

THE AMORALIST

In ordinary towns like Earlstone very nasty things rarely happen and it makes it all the more shocking when they do. My name is Derek Miller. I had transferred to the local police force there as a Detective Inspector from a large northern city, and I took the humdrum routine of theft, burglary and street disturbances at turning-out time easily in my stride. But what began to unfold that New Year's Day would nearly get me killed and would lead to my leaving the force, and, after later reflection, to this account.

I cannot see into people's heads and you will have to take with a pinch of salt some of my deductions as to what these characters below were possibly thinking. I have reservations about third person novels – the novelist is not privy to the inner workings of other people's minds. Besides, if you decide to travel through these pages with me, you will experience almost first hand my surprise, terror, exhilaration – and misery.

My insights into the characters are based on face-to-face interviews and discussions with people who knew them, whenever I was stuck. Take Mr Clifton (not his real name). After his wife had gotten over his death she supplied me with enough details to look at him in the round and to understand what possessed him that rainy night to go over the road to a couple he scarcely knew. This all begins with him.

Clifton was not a nosy Parker but as a member of Neighbourhood Watch he took it upon himself to get a good idea of who belonged on the estate, and who did not. So quite often, day and night, he did the rounds with his dog, and little by little he got to know the local faces, human and canine (and feline); got to recognise the routines, the comings and goings of his neighbours and, bit by bit, almost incidentally, got to know a lot of their business. He knew, for example, that the sad, dark house on the corner, long up for sale, and embarrassed by the long, tawdry grass of its front lawn was the innocent victim of an acrimonious divorce; that the rotund teacher three doors away was a drinker (his council-issue blue plastic recycling box for tins and bottles contained far more of the latter than the former (for Clifton had lifted the bag of newspapers on the top late one evening and had had a quick peek in)); and he knew that the middle-aged couple opposite, not long moved in, had adopted a boy and a girl - unrelated - and had been paid back abominably by both when they had reached their mid-teens. The girl - the younger of the two - had, as they say, got in with the wrong crowd at school and had embarked on the usual cycle - the life-cycle of the disaffected teenager - of tobacco, premature sex, alcohol, cannabis, amphetamines and Ecstasy. At fourteen she had already had an abortion, a fellow dog-walker had whispered. At fifteen she was dead from an overdose. Their difficult, much excluded from school seventeen year old son had upped and left, much to their (relief and?) chagrin, shortly before their house-move and had not come back.

Mr Clifton had a hiatus hernia which his magic one-a-day tablets usually kept in check. On that New Year's Eve however, spent "quietly" as usual with his large, silent wife in front of the television, he had perhaps had a few glasses of sweet sherry and squares of chocolate too many and now he was suffering with shocking heartburn. His wife, transformed into the great mound beside him in their passionless bed, was snoring like a regular toper. Having listened patiently until past two o' clock when the shouts of revellers, crackles of jumping-jacks and wooshes of sky rockets had gradually subsided, he must have been distressed to find himself awake again -

and he squinted grimly at his glowing alarm clock - at 5:13, due this new combination of noisy and painful disturbances. He finally decided to give in, to get up and go downstairs. He would have to take one of his magic tablets much earlier than the time advised on the bottle and make the best of the rest of this special night on the settee. Had his wife left a downstairs light on? He shook his head in disbelief. Her profligacy now touched off the rage that had been smouldering because of her snoring and popping and he almost swore. On his meagre council clerk's pension every last penny of saving was vital. He went deliberately late to the supermarket to snap up the last minute give-aways; he looked at the multi-pack offers, calculated the saving and debated whether they needed, for example two tins of pineapple rather than one. And stood debating for ages whether they needed pineapple at all.

But as he rounded the stair-post in misery he was surprised and pleased to see that the glow turned out not to be their hall light, but a light from his new neighbour's house, streaming from their front door opposite and through the glass panels of his own.

In that light briefly he saw first one, then another black silhouette emerge from the house and dart across the lawn. He stood and waited for one of the Jollys (for that was their unfortunate name) to appear at the door and close it. It remained open. He went closer to look. Lights were on in every window though all the curtains were closed. He became aware of the faint beat of a pop song. At some distance away a car started and roared away, now flashing past his door. A nearby lamp post allowed him just a glimpse of the driver's profile but not his passenger's. It was the pale face of a teenager; a mask pulled up onto his forehead; a black hood topped by a cat's pointy black ears. Had there been a party at the Jollys? A fancy-dress party? Were these the last guests to depart? Yet still the light streamed from the hallway and the door did not close.

In the kitchen cupboard Clifton found his precious tablets, swallowed one and sat waiting for the burning in his lower throat to fade away. This should take about five minutes, but when after ten the pain had only slightly relented he decided to make a pot of tea. The light across the road was glowing pink in the kitchen blind. He returned to the hall. Still no-one appeared. Then it suddenly occurred to the sleepy Clifton that something might even be amiss over there. Had he in fact witnessed, not the end of a party, but a burglary? Now, with a jolt, he thought of the acclaim that might be his as the Good Neighbour, saw his photo in the local paper and even saw himself interviewed on Midlands Today! He thought this all over for a few minutes, roused his wife to tell her where he was going, and why, and then put his overcoat on over his pyjamas, found his slippers and opened the door. It was raining quite heavily. He heard the soft consumptive gurgle of the drains and in the sulphurous lamplight he saw a twisting cable of yellow water being hauled along the gutter and away. The rock music grew louder as he approached the house. Mrs Clifton came to the door and watched nervously as he walked down the drive. John Lennon was telling the oblivious estate that he did not mean to hurt anyone and he was just a jealous guy.

Mr Clifton went to the door, cleared his throat and said "Mr Jolly, are you there?" In reply the hungry pet cat, a fat marmalade beast, came growling to the door. Then it stopped and studiously licked the red pad of its paw. Behind it on the beige carpet were its own red footprints and about six human ones in an even pattern. What a peculiar carpet, he must have thought. Then he heard a stifled groan and saw a swollen ankle, with a lost turquoise slipper next to it, sticking out of a doorway. He was so surprised that his legs gave way and he fell flat on his back. Sitting up again he whispered "Mrs Jolly? Are you ill?" She groaned a second groan. Summoning up all his vigilante courage he got up and went in. The source of red was her blood seeping from the kitchen floor onto the hall carpet from between her legs. Horrified he saw that she had been

sliced open to the navel from the crotch. She was gagged and bound. Lividly white she was bleeding to death and barely alive. "What happened?" he heard himself gasp through the singing of the music and his own blood in his ears.

She opened her eyes and stared at him in terror. He watched a hand, his own shaking hand remove her gag. "What happened?" he asked again, now weeping.

She began to mutter. He put his ear to her mouth and heard her say "The stubborn fool.....wouldn't tell them....".

"Tell them what? Who?"

"Where...he'd hidden it..."

"Hidden what?"

Now she faltered and began to fail. In her last breath she said "Stephen..why...why?" and then, with a final perplexed shake of the head, she was gone.

Now he became aware of water pouring from a tap. He looked up. There, looking down on him, his bottom stuffed snugly into the sink, so snugly that it fitted perfectly, was Mr Jolly, equally gagged, with his pyjama-clad legs hanging down like giant stripy sticks of rock, his feet still in his chequered slippers. "Mr Jolly!" cried Clifton. "Are you alright?" But Jolly's great eyes were only frozen in the horror of what had been his final vision as he had died. The water was splashing up from his naked abdomen. Edging closer Clifton witnessed the next horror of the night.

Jolly's genitals were missing. From the gaping hole where they had been, around which the water was swirling, no more blood was seeping out. Around his throat a rope, against which he had obviously struggled and chafed, led tautly to the tap fitting. His hands were dangling by his thighs and suddenly Clifton had an awful vision of them futilely trying to stem the bleeding. He heard a rapid licking sound, turned and saw to his utter disgust and suddenly reviving fury the adored family cat helping herself to her mistress's blood. Shouting, he leapt over her and chased it out into the street where he faltered, stopped and collapsed.

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In polythene over-shoes, slowly and carefully, I made a tour of the house. Everywhere was a triumph of chaos over order. Objects had been liberated and scattered in every room. On the stairs I felt the crunch of glass underfoot. I noticed a strange chrome stick, akin to a three jointed snake hanging down over two risers. A photograph of a wedding pair lay nearby torn in half. Mentally I pulled what it had now become back together into the treasured picture frame it had been. And it struck me even at that early stage how odd it was that a house-breaker on a greedy, urgent mission should go on a mini-detour of petty vandalism. The young Jollys, now put asunder, smiled at me as if only they understood the punchline of this childish, of this rather silly, sick joke. Here they were - in the late nineteen sixties, I guessed - laughing at the camera - (had someone off-shot just made an over-ripe joke?) - in the first eager scene of their life-drama. And thirty odd years later here they were, still laughing, amongst its cruel, unanticipated denouement. And soon, I mused sadly, they would smile on in the darkness of a relative's drawer or, more probably, buried deep in a rubbish tip. I turned and heard laughter from the living room and frowned.

I was relatively new on the Earlstone force and, on the whole, rather unimpressed. Something I could not put my finger on was not quite right. Procedures were sloppy, things went missing,

cases collapsed, matters were not properly followed up. My colleagues had gradually come around to the view, it seemed, that my tendency to keep my own company and counsel was not, as might be understandable, due to initial diffidence - as I weighed up the how and where of fitting in - but rather natural standoffishness. This was not entirely fair (the truth was that I was not entirely sure who to trust) but the suspicion made them wary. Someone had put it around that I went to the ballet. At the Christmas quiz I had put our team so far ahead by playing my Joker on the History round, scoring almost forty out of forty points, that the much anticipated event had died a slow death. History just happened to be a particular interest of mine, I had quietly explained. It dawned on my colleagues gradually that I was also a perfectionist (very true) and this made them still warier. They had come to take little notice of me, having precisely as much to do with me, as I did with them, as the necessities of the job required.

I walked along the hall, avoiding the blood prints. I could hear Shephard who, I had quickly deduced, thought he was the station comedian and much preferred the sound of his own voice to any other.

“What an excellent night to raid a house. Genius! A brilliant idea. Who in the neighbourhood would guess amongst all the other rowdy goings-on that the lady of the house was having her difference split and the husband his wedding tackle hacked off? Hey up! Found ‘em! They’re in here, in the pedal bin!”

A senior member of the Forensics Team, dressed like everybody else scrutinising the house in a white suit, he had picked up the penis and testicles with tweezers. “Happy New Year” he said, wagging them under Jolly’s nose. “Photographer!” he yelled. After they had been snapped he dropped them theatrically into an evidence bag.

