanishes. Besides, how can a misanthrope be a Christian?

Here I lay down my pen and take a glass of wine, increasingly my sole comforter.

* * *

There I would have ended my days, selfish and disconnected, privately behind my privet, but for a startling event. Thank God for the subconscious mind. What a vital role it plays in our lives, beyond the production of inexplicable and bizarre dreams. Like a mole, it can burrow away at puzzles we have long abandoned on the surface, to throw up a solution in unexpected places. My place was a dream - no, a nightmare.

I found myself sitting on the steps of my old church looking at the bank opposite, past which Kerry had walked and into which her putative pursuer had disappeared in apparent innocence, that day in April, three years previously.

All at once, she is there again, striding with apparent nonchalance, and the man in the dark blue suit is a few yards behind. But this time he is walking with a purpose, not sauntering, and is gaining on her. Suddenly he stands right behind her but it is not a lunch packet Kerry holds - no, a carton of milk, and as he grabs her it goes spinning into the gutter. Her scream is stifled by his free hand and her eyes are huge with terror. But that is not the scene which wakes me with a start and a shout. Slowly her assailant turns and I find myself up close to him, and he is smirking, holding not the girl, but the front door of the flats open for me. He is gripping a hold-all.

I sit up in bed soaked with sweat.

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Further sleep is impossible. I get up. By seven I am on the road back to Earlstone.

Kerry's boutique has become a fancy goods shop. I count five estate agencies and it is in the third one, just around the corner, where the plan I have hatched en route succeeds. The young blonde woman stapling documents at her desk gives me a very seductive, house-selling smile, no doubt well practiced in the mirror, when I enter. A young male colleague - too tall and swarthy to qualify as my man - is filling a briefcase at a desk at the back of the room. For the third time I begin my spiel.

"Three years ago, I sold my house through this agency and moved away. Now I'm looking to move back, and wondered if I could have the services of the chap I dealt with before. I've forgotten his name - in his thirties, fair hair, about five ten, dark blue suit."

"Oh you must mean Pete," says the woman. "He left...unfortunately...about two years ago."

"No, three," counters her colleague. "It was that hot summer. Don't you remember? Around the time that beautician disappeared."

“He left? What a pity!” I exclaim, as calmly as my racing heart will permit. The young woman cannot prevent herself looking doubtful as to the pity of it. She turns to give her colleague a dark smile. I ask her if he had gone to another agent in the town. She shakes her head.

“He set up on his own. He was always a bit of a loner, our Pete. A real charmer though. But a fidget - more out of the office than in..... and not always on agency business. He jumped before he was pushed.”

“Can you give me his address?”

She seems now to sense that there will be no sale or commission forthcoming, and so swaps her welcoming manner for that smug officiousness which is utterly infuriating in people of little power, who are resolved to exploit it to the full. She is not authorised, she says, to give out such information about a competitor. Nor, on grounds of privacy, can she give me his surname. She smiles apologetically, insincerely and returns to her stapling well pleased.

I leave and stand outside, realising that my next move should be in the direction of the police station, although the prospect of facing Box again - assuming he is still there - and enduring his scepticism and contempt fills me with dread. I am just about to move away when the tall young man emerges.

“I’m leaving here soon,” he whispers in passing. “You can only find him online – bugger undercuts us. Peter Castle Estates if you want to google him.”

Peter Castle. Suddenly I see a young Peter Castle sprawling in my surgery, computer game in hand. The same Peter Castle?

In spite of my heart, I almost run back to my car and within a few minutes I have his website up on my phone, and am looking at his round, smiling face. But his intensely sincere eyes are cold. I try to imagine him disguised by glasses and a moustache, but cannot be sure he is the man at the flats – or the boy in my surgery. The feeling persists that the blonde agent had found him unpleasant. A real charmer? The letter Kerry had received was full of smarm - in the effusive style for which estate agents are notorious....

A fidget!

The conviction grows that I am staring at the right man. I make a new plan.

Ten minutes later, I am sitting in Sowerbutts Lane, the most exclusive street in the town where houses start with a *guide price* of around three quarters of a million. Commission of one or two percent would produce a tidy sum, a tempting bait to break whatever schedule Castle has planned for the day. I rehearse my little speech and ring his mobile. I call myself Robinson and give the address of the magnificent house near which I have parked.

“I require an immediate valuation with a view to a quick sale. I have to move up north with my job as of yesterday.”

“My diary is full today, unfortunately.”

His voice is gruff and familiar. It is familiar and chilling.

“Mr Robinson? Hello?”

“Ah...right.....well.....bloody well cancel somebody - you come recommended. I’m in Manchester from tomorrow.”

I think for a second I have overplayed my hand and he has cut me off. Abrasiveness is not a natural vice of mine.

“Mr Robinson? I just looked at my diary. Could I squeeze you in as my last call at four forty-five?”