“Show some respect, Shephard” I growled, now stepping over the corpse into the kitchen.

“Will somebody please turn off that bloody music!” yelled DCI Turner as he arrived.

“We were quite enjoying it Sir” said Shephard. “Music while we work!” Somebody passing the door with a plastic bag was singing along.

“Oh, don’t you think you’re hilarious, Shephard” growled Turner as the music stopped. The DCI had been woken an hour earlier and was even grumpier than usual. Now he turned to me, the detective inspector he hated, and who, with good reason, as you will see, loathed him back.

“Well? What have we got?”

I glared at him. I had as little contact with him as possible at the station. I knew what he was and he knew I knew. I began to mutter in his direction with obvious reluctance, avoiding eye-contact.

“They made it look like a break-in and a burglary....”

Turner stiffened. And then sneered. “*Made* it look like?”

I had had a terrible night with my wife. Her pain had only subsided at around two. Roused myself at six, I was exhausted and in no mood for my boss’s amateurish dramatics and rudeness.

“You honestly think this is a simple case of house-breaking?” I said.

Now he returned my steady gaze.

“Possibly. Rule nothing out. Best keep an open mind. What persuades you it’s a put-up job?”

“Persuades me?” I looked pointedly at the victims, who were about to be bagged. “Do victims of burglary usually get subjected to sadistic torture and made to watch?”

“It depends what they have and refuse to give up” answered Turner. I took a deep breath and shook my head. Did I have to state the obvious?

“What sort of a dwelling is this? A villa? A mansion? Look at these cupboards!” I kicked one shut. “Basic, DIY store stuff... They drove an old car. He was a retired teacher. She had stopped working long ago.” I stopped and shook my head. What could they possibly have of any value to

warrant this, this...atrocious...cruellest treatment? Turner had not replied. Why was he looking to pigeon-hole this case so quickly and conveniently? I watched him closely. He seemed to be surveying the mutilated corpses not with pity or horror, but in fury.

“Anything taken?” he muttered.

“Obviously some jewellery...there’s an empty wooden box on the bedroom floor with an earring left beside it...obviously. The security chain on the door has been wrenched off...Every drawer in the house has been pulled out and emptied, as if to convince us.....we can’t find a credit card or a bank note anywhere..”

“I can’t see your problem here, Miller. Probably some crack-head, pissed up into the bargain...out on a spree...opportunist.... saw a chance and the rest, as they say, is history.”

I cringed at the cliché. He told me to collect any security camera footage from the neighbours. At that moment I was not listening too intently. I was watching the wicked kitchen knife, the implement responsible, being photographed in situ, prior to bagging.

“Security cameras!” repeated Turner, irritated to have been ignored.

“There was only one,” I replied. “Next door to the Cliftons. Mr Clifton found the bodies. The lens was pointing at the wrong angle but we’ve taken the tape anyway.”

“Only one? One? How far along the road have you enquired?”

Suddenly I realised that in my weariness I had made a rare boob. I had only sent constables around the houses in the immediate vicinity. Turner exploded in self-righteous anger.

“I want every single video-tape on this whole estate collecting up. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly.....Sir”

“And have you interviewed the neighbour yet?”

“No”

“And why the hell not?” he snarled. Now I covered him with a full glare of contempt. “Because he’s in Intensive Care, that’s why. He had a heart attack in the middle of the road. He was lucky his wife was looking out of the door.”

Now it was his turn to draw back, stung.

“Will he survive?”

“Touch and go. WPC Hart is on hand there in case he wakes.”

Turner called her and told her to report to him as soon as Clifton came round. Chewing the inside of his cheek he switched his phone off and said “Did she see anything?”

“She was too upset to make much sense. I’ll speak to her later.”

“Other neighbours?”

“Nobody. All tucked up in bed.”

Turner relaxed, and to my keen eye, even seemed pleased. There was something in his manner I had seen before and the faintest suspicion began to germinate in my head. Turner put his head around the door and shouted for Shephard. He sauntered in from the dining room opposite. Turner asked him for a quick report. Shephard smiled provocatively and then deliberately ignored me, showing me only his profile while he addressed Turner.

“We’ve been all through the house but we can’t find any foreign prints or a single hair that looks different to theirs. It looks as if whoever did this came in a suit like ours. The six footprints are all we have at the moment. They are all obviously from one person.”

“Have you made a cast?” asked Turner.

“Just doing it, Sir”

They fell silent. Shephard threw his head back theatrically and laughed low.

“Something amusing you?” asked Turner.

“Just in time for panto season!” he said and laughed again. “You know!”

“No we don’t know. Kindly enlighten us.”

“Oh come on! *Cinderella*! If we make a shoe from the cast and it fits then you’ve got your villain!”

Neither of us smiled.

“Shephard” I said finally “You are desensitised. You’re in danger of turning into a callous, amoral bastard with a tasteless sense of humour.”

He pulled a shocked, indignant face, grinned again and left the kitchen.

“Like water off a duck’s back, for that one,” muttered Turner.

Now the bodies in their grey bags were being carried out to the ambulance. A bed sheet had been placed over Mrs Jolly’s blood. The team were now packing up and there was only the drone of the special vacuum cleaner, searching on the hall and stairs carpets for any last elusive threads of evidence.

Through the streams of condensation on the window, I looked out onto the grey light of the first day of the year, not long dawned, and into the back garden. Black mopheads that had been saucy dahlias drooped down from their broken shafts. My eyes turned next to the photo-portrait on the wall. A boy and a girl of around secondary school age were smiling bleakly through experience-hardened eyes. The next-door neighbour had already given me a brief family history. I wondered again where the boy was.

I looked around and tried to sense the distress and agony, physical and mental, which this ordinary couple had had to endure in that kitchen now filled with a blank, uncaring silence as the vacuum machine stopped. Turner had made us both a cup of coffee. In his face as he passed me my cup was a very cautious smile, perhaps a hint of a desire for reconciliation. I took the mug and murmured a thank you.

“Well, at least they made one mistake” I said after a long, thoughtful silence.

“They?” replied Turner. Now I looked at him in astonishment, lost the thin veneer of patience covering my disgust and pushed the kitchen door to.

“We both know you’re corrupt, Turner, but are you being disingenuous here, or are you really more useless than even I give you credit for?”

Turner’s chin dropped and he looked in disbelief at me.

“It’s a good job for you nobody heard you say that,” he whispered. “And what do you mean by disin-whatsitsname?”

“Disingenuous; pretending innocence.....dishonest...You really think only one intruder did this? Tied up and gagged one victim while the other stood watching and...and asked him about.....his New Year’s resolutions?”

Now it was his turn to blush.

“Well...” he stammered “Perhaps he held a knife or...or..even a gun on them and made one tie the other up first and then did the other one himself....I don’t know...I wasn’t here...and nor were you...”

“Oh for God’s sake! Did his wife help him lift her husband into the sink? He was easy fifteen, sixteen stones.”

“Well, how come we have only one set of footprints?”

“Oh come on! One cocked up, trod in the blood and the other - or others - didn’t!”

Turner blushed again. Now I eyed him even more closely.

“This was no drop-of-the hat crime. Surely you can see that? They came prepared and with a clear purpose.”

“What purpose?” asked Turner quietly. He studied my eyes carefully and then broke free from my gaze.

“I want a full report on my desk by two pm. Without fail.”

Then he smiled faintly and his eyes widened. He assumed an exaggerated caring tone of voice and said, “Oh, by the way, I forgot to ask how Maxine is.”

I resented the insincere enquiry but was too polite to ignore it. I told him how ill she was and how much pain she was in. Turner slowly shook his head.

“A terrible shame, Derek. I’m sure we’ll both remember not to mention you-know-whatso that she stays as comfortable as possible.”

Catching the drift of his threat, I glowered at him, opened the door and left him without a further word. Outside I organised a team to go on the knocker to collect more video evidence.

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I phoned WPC Hart at the Infirmary as I drove back into the empty town centre. She told me there had been no change, but the doctor had said that he was not very hopeful. Clifton had had a serious heart attack which he had been lucky to survive. His heart showed signs of widespread very advanced coronary disease.

“Phone me directly if he wakes, Louise.”

“But Turner told me - “

“Forget what Turner told you. Phone me and we’ll pretend I was already there. I can be over in five or ten minutes, particularly this morning with nothing on the road. Will you do that? It’s really important I get to him first.”

She reluctantly agreed. I turned off the main road onto a street of Victorian villas, one of which belonged to me. I found my wife sound asleep. Her rheumatoid arthritis was definitely getting worse after two hopeful years in which it had been somewhat in abeyance. I heard the key of the helper turn in the front door. I had hired her out of my own pocket a few weeks before Christmas. Creeping back downstairs, I thanked her for coming in at such short notice on a holiday. She told me she was feeling fine and had no hangover.

“Could you stay until half-past two, Michelle? I’ll try to get away at two fifteen.”

“No problem Mr Miller,” she said in her lovely Jamaican lilt. “She awake?”

I shook my head. “Could you do a bit of ironing and cleaning and take her some soup at half past one?”

She smiled and told me to leave everything to her. I kissed her on her velvet cheek, which made her giggle, and went upstairs to have the shower I had missed in my hurry to attend the crime-scene.

When I eventually walked into my office I found DC Conway sorting the collected videos into two piles, one “nearbys” and the other “far-aways”. It was nearly ten o’ clock.

“You don’t know how much hassle we had getting these, Sir; almost everybody was in bed, sleeping it off. In the end we took just a couple from each road. We could always go back for more later.”

Conscious of my 2pm deadline I decided to call more pairs of eyes in to get through the video footage more quickly.

As Conway and I went through Clifton’s neighbour’s tape we stopped as cars or revellers went past but found nothing untoward as we reviewed those scenes. As we approached 4 am street

activities virtually stopped. And then as we got to 05:16 a car suddenly sped past much more quickly than all the others had done. We went backward and forward until we had frozen the exact frame we wanted.

“What’s the driver wearing, Conway?”

Conway studied it closely before finally exclaiming that it was a cat costume.

“Exactly what I thought. Look at the hood. And look, he’s wearing black gloves....One passenger. Male?.....You can’t really tell....”

“Perhaps they were just coming home, or going home, after a fancy dress party. We could go door-to-door on the estate to see if there was one going on before or around that time. And if anyone came as a cat.”