I immediately accept. My car clock says I have five and a half hours to wait. Where could I go?

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“Mrs Grant? Remember me? Doctor Briggs. Can I come up?”

“You! Everybody thinks you did it!”

“No I did not. You’ve met me. You know it’s not true. The police don’t believe it and nor should you. Are you still housebound?”

I hear her swallow. I wait. The buzzer buzzes and I am admitted.

She stands on the landing, uncertain whether to smile or not. She tells me I have aged.

“And you look much better.”

“I am. You mean thinner. Flatterer. Come in.”

In a corner stands a bag of golf clubs. She sees me look and tells me she is a regular at the gym.

“You kind of cured me - well, made me think. I realised I was fed up with my husband and my OCD was a way to get rid of him.”

“I did wonder. So, do you have someone now?”

“I have a friend, yes. Please sit down. I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

I tell her not to bother and ask her to tell me about her conversations with Box, after the discovery of the milk.

“I didn’t like him. He said he’d get a warrant for my arrest if I didn’t let him in. Pushy bugger. Anyway, he was holding that picture you showed me but I could only tell him what I told you. Never seen the man. I told him I never went out, so how could I? Anyway, it was such an everyday face. Lots of Englishmen have round heads like that. Like pigs. Hard to tell one from another.”

My hand automatically tugs my phone out of my pocket.

“Recognize *him*? I dare say he’s been around here - he’s -”

“An estate agent! Bloody hell. Yes, I’ve seen him here, showing folks round.”

The scales fall from my eyes. Not only had he kept watch on Kerry in town but also at the flats. How could I have been so obtuse? And if I had not been so arrogant and condescending, she would still be alive. I put my head in my hands in despair.

“So you think he killed her?”

I can barely bring myself to nod. She sits down next to me on the sofa and seems lost for words.

“I should have believed her when she said she was being followed. Me, the great mind reader. He really was stalking her, Carole. I only saw him in profile - and then in disguise. It’s my fault she’s dead.”

“But you can’t be sure she is! What about those girls who were held captive in America? You’d better phone the police.”

No. Box would think I was leading him astray again. I thank her and tell her I am off to the police station. Instead, I drive the short distance to Sowerbutts Lane and settle down for a long wait.

In the warm sun I fell asleep and wake to see a police officer tapping at my window. She explains that a neighbour had reported me as suspicious, but I can see from her expression that she does not think I quite fit the profile of a house-breaker. I tell her I am meeting an estate agent to view a property nearby and she decides to believe me. After a word into her radio she remounts her bike and is on her way. I see a curtain twitch and decide to reverse a hundred yards or so, keeping in view the house I have chosen.

At nearly a quarter to five my wait is over. An overlarge and loathsome 4x4 comes racing past

and pulls up outside the house in question. With shaking hand I write down his registration number. I overcome an urge to get out and show myself. Stupid. If he is as devious as I imagine, and if he really had been following her, he might well know of her visits to me - and know who I am. I can only pray that Carole's theory is correct - that he is a collector not a killer.

The car door opens and he emerges checking his watch, chubby and blue-suited, sandy hair close-cropped, the antithesis, the nemesis of beauty. Needing to keep a cool head, I suppress feelings of disgust. He strides confidently down the path, clipboard in hand, and knocks at the door. I pray again that my surmise about the absence of the residents is correct and am delighted when, after another rap, he stands back to look up at the windows. He will assume I am delayed and not suspect a trap. Slowly, he walks backwards to his car, still gazing at the windows; I grab my phone, and turning on my radio to create a background murmur, I put the next part of my plan into action. He answers.

"Mr Robinson?"

"Oh, Mr Castle, I'm really sorry. Would you believe it? Some idiot has gone into the back of me at the lights in Bragwell. I'm right in the middle of sorting it out so I'll have to cry off. I promise to be in touch."

I watch him lower his phone and start his car. As soon as he rounds the bend I begin to follow him. Once I nearly lose him on the railway bridge when the lights change, but I speed through, causing a car to brake. I realise that we are on our way to Fairley Parva, which he would doubtless describe as a desirable and popular village for professional people. Nowhere does the speed limit exceed thirty and although he keeps lighting up - contemptuously - the flashing warning signs, I manage to stay in touch. Fairley has more cars parked in its narrow streets than anywhere I know and Castle is often forced to slow down and give way. We crawl past the church and The Fairley Arms, the WW1 monument and The Red Lion until we reach the edge of the village on the Allingworth Rd, where he puts his foot down and speeds away from me until he almost disappears from view. If he is bound for the A5, he will lose me completely there, and so I am relieved when his brake lights turn red and he veers suddenly left into the drive of an isolated farmhouse. I drive well past and park on the verge.