“Maybe. We’ll check all the fancy dress hire places tomorrow” I murmured. “I’ve just got a hunch that these are our villains. The time fits well with when the neighbour was found. Play it again slowly. Let’s decide what make of car it is.”

Immediately Conway said that it was a Toyota Previa. His sister’s boyfriend had had one. Then, suddenly remembering something, he stood up and went out to the desk. He returned with a sheet of paper. “I thought so! We had a report about half-an-hour ago that a Toyota’s been spotted burnt out on farmland out at Wolverley.”

Then my phone rang. It was WPC Hart. Clifton was awake.

“Look, Jim, go and tell everyone to look out on the recordings for that Toyota parking up or driving past. Then go out to Wolverley and examine the car. Where’s Turner?”

“Last time I saw him he was in with the Chief. Shall I let him know what’s happening?”

“No. I’m off to the Infirmary. If Turner asks you where I am you don’t know.”

I took the lift up to the Coronary Care Unit. I showed my credentials to the ward sister and asked what chance he had got of surviving. She did not speak and her eyes told me the answer. Then she told me that his wife was in there with him.

“Sister, could you ask her to come out and have a word with me?”

She put down her pen and entered his room. Eventually a large whey-faced lady with uncombed hair came out.

“I’m DI Miller. I’m so sorry about your husband. Can he speak?”

She nodded.

“Has he spoken yet about last night?”

“I asked him what had happened but he just kept shaking his head. He said he had never seen anyone die before.”

I pricked up my ears.

“Die? Are you sure? He didn’t say dead?”

“Yes. Die. She was still just alive. Died in front of him. Colin needs a heart transplant; his chest pains were more than indigestion; his heart....it’s all furred up.....There’s no hope.....We had no idea.”

She wept. I put a consoling arm around her shoulder.

“Mrs Clifton, I won’t disturb him. Could you just ask him if Mrs Jolly said anything before she died.”

“No. You ask him. I don’t mind.”

The sister looked doubtful. The hospital was awash with other casualties of the night’s carousing and the doctor had rushed away to another case, leaving no instruction one way or the other.

“He may hold the key to identifying whoever committed a vile double murder.” I told her. She

nodded and told me not to be long. I sat down at the bedside. A pale, bluish, whiskery face lay, eyes closed, on the pillow. An oscilloscope beeped slowly and irregularly. Clifton's gnarled hand appeared from beneath the sheet. Automatically I took it and his eyes flickered open.

"Sylvia?"

He peered at me and I instantly realised that his sight must be failing. "Your wife's gone to the toilet. I'm here to ask you about Mrs Jolly. Did she speak to you?"

"Police?"

"Yes. You're safe and in good hands, Mr Clifton. Try and remember, did Mrs Jolly say anything to you?"

His voice was a whisper. Slowly but surely he told me what the dying woman had told him and gave me the name which she had uttered on her dying breath. My heart leapt with emotion. I felt my conviction now confirmed. The Jollys had been the victims of a crime much more sinister than a simple aggravated burglary.

"Are you sure she said "where he'd hidden it" and...not just put? Hidden?"

Clifton squeezed my hand, which I took for a yes.

"Mr Clifton. If anyone else asks, just say that she was dead when you arrived. It's important."

Again I felt my hand squeezed.

I found WPC Hart having a cup of tea in the nurses' room. She looked at me inquisitively. I smiled and said that he had known nothing, nothing not already known. I found the sister and told her that a colleague of mine might turn up, a detective called Turner.

"I'm warning you, he can be a little abrasive. Best not let him in; just tell him that I already interviewed Mr Clifton. Just refer him to me, DI Miller."

With a final word of consolation to Mrs Clifton I left.

On my way to Wolverley my phone rang. It was Hart. Clifton had gone into a coma and was on life-support. He would not be long. His heart was gradually failing. I experienced the ambiguous thrill of realising that I - apart from the perpetrators of the crime - was in sole possession of the truth - that they had been looking for something concealed by Jolly. But they did not know that I knew.

I drove through the village looking out for Conway's car. A thin wisp of smoke beyond a copse caught my eye. As I rounded the bend I saw two vehicles, one a police car, and one Conway's, parked on either side of a burnt-out wreck in a ploughed field. I turned off the road along a bumpy track and got as close as I could. Conway came plodding through the mud as I got out. I remembered I had wellingtons in my boot. I pulled them on and went to meet him. Conway's shoes were heavy with the mire. He stopped and waited for me and as soon as I was in earshot he told me that they had found a body in the car.

"We're waiting for Forensics and the pathologist."

Two uniformed officers were sitting having a smoke with their doors wide open. As I approached I could see that the windscreen was covered in black grease; the substance of the victim.

"Round here, Sir. PC Morris spotted it."

Sticking out of the slightly open passenger door was a smouldering lower leg. Above the ankle all was blackened and crisped. The ankle was in lycra, and there was a foot inside an intact trainer. I drew my penknife, cut away a square of the material, undid the shoe and eased it off. The air was full of a rich barbecue odour. Through the gap in the door the shrivelled body, like a long twist of burnt paper, could be seen, leaning over to the driver's seat. White plates of facial

bones, the darkened eye-sockets and the teeth were grinning back at me like a grateful idiot on a rare excursion. Had the driver stabbed or shot him? I looked and thought I could see the outline of a slit through the charred material covering the chest. Was this his reward for leaving his footprints behind at the crime-scene? A set of footprints, or rather holes in the mud, led from the car back to the track. The heavy rain had erased any imprint. The boot was open. I looked around. There, where it had been hurled, about thirty yards away, lay a petrol canister. I told the constable to collect it and handed him a plastic glove.

Now a white van was bumping along the track. The forensics team, looking like UFO investigators in their suits, leapt out and pulled on their boots. Shephard led them across the mud. His sarcastic grin turned to blankness, then to astonishment and finally to triumph as he saw the training shoe in my hand and connected it mentally to the smouldering ankle.

“You’ve compromised a crime-scene, Miller! I don’t believe it! Turner will have your balls for that when I tell him.”

I secretly rejoiced. At the very least I would be officially off the case and might even be suspended.

“I knew you were a twat Shephard, but I didn’t take you for a rat. I had to remove it, before it melted, like the rest of him.”

“Makes no difference, Miller. You exceeded your authority. You’re in the brown and sticky my friend.”

In response, being nearly a foot taller and much broader, I picked Shephard up and threw him backwards like a high-jumper into the mud. For a moment no-one spoke and then someone laughed helplessly.

“Who’s in the brown and sticky now, Shephard? Come on Conway, let’s leave the experts to it.”

As I passed him I placed the boot on Shephard’s chest and whispered. “Looks like you’ve been miscast. You’ve landed the part of Prince Charming.....arsehole....”

Shephard’s pretty assistant gave me a wink as I went past and whispered

“Serve the asshole right. We all saw him fall over.”

I sat alone in my office patiently waiting for the storm to break. Clifton had died. Turner had rushed off to the hospital and would soon be back. After an hour had elapsed I called in Conway. Had the videos shown anything else? He told me that so far there was no sign of the car pulling up anywhere. I opened up a new file on my laptop and tapped out the following report.

“In the early hours of 01 01 200-, a break-in occurred at 32, Somerset Drive, Earlstone. The intruders, probably dressed in cat costumes, took jewellery and probably also cash and credit cards, leaving the householders, Simon Jolly and Patricia Jane Jolly brutally murdered, having subjected them to cruel sexual disfigurement. This may have been in retribution for not revealing where other valuables were concealed. At 05:16 a Toyota Previa was recorded driving away by a security camera. At 10: 20 I attended an incident at Gallowtree Farm, Wolverley, involving a burnt out vehicle of that make. A charred body was found inside the vehicle in the passenger seat. It appeared that it had been deliberately set alight, as a petrol canister was discovered nearby. Forensics are currently matching a footprint found at the Jolly’s house with the shoe of the deceased found in the car. At this stage of the investigation it appears likely that the Jollys were the victims of an opportunistic attack by sadistic killers and possible that one of them was subsequently murdered by the other because he had left a vital clue at the scene.”

I printed this off and took it to Turner's office, leaving it on his table. I returned to my office, made myself a cup of coffee and waited. Some time later I heard unmistakable loud footsteps approaching rapidly down the corridor. My door was flung open by Turner. His pudgy face was pale with fury.

"Follow me" he ordered. I languidly finished my coffee while he waited. Then I stood and ambled after him upstairs to the Superintendent's office.

The latter sat with his massive head sunk lugubriously onto his chest, with his fat red fingers interlocked across his large barrel of a belly. His watery walrus eyes were not promising me much sympathy. Turner positioned himself officiously to one side of his desk and polished his spectacles furiously on his tie, staring in blind contempt at my shoes.

I stood facing the Super, who was called Paul Gilbert. Now he picked up the half-page report, as if it was contaminated, glanced at it and wafted it towards me.

"A bit thin, DI Miller, don't you think?"

"Thin? I think "succinct" would do it more justice, Sir. I'm sure that DCI Turner would approve of its conclusions; the conclusions he wanted me to reach. Well, I've reached them. Was there anything else?" and so saying I turned to grab the door handle.

Politely Gilbert said "I think there's quite a lot more to say, DI Miller" Then he glanced at Turner wearily, as if it was beneath him to soil his soft, fat lips on the grimy detail. Turner now began to relish every word he had been rehearsing.

"DI Miller, you have, it would appear, committed serious breaches of discipline. Firstly, you overruled my instruction to WPC Hart at the Infirmary that I was to be informed immediately if our main witness Colin Clifford regained consciousness - "

"Clifton, DCI Turner. His name was Colin Clifton." I drawled.

Embarrassed and indignant to be so corrected, Turner began to bluster.

"I have found out subsequently that you went to the hospital in my stead, without my approval. Why so? And why is your contact with Clifford - CLIFTON - not mentioned in this..."report"....?"

I weighed up how close to the wind to sail.

"Well..let's just say I didn't think you had quite the right bed-side manner."

"Don't be flippant, Miller. Just answer the DCI's question," growled Gilbert.

"I'm sorry, Sir. The visit simply slipped my mind. Clifton could add nothing new or useful."

"What did he say?" demanded Turner.

"He just kept repeating "terrible" over and over...He could barely speak."

"We've only your word for that."

"But why would you possibly doubt it, DCI Turner?"

Now we glowered at each other. Gilbert cleared his throat and managed to look even more walrus-like.

"I've also had a complaint about your conduct at a crime scene. It is alleged that you interfered with evidence. Is it true that you removed a boot from a corpse?"

"I had no choice but to. The leg was burning down to the foot. Vital evidence was at risk. If the Forensics team had responded more promptly...."