A promising feature in the garden, to the rear of the main building, has made my heart leap with fear and hope. It looks like a workshop, a flat roofed outhouse in dingy white concrete. I am soon in the neighbouring field and walking towards the unkempt conifer hedge which forms the border. I find a gap and squeeze through into the garden - a wilderness of weeds, tall thistles, nettles and throttled rose bushes, which, against all odds, are here and there in bloom. The building puts me in mind of a bunker. Only on the long side is there a window and then I notice a door, mostly devoid of its green paint, at the corner. Padlocked. The window is barred on the outside and a dark curtain covers the inside.

Picking up a stick, I rap the glass and listen. Nothing. I rap again, louder; do I only imagine a low moan in response? As I try to decide, a rasping, shuddering noise seizes my attention. It comes from the house - an ill-fitting door being forced open. Through a buddleia, wild and out of control and teeming with red admirals and painted ladies like creeping brooches, I see Castle walk down the drive, like a butler, with a plate in his left hand covered with a lid. I draw back. The plate is put down and a key turned in the lock. The door opens and closes. I venture a glance around the corner. He has gone in. I have one chance at this and yet fear my own weakness - not only in my breathlessness and in my arthritic joints but in my mildness of temperament. I have seen a stack of house bricks around the back and, trembling, pick one up. In my whole adult life, I have not committed one act of violence and doubt whether I am capable. I shake with fear and

excitement.

But what is taking so long? I imagine him talking to her, teasing her - molesting her and worse. This makes me grip the brick so tight that it causes me pain. I creep to the window and strain to hear a conversation, expecting protests.....but there is no sound. Why is she so compliant? Why is she not screaming? Is she drugged? Is she really there?

Around me there is a profound silence. Not one bird is singing. The world is petrified. The absence of breeze intensifies the June heat. I think of all the places out of bounds to man - the inside of mountains, the ocean floor, the deep polar ice, the darkest caves. I am standing in a garden into which no caring hand has intervened in a generation; out in the indifferent countryside - a perfect place to hold a captive, neglected by man and God.

The brick has become so heavy I can hardly hold it, but it is a talisman which I refuse to put down for a second. I swap it to my weaker left hand. Can I use it? Even when part of the mind is resolved, the resistance of all we have been taught and - perhaps - our profound humane instinct can act as a brake over which the former has no power. Breathless and almost weeping, I recall a poor blackbird in a gutter, injured by a car, squawking in agony - and I had not been able to raise my foot and kill it. But this situation, I tell my reluctant, kind, cowardly self, is entirely different. In response, causing me to feel fury, *Thou shalt not kill* intones itself in my head.

The door opens and, as Castle turns to walk away, I step out and bring the brick down with all my force onto his skull. He dives forward and falls in a jerking heap on the path. Blood runs down his scalp in profusion and I am sure I have killed him. A mess of potatoes and meat and peas surrounds his head and the white plate is broken in two. I am relieved to see he is breathing. The key has fallen from his hand. I pick it up and struggle for an age to make it fit into the padlock.

The room is gloomy and the air stale. A faint glow of light is coming through beaded string drapes at the back. The light flickers and alters and I realise it is streaming from a television set. "The answer is still and always will be no," I hear that lovely gravelly voice whisper. "No! Now leave me in peace, if you won't kill me like I want you to."

With thumping heart, I push through the beads and see her sitting on a sofa in a nightdress. He had obviously returned that day to the flat for her clothes - and her various cosmetics and appliances which are scattered around her with magazines. There is even a tin bath and a bucket. In the light of the television her face is pale and her eyelashes and eyebrows black. But her eyes are dead. She does not even lift them up to look at me.

"I will never change my mind. So just leave me alone."

"Kerry. What does he want?"

Now she looks up slowly, almost in a trance.

"He wants me to consent to have sex with him. Then he'll let me go but I don't believe him. He won't. He never will."

Her eyes are now fixed on mine but they keep staring as if her mind has gone. Just when I fear he has destroyed her sanity, a shade of curiosity creeps into her face. I sit down next to her, draw back her lovely hair and chastely kiss her cheek. Her trembling hand comes up and feels the spot. Then she recoils and begins to scream. She stands up and backs away from me towards the drapes. Behind her, a dark figure is looming.

"I should have killed you, Briggs, but couldn't be bothered. Now I shall have to."

A terrible anger seizes me; it is as if I am face to face with a stinking zombie, representing everything I loathe in the black heart of man. Scissors. I grab them, run past her and bury the blade in his eye. This time there is no doubt. She stops screaming, looks down at him and then up

at me.

“Trevor?”

“Yes. You’re found, Kerry. Now come home. Come home with me.”

We go out into the sunlight, she blinded. I tell her to breathe in deep as she sways like a dancer in my arms. High above us, a bird is singing, stationary in the blue sky, fluttering its sly wings.