Gilbert bade me wait outside a moment. Five minutes later I found myself off the case and assigned to other duties, pending further investigation. Inwardly I rejoiced. It appeared probable to me now that Shephard had thought twice about reporting me for assault. As I left for home the message came through that the rescued shoe had fitted the print-cast perfectly.

“She’s eaten some soup, Mr Miller,” whispered Michelle. I looked at my ailing wife, Maxine, asleep again on the pile of pillows. One hand, gnarled like an old branch, lay stretched out on the duvet. Her stick stood propped up against the bedside table. On the wall behind was our wedding photo; my eyes were drawn to it. She was truly radiant with her dark brown curls falling around her sweet face. I studied that once slender wrist and hand holding her spray of carnations; and there stood I, proud to be at her side in a morning suit and top-hat, with a rakish beard. I thought of all the distance that we had come together since that bright July day in the late seventies; of our long wandering, now closer, now further apart, and then of our perilously near separation, after I had confessed to that stupid dalliance. I was not an especially handsome man and it had come as a shock to realise that I was the objective of a young and attractive secretary at the station. This scandal had caused us to uproot ourselves from the North and come to the Midlands nearly two years before. And I thought again, angrily and painfully of what Turner had interrupted that late evening a year ago which I could have so easily explained away to her, had it not been for that previous affair. I could never afford for Maxine to know of what Turner had seen, and add mental despair to her physical suffering.

Michelle seemed to have followed some of my train of thinking for she now rested her hand on my arm.

“She was a beautiful bride Mr Miller.”

I looked again at her present incarnation. Her face had relaxed. The contours of her pain had smoothed themselves out. In slumber she resembled somewhat my pretty bride again. I nodded.

“Michelle, could you possibly stay an hour or two longer? I’ll make it worth your while.”

She smiled and said she had nothing planned. Quietly I took my leave.

In Somerset Drive there was no longer a constable on duty. The clean-up team had been and gone. Today we had been short-staffed. A dog-walker, having stopped briefly outside, was now moving on again. Reporters, photographers and camera-crews had long packed away. At the house opposite, a dismal, solitary light went on upstairs. Mrs Clifton had returned home a widow. The daylight would soon be going. I got out of my car and inspected the police incident tapes. The whole road was quiet, grey, gloomy and hungover. I opened the side gate and walked along the side. Around the back of the house my keen eye looked for where the spare key might be hidden. I inspected the nearby shrubs for a key tied onto a branch and turned over likely stones. Nothing. I moved along the larch-lap fence looking for a hook. I looked in the mouldy-smelling garden shed and turned a few pots over. I examined the nozzle of the watering can. Nothing. A pale moon was emerging in the stony sky. I walked around the garden again and broke off the withered dahlia heads. The patio of hexagonal slabs was old and discoloured. I ran my eye carefully along the edge until I noticed a half-stone very slightly higher than the rest where it met the lawn. I nudged it with my foot. It moved. In a little pocket underneath, wrapped in plastic, I found a shiny back door key.

Letting myself in I wondered where I should begin my search. What exactly had Jolly hidden? And where? Was it a key or was it a computer disk? A letter? I discounted a trawl-through of the content of the drawers, which had been strewn everywhere. Too obvious. I knelt down and inspected the recesses of the cabinets in the kitchen and living room from where the drawers had been pulled, feeling carefully for anything taped to the surfaces of their interiors. Nothing. I pulled all the carpets in every room away from their grippers; looked underneath underlay and behind radiators; lifted the pictures from the wall; felt down the sides of the settee and armchairs and tipped them over to inspect their bottom material for any rips; took out the seats from the

dining room chairs; I looked in the cistern of the toilet; removed the bath-panel; took out all the towels in the airing cupboard and felt behind the hot-water tank; pulled back the beds; raised mattresses; climbed into the loft and lifted insulation. There was nothing. I looked at my watch. It was gone three and the fading daylight was inadequate for further searching. I could not chance switching on a light. It was time to go home. I called on Mrs Clifton first and made her a cup of tea. We chatted. She would not be long alone. Her daughter was flying down from Glasgow to be with her.

*

The next day I went in at nine o'clock. Maxine had had an even worse night. I felt exhausted and depressed. I had been there perhaps ten minutes staring at some file about a spate of car thefts on the more prosperous edge of the town, in which I had absolutely no interest, when Turner knocked and entered. As if he was a true friend he said

“God, Derek, you look knackered! Maxine no better?”

I managed a faint shake of the head and looked at him suspiciously. Derek indeed! He sat himself down opposite and stroked his chin, in the exaggerated manner of one trying to convey bewilderment. What a transparent man! I felt ill-disposed to help him to his next remark.

Finally he began. “Frankly, I’m puzzled, Derek.”

“Are you?”

“You didn’t protest. You weren’t bothered. About being off the case.”

“I wasn’t...and I’m not. It’s best we don’t work together. Full stop.”

Turner wasn’t satisfied. He considered what next to say.

“But you seemed so...worked up about it yesterday. So...so...”

“Adamant? About it not being a break-in? Well, I thought it over and decided to bow to your greater wisdom and experience.....Jonathan.”

Now Turner’s stupid, pudgy face darkened. “Don’t take the piss.”

I smiled to see him begin to lose his composure. I had a shortish fuse but his foul temper was legendary. I decided however not to push him. I was in no mood for a fight. Turner put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

“Derek, why can’t we let bygones be bygones? Just let’s get on with it. This is work, Derek, not our social life. I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine. I made an error of judgment, as did you. OK?”

“OK what?”

“You know what. Rule a big line... turn over the page put a new title..... Life’s too short - ”

“You know there was nothing between me and Jaqueline. I was upset. Over Maxine. Jacky was just showing me some compassion....yes, admittedly, in private...and to a dirty mind it might have looked suspicious....NO, DON’T TRY AND INTERRUPT ME..... but you had a motive to read something sordid into it. You drove Jacky, a genuine, lovely person, out of here with your mucky innuendos....You’re lucky she didn’t complain about harassment. And you want me to forget THAT?”

Turner hit back “Well I wouldn’t call a clinch in the dark “innocent”. It didn’t look like brother and sister to me, and I doubt if anybody else would have thought as much, and –“

“Just get to the point. Why are you really here?”

Now he leant back and cradled the back of his head in his palms. The attempt to neutralise my venom had failed again. He seemed to decide that had been the last attempt.

“We’re short-handed as you well know, DI Miller,” he said now standing formally and stiffly like a soldier on parade. “Thompson and Craddock are off sick. Chief Superintendent Gilbert wishes you to deal with the Toyota - and strictly that - reporting directly to him. I will handle the Jollys. Now, please tell me what Mr Clifton told you at the hospital.”

“I’ve already told you. He said nothing.”

Turner reached inside his jacket pocket and began to scan a piece of paper until he found the section he wanted. “...”DI Miller suddenly picked me up and hurled me backwards into the mud. This assault was completely unprovoked.....” - Serious matter, Miller, an assault on a fellow officer. Could get you demoted...or the sack....no pension....years of pain and penury...”

“You no doubt refer to Shephard. He in fact slipped and fell when I let him have the trainer. Everyone saw it. Ask his pretty assistant..... what’s-her-name.....Rhona? Rhoda?. She’ll confirm it. And DS Conway.”

“Well it sounds as if there will have to be an inquiry. But if you tell me what Clifton said I’ll bury this and threaten Shephard with a charge of gross misconduct at the Jollys. He sent this to me, not Gilbert. You’re in luck, it goes no further, as long as you tell me WHAT HE SAID.”

I tried to give him the impression that I was weighing the pros and cons of this offer, and eventually replied “Mmm. It wouldn’t be the first time that you have lost - or rather shredded vital evidence. Do what you like DCI Turner. You don’t frighten me. My conscience is clear.” Turner carefully folded the paper and, after returning it to his pocket, he shook his head in mock pity at me and left.

As expected the Toyota had been stolen; from a car park on New Year’s Eve. A DNA sample from the victim had been taken and the post-mortem had confirmed a stab wound to the heart as the cause of death. They now waited for someone in the target age group, 16-21 to be reported missing, otherwise a long-winded search-process involving dental records would have to begin.

But as I stirred my coffee I had a hunch.

I drove back to Somerset Drive and parked up at a safe distance from the Jolly’s house. First I slipped around the back, let myself in and took the photograph off the kitchen wall. I knocked at the neighbour’s front door and the nice middle-aged lady with whom I had spoken the previous morning showed me into her cosy lounge and made me a cup of tea. When she had settled I asked her to tell me when the Jollys had moved in. She told me that had been in the summer. She had got to know her through their common love of gardening.

“She was always out there at the front, tidying and planting. We began to get on really well. I lost my husband in February. To a stroke. When I told her that, she told me about the death of her step-daughter...” Now she paused and sniffled into her handkerchief. “Oh please excuse me. She had become such a dear neighbour.”

I assured her that everyone on the force had been equally appalled by this brutality. I asked her if Mrs Jolly had ever mentioned her son.

“Steven? Quite a bit. He had left home before they moved here.”

I was startled to hear her mention the same name gasped out by Clifton. “Are you sure he was called Steven?”

“Oh yes. She told me what a difficult phase he was going through and how it wasn’t surprising when you knew what a hard childhood he had had...being knocked about and...such like. But she was sure that one day he would come good and realised how much he was loved. And come

back home to them. I never met him of course.”

“Come good?” I asked. I made a note to check him out for a record. “Did she say what he had been up to?”

She shook her head and said it was not her business. I asked her if she had ever seen him call round. She said she had not. Now I thought it was time to show her the photo.

“This was him when he was about twelve.” I passed it to her. She looked at it and appeared taken aback. She had seen him! About a month ago he had been outside for quite a while sitting in a car playing music really loud. She had been on the verge of calling the police when they had suddenly driven away.

“They?”

“Yes, there was a car-full of them, all in those horrid caps they wear. I didn’t like the look of them at all.”

I sat in my car and thought it over. Steven Jolly was obviously a troubled teenager, but was he a callous psychopath capable of inflicting such murderous injuries on the very people who had tried to reach out to him? I looked into the cold, unsmiling eyes of the boy and tried to measure them for empathy. I found little evidence of any. I looked at the brace on the grinning teeth and instantly knew what to do next. I phoned Conway and told him to start phoning orthodontists and find who had fitted a brace in Steven Jolly’s mouth.

“Good news on the videos, Sir,” said Conway. “One from number 21 further down shows the Toyota pulling up at 03:51. Two chaps in cat suits get out and walk up the road towards number 32. Then at 05:15 they run back to the car and drive off. They’re our villains.”

I asked him if they had been carrying anything. I waited while Conway went away to review the tape.

“No, Boss, they were carrying absolutely nothing.”

“A strange burglary then. Well done, lad. Get onto those orthodontists now.”

I sat as if paralysed and watched the rain streaming down the windscreen. At 49 I felt like an exhausted swimmer within a few strokes of the end of his race. I needed desperately to retire not just because I was tired and depressed but also in order to care properly for Maxine. To do so I would have to build up as much pension as I could to make ourselves secure. I had no idea of what care she would need or what its ultimate cost would be.

Not a day went by when the dangerous thought of suicide did not fleetingly enter my head. The sheer futility of my life confronted me every morning when I opened my weary eyes; the routine of the shower as it turned on and warmed up and washed me clean; the few instants, like the gap, as I imagined it, between the last breath of life and the swishing drop of some guillotine blade, as I switched the shower off before it finally stopped itself, seemed to symbolise the cruel, mechanical existence I led. What prospect of joy was there? An old age watching my beloved wife deteriorate and die in misery. And an alienated son, nursing an hysterical, self-sustaining belief that he was the victim of an unhappy childhood had exiled himself, incommunicado, to southern France.

Maxine and I were temperamental, easily roused people, and yes, not easy to live with. I had drunk to excess at one time but had finally brought it under control. Maxine had a side to her which I feared; the passion which made her dig her fingertips deep into my skin as she came to her shuddering climaxes with an unearthly cry of delight, was the same ranting demon which could possess her for furious purposes. It had been a roller-coaster of a marriage, now exhilarating, now dispiriting. But now our heyday, in every respect, was finally and irrevocably

behind us. All I could look forward to was the torment of her pain which I could sense but not divide and share with her, in order to make it bearable. This frustration, born of sheer helplessness, made me more miserable than anything, apart from her accusation that I remained at her side from a sense of duty and not love. It depressed me because it was dawning on me that it was becoming the truth. I tried to console myself with the cheap thought that others were in a worse situation; undoubtedly they were, another voice retorted, but just because someone else was deeper in the mire did not make the reek in my nose any better.

The dismal place we had moved to, symptomatic of the callous disgrace which was much of run-down urban Britain; the people I worked against there and their violent, senseless acts, and some of the people I worked with, had gradually poisoned the wells of my goodwill and every hour I yearned to walk in the wooded seclusion of my beloved Tyrol, to cleanse myself of this pernicious influence; but Maxine's illness made such thoughts of glorious independence impossible.

I thought again of the appalling crime I had to come to terms with and attempt to solve, even though I was officially no longer the responsible officer. I am not Sherlock Holmes, but I knew there was no-one else on the Earlstone force capable enough or concerned enough. I forced myself out of the car and walked back around the bend through the driving rain towards the Jollys' in order to put the photograph back on the wall. I let myself in again but decided in the end to keep the photograph and just leave the frame in a drawer. Who on the force, apart from me, was keen-eyed enough to notice it missing? Certainly not Jonathan Turner.

As I removed the photograph a small key fell out from between it and the backing of the frame. It looked like a suitcase key. As I examined it, in disbelief at this stroke of good fortune, I heard with alarm the front door being opened. Torn between the impulse to escape and the desire to stay and satisfy my curiosity as to who the visitor was, I hesitated near the back door. To my relief the ensuing footsteps ascended the staircase. For a while there was silence. Then came the scrape and rumble of furniture being moved about. I crept out into the hall. Slowly, silently I mounted the stairs, placing my feet as far into the angles as I could to avoid making a creak. It sounded now as if the heavy double bed was being trundled to one side; with every rumble of the castors I heard a grunt of effort and almost had to giggle as I knew that whoever it was straining himself would find nothing, as I already had. Now my eyes were almost level with the landing. Great shiny shoes came marching past my nose and disappeared into another bedroom. They belonged to Turner. Intrigued, I retreated back to the kitchen. I opened the backdoor and slammed it as loud as I could, and then stood with the photo in one hand and the frame in the other, poised as if to begin the next scene of a soap opera. The frantic noises above had stopped. Now the footsteps were rapidly descending. Just before Turner came into the kitchen I began my scene, as if I was just in the act of removing the photo from the frame.

"What the devil are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"I found a backdoor key under the patio. I was just collecting this photo."

"Why? You know you're off limits here. WHY won't you do as you're bloody well TOLD?"

I could not help but smirk, revelling in my unsuspected advantage.

"And what brings you back here, Sir?"

He looked flustered in exactly the same way as he had done when I had walked in him, as he was shredding those papers in his office, in which incident our enmity was rooted. Turner pulled out his mobile phone from his pocket and told me that he had left it upstairs the previous day. I felt now so hot, to be told such a whopping, such an obvious lie, that I thought my own face must be blushing in embarrassment for him. But Turner seemed not to notice, very pleased with himself,

I supposed, to invent such an inspired lie on the spur of the moment. Thinking himself in the ascendancy he now rounded on me.

“You are OFF THIS CASE. Which of those words do you fail to grasp, DI Miller?”

Yet again I felt disgusted by my superior’s inferior soap-opera dramatics and love of cliché. What a deplorable man he was in every sense.

“This photograph is essential to solving the case which I am currently re-assigned to work on...Sir.”

He shook his head in incomprehension. ”Sorry, DI Miller, I must be denser than I thought. I’m not receiving you.”

In answer I tapped the image of the boy and told him deliberately slowly what the neighbour had told me. He flinched and I saw it.

“You.....surely don’t mean to say that you think...that the...stepson had anything to do with this?”

“I’d put money on it.”

My adversary was so taken aback that, as I left through the backdoor, he forgot to demand the key which I had found. By the time he did remember and had taken it from me, I had had a copy of it cut.

The hardening of my initial instinct to almost a conviction that DCI Turner was somehow involved with this nasty business came as such a shock that at first I thought his furtive search of the upstairs rooms must have a more obvious explanation. I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he had been persuaded to subscribe to my initial interpretation of the facts. Had he possibly acquired information by a route of which I was unaware? Did he in fact know, somehow, what it was that the murderers were looking for? I took out the almost weightless key and tossed it up and down in my hand and smiled, finally caught it and put it onto my key-ring.

At about four o’clock the orthodontist who had clamped the adopted son’s teeth was tracked down. Not long afterwards it was confirmed that the teeth of the burnt corpse belonged to Steven Legal Jolly.

I sat in my office drinking cup after cup of coffee and thinking things over. What valuable possession did the stepfather have, known about or seen by Steven Legal Jolly, which he so vehemently craved? How and why was Turner involved? Or had I jumped entirely to the wrong conclusion, influenced by my previous experience and dislike of the man? Possibly. Yet everything shouted the contrary.

The confirmation of the involvement of the stepson decided the Chief Superintendent to call a press conference. The story now made the national news and everyone threw up their hands predictably in horror. Other cases of similar ingrates were unearthed and people wondered - again - what the world was coming to. The apparent motive - greed - made the outrage more vehement. The more respectable news media speculated on whether the boy had acted out of revenge for some real or imagined domestic abuse. Turner, the spokesman, had not elaborated on anything more sinister than a vicious burglary and seemed, on my close perusal of his recorded words and gestures, content to convey the simple impression that Stephen Jolly had in turn become the victim of one as equally depraved and unconscionable as he. And he seemed more than content to make the hunt for that villain the one remaining issue.

Before going off duty I found myself summoned to the Chief’s office. My heart froze. Would I

now be formally accused of assault? To my relief and astonishment the mournful Chief was almost beaming, congratulating me on first-class detective work.

“Does this mean I’m back on the Jollys’ case, Sir?”

Paul Gilbert frowned and thought this over. He murmured that the cases had coincided rather and then finally making up his mind said

“I’m giving you full responsibility DI Miller. Find out who did this”

“But, with respect Sir, if I have to have contact with DCI Turner...”

“You realise that this puts me in a predicament. We are under intense pressure to solve this. There’s a vicious killer on the loose and we need to catch him. I know that you and Turner have a history. You are the abler officer, Miller. That stays within these walls. I gave you the burnt-out car case. So be it. Of course if any new evidence relating to the couple is unearthed it goes without saying that this must be passed over immediately to your senior colleague, and any suspect must be questioned jointly by you and him. I realise that this may cause conflict but the investigation and the safety of the public must be our priority. DS Conway can liaise between you. I am minded to transfer one of you, as soon as practicable, to another station. That will be all.”

I left convinced - and determined - that the officer transferred would not be me. When Turner found out that I was not, after all, as he had hoped, to have my time taken up with car thefts and was back in the driving seat almost, he was livid. I went out of his way to avoid him as I left the station.

*

In the early hours off the next morning as my wife was finally dropping off to sleep beside me while I gently stroked her back, I wondered where to go next with my enquiry. Steven Jolly had clearly got in with a bad lot. Were they drug users? Did he have a record? Who were his friends? Where did he drink? I decided I would start tomorrow at his school and get a few names to follow up. An appeal through the local evening paper for contacts might do the trick.....

When I regained my train of thought, lost in a shallow mist of sleep, the blackness of the night was turning into that dreaded navy blue colour at the edge of the curtain. I watched the minute-hand of the alarm clock rise like a railway signal towards seven. Now it was time to get out of bed and drag myself once again through that vile routine of the early morning.

Steven Jolly had no record, not even a caution. DS Conway came away from the local comprehensive school with nothing. Jolly had been a loner, shunning everyone and shunned by them; he had been a bully and had spent weeks at home or in special units, excluded for verbal and physical assaults on pupils and staff. My team took the photograph around the local pubs but no-one recognised the boyish face and the name Steven Jolly meant nothing to anyone. The newspaper appeal drew a hoax call and nothing more. It dawned on me that he had possibly moved far away from the area after the rupture with his step-parents.

Earlstone was a large post-industrial town at the hub of the motorway network. Coventry, Leicester and Birmingham were easily accessible. Who knew where Jolly had landed up? I looked at the key I had retrieved and knew that it was the key to solving the whole crime. It looked like it opened a suitcase. As soon as I had dealt with a few routine matters, I returned to the house and let myself in. I checked the loft again and the tops and insides of wardrobes. I did a rapid double-check on all the places I had searched previously. I rummaged through the shed and

garage but found not one suitcase. Did these people never go away on holiday? I looked in the coat cupboard downstairs and pulled all the garments off the hooks. Perhaps there was a briefcase somewhere. I cleared the ledge of scarves, slippers and hats and in a corner at the back I found three shoe boxes. I took out the top box, then the second, and found, unsurprisingly, that they contained shoes. I was about to close the door when I noticed there was something slightly different about the third box. It stood proud of the others and there was a slight gap at the back; cut away on its two blind sides it merely served to house a strong box which was attached to the wall. Taking the key I inserted it fully into the lock and with a thrill heard the lid click open as it turned. Inside was a book larger than a pocket diary with a spiral spine. As I drew it out into the light I read on the cover, in panned block italics WHO KILLED ABIGAIL? Abigail? Then, as if jolted by an electric shock, I started and remembered that Abigail had been Jolly's step-daughter. I took the book into the kitchen, made myself a drink and opened to the first page. Written in a clear hand I read:

“If you have discovered this, or I have sent it to you, be aware that I intend to discover how a girl, barely 14 years old, my adopted daughter, whom I endeavoured to bring to a place of love and safety, came instead by way of drugs in this very ordinary town. The police seem to be unaware of who are the pushers or, if they do, seem not to care. I owe it to our Abigail, and to many other children and parents, to bring whoever is culpable to justice. I shall not rest until I do.”

It was signed James Jolly. Here then, surely, I held in my hand the reason that Mr Jolly and his wife had been murdered. I locked the safe, replaced the shoe boxes and clothing and left the house. I dropped the key down a drain and returned to my car. Having put the diary into my glove compartment, I drove home behind a car with a Christmas tree roped to its roof, scattering needles in its wake, evidently on its way to a dump. Truly, the season of goodwill had ended.

I found Maxine in tears on the sofa when I came in. The pain in her spine was taking the starring role again. Tomorrow it might be her wrists or her knees. Michelle hovered in the doorway, looking first at one then the other, but said nothing, for words were useless. The doctor had been an hour ago. She had been prescribed a new anti-inflammatory drug and had been told to take a stronger dose of her painkillers whenever she needed to, but not to exceed ten a day. Returning from the pharmacy, I paid a grateful and subdued Michelle a handsome bonus and then settled down with Maxine and her pain. At last, no longer able to stand the silence, I said in despair “We need to get you away from here, Max...to somewhere warmer and drier. You can't go on like this....”

On cue she came back “But how can we? You can't retire early....If we go to Spain will I get proper treatment? How would we afford private treatment? I'm uninsurable.”

“We'll sell up here, buy a tiny flat and live on the difference.” Now I thought to throw in a new argument. “We could manage...I could do security work in the clubs.”

But Maxine wearily shook her head. This was the signal to change the subject. This conversation was as futile and predictable to Maxine as her pain. As she lay in the stifling heat of the living room, having had a little supper in order to be able to take her new drugs, warm under her blanket, now staring unseeing at the prattling television, now dozing, I quietly took up the diary and began to read.

The first few pages were almost illegible, a scribble in which dates and remarks were quickly jotted. There were crossings out, underlinings, arrows, asterisks and question marks until I suddenly saw circled on about the fifth page in, the name Brierley. It seemed to burn on the page like an illumination on parchment. I was so shocked that the book fell from my lap onto the carpet. A letter fell out from the back, a letter with the heading of my own police station. Dated 29th October the previous year, it read

Dear Mr Jolly,

Thank you for your letter of 16th October. Please excuse the delay in replying but I have had to look into a number of allegations which you have made.

I have to point out to you that it is not enough to quote hearsay overheard in a noisy public bar in order to warrant the launch of an enquiry into the conduct of a private citizen who, I have been assured, enjoys an impeccable reputation in this community.

I have interviewed Mr Brierley informally, and he has asked me to inform you that he is minded to take legal action against you for libel. Such a task as I herewith perform is more properly the business of a solicitor, but in this special instance I have decided to exceed the normal limits of my professional responsibility due to the sad circumstances of your loss. Mr Brierley has been made aware of those circumstances and quite understands your desire to see those responsible apprehended.

In view of your obvious inner torment he is, he informs me, prepared to overlook this matter on this one occasion, as long as you now relent from making wild, unfounded allegations.

Mr Jolly, our investigation into the death of your daughter is still extremely active. I urge you now to leave these matters to us and not to rub shoulders with those, shall we say, on the borderlines of law-abiding society, thereby possibly putting yourself into harm's way,

Yours most sincerely,

Paul Gilbert

I was utterly stunned. What? Had Paul Gilbert completely forgotten about this recent correspondence with Jolly, the barely cold victim of a murder so hideous, that it was unprecedented in its brutality in our- or any other - manor? Why had he not mentioned this exchange of letters with Jolly to me at any point in the last few days? Had he simply signed the letter on behalf of someone else - Turner, perhaps? - without properly reading it? But no, Gilbert had personally intervened Brierley! It said so, in black and white. How could this possibly have slipped his mind? Why had he alerted Brierley to the fact that he was accused of such serious misconduct? That my own sober-sides Chief could be involved in some foul criminal conspiracy seemed so postposterous that I tried to dismiss it there and then.

Brierley!

I sat back on the sofa, sipped my glass of wine and closed my eyes. I saw myself again walking into Turner's office that fateful day. I had left a file in there. I thought I had seen my boss leaving and assumed the room was empty. The light was off.

I had been in Earlstone six weeks or so. When I had first come onto the scene Turner and I had gotten on reasonably well, although I realised he was a Philistine when I had casually mentioned that I had been to see Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* at the Birmingham Hippodrome, only to be met with an obvious stare of blank incomprehension, and the remark that he thought October was a bit early for pantomime.

As I had breezed in whistling, there at the shredder, feeding in a folio, was Turner. Startled and flustered he had barked at me "Don't you believe in knocking?"

I had frozen, embarrassed at the door. The late November twilight was thickening. Turner had scooped up a manilla folder from the table. I just got a glimpse of the first couple of letters. Apologising profusely, I had withdrawn.

A few weeks later in the early spring the full significance of what I had seen dawned on me. DS Morgan had literally rampaged through the cantine, kicking chairs over, shouting "How the FUCK did that medical report on Simon Brierley go missing? Wankers.....WANKERS!" Simon Brierley, I was informed by Conway when Morgan had stormed out, was the son of Bernard Brierley. Bernard was a builder, entrepreneur, man of means and property, chairman of the golf club, driving force and chief grand cheese of the locality, without whose say-so little got done in Earlstone. And his son had just escaped prosecution for drink-driving when an apologetic and perplexed prosecution had offered no evidence.

About to take a sip of my coffee I had stopped. *Brierley!* Had the letters Br... I had glimpsed on the manilla folder in that instant the previous year been the beginning of Brierley? As the news of the collapse of the case and of the missing evidence spread, I thought I saw a change in Turner's face when we met; a dark grimace began to scan my face from one eye to the other and back again.

The next evening I had bought the evening paper and had expected to read about the collapse of the case. I turned over page after page until I reached the small ads. There was not a word about it. Yet the case had actually gone into the magistrates' court. It was as if the event had never happened. But I decided to put it to the back of my mind.

And that might have been that, had Gilbert not arrived on the scene that autumn from Leicester. I was impressed. Solid, unexciting and impeccably polite, Gilbert was a refreshing change from his self-preening predecessor. He had appealed in his welcoming address to the assembled force for the highest standards: of alertness, of public service, of commitment, but, beyond all these, of integrity. We had a duty, he stressed, to come to him if we suspected malfeasance in the force. I had deliberately avoided looking at Jonathan Turner.

Inspired and unsettled, I had finally made up my mind to take my rekindled concern to him, but first I had to pluck up the nerve to lay my suspicions before Turner, in case I had got it all wrong and was about to make an utter fool of myself, or worse.

I refilled my wine glass. The new anti-inflamms seemed to be working. Now Maxine was snoring lightly. Should I wake her in case her sleeping too long now would mean a sleepless night? I looked at the wall clock. Just after nine. I decided to let her sleep while she could. I returned to my reflections.

I had knocked at Turner's door and had waited for a "come in." Once seated, I told him I had a matter to discuss which had been causing me sleepless nights. Turner's faint smile then disappeared. He seemed to know what was coming. I had already decided to play it not as an accuser but as a colleague with a dilemma, in need of reassurance and advice.

"Jonathan...I can't get it out of my head, what I saw that evening last year when I walked in on you, and you were at the shredder...."

Turner said nothing. That grimace had returned, but this time it beheld me without a flicker. I saw in that dark expression all the confirmation I needed. I knew now that I was about to burn my bridges.

"Did you....destroy evidence...against Simon Brierley?"

I could scarcely believe I had said it. As confirmation that I had, I was treated to the sight of an even darker glower, the contempt of a corrupted man, spread across the ruddy cheeks opposite, stretched taut by a humourless smile. Turner lit a cigarette. The lighter flickered twice in his rimless spectacles. He blew the smoke onto the table like a fog.

He spoke in a whisper. "I did. But you can't prove it. If you try to.... I'll destroy you. Now turn around."

I looked behind me immediately, wondering what I would see.

"That's the *door*, Miller. Open it, close it.....and fuck off."

It must have been five or six weeks later. New Years Eve. Jacqueline, a pretty detective constable I vaguely knew had come to see me. She had found out somehow that my wife had rheumatoid arthritis. She told me that her own mother was a sufferer. It was late and getting dark. We had talked it over and swapped stories about the misery it caused. She had suddenly taken her face in her hands and begun to shudder with emotion. I had stood up and gone over to her, now almost in tears myself. Smuggled-in bottles had been gradually emerging from lockers and drawers, as the afternoon shift had wound down in that quiet period before the midnight storm. I had had one or two glasses as so, probably, had she. Now the light went on and a startled Jacky had jumped out of my innocent embrace and run out of my office. I blinked and saw that it was Turner smirking at the door, licking his finger and chalking up an "equaliser" in the air.

Then Jacky had come to me, telling me that Turner had threatened to tell her fiancé what he had seen. I thought I saw knowing smiles in the faces of some of my colleagues, and Turner took every opportunity to make some pointed remark or other. He began to call me lover-boy. Finally, in exasperation, I had tackled him. We had had a screaming row which must have echoed unintelligibly along the corridor. Turner, then, with primitive cunning, had blocked my threat of checkmate with a devious move of his own.

Amongst the scribble in the diary I kept seeing "Duke" with what looked like dates and times. Was it a surname? A nickname? Then it came to me: this was probably The Duke of Marlborough, a public house on the edge of the most derelict area of the town. Despite its august name The Duke was the worst dive in Earlstone, watering-hole of the lowest of the low. I read on. The names Hurley, then Ben, then Griffin began to appear. Griffin I recognised. He was one of the most abnoxious villains hereabouts. For the right price he had an expert knack of putting the wind up people, once driving a young hooligan who had been harassing a client forty miles out of town, forcing him to strip at knife-point before abandoning him with his clothes in the boot. He had spent most of his adult life in prison; assault, robbery and extortion were his stock-

in-trade. A machine gun had been found in the boot of his car, for which he had done his longest stretch. Was he out now, I wondered, between sentences, as it were? What was he into at present? Drugs? That didn't ring quite true. Griffin earned a living by thuggery, not as an entrepreneur. He wasn't clever enough. I read on but could see no connection between Brierley and any of the other details. Brierley would surely have no verifiable link with The Duke or Griffin.

I had made enquiries after the collapse of the court case and knew that he lived in a smart mansion out past Wolverley, surrounded by a few acres of woodland, with a stable of sleek motor cars and horses. The Duke of Marlborough would not be his local.

I turned the next page, deciphering nothing. Then to my delight the neat, ink-penned hand of the preamble returned and I read the following clear entries.

Saturday May 3rd

Steven has finally told me where I should be looking. At the Duke. He had been drinking. I asked him if he had used drugs himself and he admitted he had. We pleaded with him not to make the same mistake as Abigail. But he kept maintaining that she was just stupid and just went over the top to impress her friends at the party. Finally he got really, really upset and slammed his bedroom door. Why won't we leave him alone? He doesn't belong to us, he keeps shouting, when we try to get him to come out. Pat is crying downstairs now. What an evil drugs are. What misery they bring. I look at the photo. We were all so happy then, a new family. Not a cloud in the sky.

Next week I'm going to The Duke to see what I can find out. I phoned the police again. Nothing new. Abigail dead now a month and nothing. I phoned to speak to somebody about The Duke four, no five days, ago but nobody has come back to me. What do we pay our rates for? And we've also decided to move house. We need a fresh start.

Wednesday May 7th

I went to The Duke tonight. I decided to go in my oldest clothes. I thought about asking Steven to come with me but he would probably have refused. Anyway, I decided to pretend to be a bit the worse for drink. I must have been convincing because nobody took much notice of me. The music, if that's what it is, was deafening. I saw an oldish chap in the corner and got into a conversation with him. His name was Charlie Hurley. I told him I was new in town; that I'd just got out of prison. What had I done? Burglary.

Charlie told me he had been drinking in there for forty or so years. He had been a bit of a villain himself in his younger days. The Duke had always been the first port of call for the police if the bloke they wanted to interview or arrest was not at home. He reeked of alcohol. I wondered if this little old man, sitting unobserved in the corner, day in, day out, was just the one to tell me about the drug-dealing that went on there. Then Steven walked in, saw me and walked straight out again.

Thursday May 8th

Today Steven left home and said he would never come back. Pat begged him, but it was if she was talking to a total stranger.

Tonight I went back to The Duke again. Pat is really worried I'll get into a bother. I told her that I had a corner to sit in where I felt really safe.

I buy Charlie a pint. He begins to reminisce about the days when Earlstone was a busy

place before all the factories began to close as knitwear and hosiery wilted under cheap imports. He says he used to be on the stocking machines, walking up and down all day collecting all the emerging nylon legs, in heat, stench of oil and din. He is quite drunk and feeling a little sorry for himself as he has tinnitus and can't sleep. I tell him that sitting in this noise can't be doing him much good. He shrugs. I buy him another pint, from which he gratefully sucks the foaming head.

Feeling he might now be in the mood to tell me what I want to know, I finally pluck up the nerve to tell him I am after some cannabis. Is there anybody in there who could help? At first I think he hasn't heard me properly even though I have spoken slowly and quite loudly in the noise of the music. He stares at me and shakes his head. He seems unsure of what to say, just keeps sucking on his fag and on his pint. Finally he mutters that I should watch my step. Is he threatening me or advising me, I wonder? Then he nods in the direction of a group of four young chaps in baseball caps in the opposite corner and tells me that they were users and pushers - small-time - they work for someone else. I ask him "Who?" but again he shakes his head, more vigorously. (Is he playing a game with me?) Then one of the group stands up and leaves the bar with his mobile pressed to one ear and his hand over the other. Hurley tells me his name is Ben and that he is probably doing some "Biz" out back. I have a feeling that I recognise him as one of Steven's friends. I stand up and follow him out. As I push open the door of the gents I can see him through a window in the passage talking outside in the yard with a girl with bottle-green hair. She is a little older than Abi and I think I recognise her too. They appeared to be involved in some transaction.

Now, if I, Joe Public, could witness this sort of thing in such a short space of time what was wrong with the police? Were they too busy or couldn't they just be bothered with this low-level trafficking? What about Abigail? Was she low-level?

When I go back in a stout middle-aged fellow in a red football top has joined the group of young men and is swigging from a bottle. They are rocking with laughter at some story he is telling. He is evidently enjoying being their source of entertainment. Charlie whispers that he is called Griffin - a really nasty crook. Ben, returning, hands over a wad of notes to him. He counts it quickly and then stuffs a couple into Ben's shirt pocket and pats him on the back.

Maxine coughed and woke herself up. I went into the kitchen to make her a drink.

If Griffin was the collector, was he collecting for Brierley?

*

The next day I asked for the file on Abigail Jolly to be brought up. I saw, as I had half-suspected, that Turner had been the investigating officer. I asked Conway to find out if Don Griffin was currently a guest of Her Majesty. Apparently he was not. I read through two short statements, one by a girl called Rachel Lewin and one by a Charmaine Bishop. Both told essentially the same tale; they had been to a birthday party in Coventry Rd in April with Abigail. She had already had some lager and was pretty drunk. After drinking first a vodka and then a large glass of cider in one go, she had collapsed. I looked at the post-mortem report.....evidence of a large dose of Ecstasy.....she was twice the legal driving limit for alcohol. She had gone into a coma and one by one her organs had shut down. The coroner had recorded a death by misadventure. I looked for an interview with the host of the party. There was none. I noted her name and address in Coventry Rd. The investigation struck me as a particularly shoddy piece of work, even by

Turner's standards.

At the given address in one of the more dismal areas of the town Rachel Lewin was not known. And Charmaine Bishop, I was informed by a rather unpleasant fat woman, wheezing on a cigarette, had left home.

"Her dad - my partner - threw the little tart out. In another load of bother is she?"

As soon as I had the address I smiled at her politely and replied that that was none of her business. Charmaine turned out to be living in a flat above a newsagent's in a parade of shops, part of a less well-sought-after area of a large, rambling housing estate. The schools had gone back. A gaggle of truants in hoods and caps sat aimlessly on the concourse, rolling backwards and forwards astride their push-bikes. I rapped at the front door. I could hear a baby bawling away upstairs. I knocked again. Eventually I heard a "Wad-yer-want?" from the top of the stairs. I flipped open the letterbox and shouted, "I'm Detective Inspector Miller. I need to speak to you."

"Worrabout?"

"About Abigail."

"I've already spoke to the blood police. Goo-way!"

"Would you rather talk to me at the station, Charmaine?"

She thought it over then slowly came down and opened up. I was startled to see she had dyed her hair bottle-green and I thought of the diary. She was smoking right-handed and, zapping like a crab, a baby was cradled in her left arm. Charmaine's sleeve had ridden up. I noticed needle marks on her forearm. The baby stopped crying and gaped at me in amazement. I smiled back at it and now it buried its head in her paltry bosom. The teenager was thin and looked ill and tired. Her complexion was pimply and ruined.

"What d'you want?" she asked hoarsely. Her eyes were like the faded side-lights of a car. Yet I could see she might have once been pretty, the apple of some father's eye, a child prematurely exposed to the rough edges of Earlstone's subculture, as brutal as its square, pebble-dashed, sixties slums.

"I just need to ask a few questions. I won't be long."

She turned and walked back up the cold stone steps. I noted that a passageway ran past the foot of the flight of stairs to the back door. A stripy old pushchair was propped up, folded, against the wall. I followed her up. It was freezing. She had opened and closed a door at the top of the stairs. Now the baby was howling in its cot. I joined her in the kitchen where she took one last red glowing drag of her fag and stubbed it out. She closed the kitchen door and the noise was reduced further. I began by asking her if she knew where Rachel Lewin was.

"No. We had a big fall-out. She moved to Brum. I think."

I blew into my chilly hands and asked her if she would make a cuppa. She shrugged and put the tin kettle on the gas stove. The walls were bare. A tiny table stood in the corner. One bar of an old electric fire glowed on the work surface. I drew a chair over and sat down. The crying now stopped and she closed her narrow eyes, relieved.

"The joys of motherhood, eh?" I said. "How old is he?"

"It's a she. She's five months"

And as ugly as sin, I could not stop myself thinking, and then felt ashamed.

"What's her name?"

"Tayler"

"Mmm, that's.....different," I said, secretly appalled. She made the tea in a cup and passed it

over. She looked at me and said “Well?”

“I read your statement. There was a lot you didn’t say, I think.”

“I just answered the questions what I was asked,” she retorted.

I drank and nodded my head in appreciation. I waited and chose my moment to ask her sharply

“Who gave Abigail the E?”

She swallowed hard and coughed. “Dunno.”

But I could tell that she did know.

“It was Steven Jolly, wasn’t it?”

The ploy worked, drawing a belligerent denial from her. Now I asked her, quietly, almost sweetly, if Abigail was a good friend. She told me that she had been her best friend. She stopped and turned her face, upset, to the dirty lace at the window. She was a study in utter, abject misery. I waited awhile, sipping the tea, until she composed herself.

“Charmaine...are you afraid to say who, or are you protecting somebody? A boyfriend?”

“I-I ‘aven’t got-a boyfriend.”

The child was crying again, as was the child-mother. I suspected neither had the love of anybody.

“How old are you, Charmaine?”

Through her sniffles she sobbed out that she was sixteen. I suddenly felt a terrible, aching pity for her. She was of low intelligence and had had her childhood, teenage and youth stolen, yet another depressing victim, I thought, of the suppurating chaos of the British underclass, sinking further beyond the reach of school and church. I felt angry. I had been an avid socialist in my teens and twenties. I had felt wretched whenever deployed against the miners and CND demonstrations. I had not entered the police force to do that Foul Woman’s political dirty work. Here again, in my continuing disillusionment, I felt disgust at this underbelly of an unfettered licentiousness, a politics of vulgarity blown up from nowhere, of a devil-take-the-hindmost, vile individualism, bent solely on acquisitiveness and “self-betterment.” Charmaine was a simple girl who needed firm guidelines to keep the wolves and jackals at bay. In fact they had been allowed to abduct her, almost with the blessing of her ignorant, pathetic parents.

“And what did you tell the other copper when he asked you?”

“That I din’t know. He believed me!”

Yes, he would, I thought.

“Who are you frightened of? We can protect you, Charmaine”

She snorted. “Just like you protected Abi’s mam and dad?”

“They didn’t ask for help.” I cried. Then, suddenly ashamed, I thought of the letter and diary, and my sense of moral superiority evaporated. I drank the cheap, weak tea.

“I want to put three names to you... Please look at me Charmaine...Ever heard of Ben? And Griffin?”

She stared down into the faded red tiles of the floor. I left my chair and went over to her.

Kneeling down, and only two inches from her face, I tenderly whispered the name “Brierley?”

She closed her eyes and bowed her head again. I studied her low forehead and the mousy brown roots of her scarlet hair. She reeked of tobacco and sourness. She was a ruin. At sixteen.

“How on earth did you get into this mess, Charmaine?” I murmured, with a catch in my voice.

Unable to help herself any longer she thrust her head into my chest and exploded in sobs. I patted her back and then went out to the crying child. I picked her up. She smelt bad. She was cold. I took her mat and laid her on it. I un-popped her babygros, cleaned her up and saw with horror how red and pimply her bottom was. I found some talcum powder and sprinkled it liberally on

her soreness.

“Charmaine....you need to get something for her nappy rash”

I carried her into the kitchen. “Let the air get to her for a while and change her regularly...here’s a twenty towards nappies...and buy her a woollen blanket, she’s cold and that’s why she cries..... Charmaine??”

She nodded, took the money and whispered a thank you.

“Does the Health Visitor call?”

She shook her head.

“Go to the doctor and get yourself put on her list.”

She nodded again. “It was Ben!” she blurted out. “He was at the party. You can tell him I said so. I don’t care what happens to me any more”

“He will never know. I’m not after him. I’m after Mr Big. Do you or did you ever get supplied at The Duke?”

I took her silence for a yes.

“Does Ben work for Griffin?”

She said that she did not know.

“Does Griffin work for a man called Brierley?”

“I have no idea.”

“But you know the name Brierley. I could tell.”

“I know.....Simon Brierley.”

“You’ve met him?” I cried, astonished. Now she laughed bitterly.

“How do you know him?” I urged.

“Parties....’orse-riding...at his ‘ouse...He likes young teenage girls...schoolgirls.....dirty bastard.....”

She looked away ashamed and gripped herself tight. I stared at her. The baby danced and gurgled with pleasure in her bouncer.

“Are you saying that Simon Brierley had underage sex with you at his house near Wolverley?”

She looked out dreamily across the dismal rooftops beyond. I had a sudden thought.

“Charmaine, how do you support yourself and pay for your habit?”

Her little eyes were filling with tears again.

“Take a minute...here, have a glass of water...”

I filled a glass and she took a sip. Then she said matter-of-factly. “I’m on his list. His rich friends pay me visits. They’re generous. Brierley pays the rent and such....”

I was silent. How many pies did this beast have his crooked fingers into? I was filled with a mixture of rage, disgust and pity. I resolved, then and there, like Mr Jolly before me, to stop at nothing to bring him to justice. But then Turner came into my thoughts, chalking the air with his finger as Jacqueline ran out of his office. I would have to think of a way to sideline him and his threat to my marriage.

“Charmaine. Would you be willing to make a statement about Brierley?”

She looked at me in disbelief. I carried on as if I had not noticed.

“And I need the names of other young girls he abused, to back you up, for extra proof...”

She looked at the child and said “She’s my proof.”

I looked at Tayler and did a double-take. “Tayler’s his daughter??”

She picked at the ends of her hair and did not answer at first. Then she nodded.

“And did Abigail go with you to Brierley’s?”

She nodded again.

“And Rachel? Was Abi made pregnant by him too?”

This time she shrugged.

“Abi slept with loads of blokes. She was an easy lay...like I am now.”

“But why didn’t you tell your dad it was a...grown...man...Brierley?”

“I weren’t absolutely sure at first it were ‘im but ‘e wouldn’t ‘ave been interested, anyway. We were ‘ardly speaking”

“Does Brierley know the baby’s his?”

“He didn’t”

I stood up. “You mean he does now?”

Again she shrugged.

“I dunno. When Ben’s mate Josh came round with my gear the other day I lost my rag and told ‘im I thought Tayler were ‘is. I’m sick o’ livin’ in this slum. Simon promised ‘e’d set me up in a nice place in Burwell...for doing ‘im and ‘is mates....turns. But I’m not grassing ‘im up. ‘E’s scary.”

I felt frustrated. “Describe the men who come here to me, then I’ll go.” She counted seven on her tiny fingers and she began to sketch them with words. I kept waiting for Turner’s pudgy face to emerge but it did not. Number 5 however interested me greatly.

“...And then there’s a big blubbery man...speaks quiet....eyes like a sad fish. I have to sit on ‘im....or I’d get squished....”

I told her to keep the doors locked and not to let anyone in.

*

“I want to be taken off the Jolly case, Sir” I said to Paul Gilbert, watching for the effect this would have on his watery eyes.

“Whatever for?”

So I told him how ill my wife was, how I could not sleep properly, how I could not concentrate or get a decent handle on Steven Jolly and his contacts in Earlstone.

“I need to do something less demanding for a time...something more routine...like those car thefts in Fairleigh Parva....”

“Are you saying you are unfit for duty, DI Miller?”

“No, Sir...I’m asking for something less stressful until my wife can get her pain under control. She’s on new drugs...We’re hopeful...”

Gilbert thought it over. I felt him gauging the depth of my pain. He told me to take two days leave to catch up on my sleep, and to hand over my case notes - such as they were - to Turner.

“When you return to duty, we’ll talk it through again.” He smiled a wan smile with his sad fish eyes. Beneath his professional self-restraint he was so obviously a kind man and I could imagine him playing silly games with his grandchildren. Surely he was not mixed up with Brierley! I found myself on the verge of mentioning the letter he had sent to Jolly but stopped myself just in time. I thanked him and left the room.

I was collecting some items together in my office when Turner came storming in.

“Why are you treading on my toes, Miller? Why take out the Abigail Jolly file without consulting me? Never heard of professional courtesy?”

Suddenly I sensed an imminent new danger to Charmaine and Rachel.

“Why? Because I was hoping to get a lead on who Steven Jolly’s friends were. Nobody’s come forward. I thought perhaps Abi’s friends might know...”

“And?”

As casually as I could I shook my head and said that I had drawn a complete blank.

“They wouldn’t tell you?”

“No. I couldn’t find them. They’ve moved.”

As quickly as I could, as soon as Turner had left the room, I looked up Bishop’s number and rang him.

“I came to see you this morning about Charmaine,” I whispered. “I spoke to your partner.”

“Yeah, she told me...” He was chewing gum.

“She told me where she lived.”

“She said she did. Did you speak to Charmaine?”

“I did, but that’s not why I’m calling. I know why you threw her out...but I know you must still feel something for her...”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“Listen, man, if ANYONE asks you about my visit, any policeman, someone called Turner, ANYONE...you must say that I did not get the address...For goodness sake, take her back in, man!”

“What’s it got to do wi’ you? Mind yer own business!”

“She might be in danger....if anyone calls, call me back –“ But the phone went dead and whenever I tried again the number was engaged. I thought quickly. I grabbed my coat and hastened out to my car. Evening was beginning to gather. I drove out to Charmaine’s flat and sat outside. The shops were brightly lit and doing brisk business - the newsagent’s, a grocery, a chemist’s, a bookmaker’s and a launderette, but not yet the Chinese takeaway, - and cars were entering and leaving the parking bays all the time. The group of teenagers outside the newsagent’s were still rocking on their pushbikes. There seemed to be nothing untoward. Still Charmaine’s kitchen window was not lit even though the daylight had turned dark blue. The pale thumbnail of a moon hanging over the jagged roof of a distant dark factory grew steadily in brightness as the sun sank away. Now the dim bulb in her flat went on. The blind came down. I sat for a quarter of an hour unable to decide what to do. I phoned Bishop again twice but in vain. Was I being paranoid? Should I tell everything to Conway? Show him the diary? Go on a long sick-leave and let Conway take the initiative? If Conway arrested Turner (and Gilbert??) could I - and Maxine - be kept out of the backwash? Conway arrest Gilbert? How ludicrous! What evidence was there? The diary would be laughed out of court by any half-decent lawyer, as a malicious lie or a piece of unattributable fiction. What sort of a witness would Charmaine make, giving evidence against Brierley, a fine pillar of rectitude in the community, and against my own boss, the walrus, even if I could persuade her to assist me? And whom could I really trust any more, for certain? Was my trusty sidekick Conway involved as well? Charmaine had mentioned a young visitor with dark, curly hair. Conway?

I phoned Maxine. She had had a better day. The medication was working. I saw that the light in the takeaway was on now. I promised to bring her her favourite - sweet and sour prawns. I rang off and phoned Bishop again. This time the woman answered. She was livid. I had caused a massive row between them, and Bishop had walked out. I apologised and then asked her if anyone had enquired about his daughter’s whereabouts. She said that nobody had. Nobody was interested in “that little trollop” she shouted and rang off.

Now what should I do? Take her to a hotel? Take her into protective custody on suspicion of prostitution - (that would really win her over to my side!).....Take her home with me?? Every

idea seemed more preposterous than the last. I cursed myself. My very doggedness had placed that wretched creature in danger. Or had it? I looked around. This was an ordinary little mall in an ordinary town. People were going about their routine business, wrapped up against the January frost. It was quite dark. A cloud had billowed up and swallowed the moon. The light on her blind suddenly went off. Irresolute, I half opened my car door. Finally I opened it and walked across the concourse to her flat. One of the teenagers said "Come for a shag, mate? Goo round the back!" I ignored this and opened the letter-box. I shouted her name but heard nothing. Had she popped out through the back door? In the dimness I could see that the pushchair had gone. I walked back to my car and ignored again the jeers and sniggers around me. She must have gone out. I was about to drive off and look around the nearby streets for a young mother and child when I noticed flickering lights on the blind. Had she lit a fire in the grate? The chimney was not smoking. Now the flickering lights were turning into licking flames. I rushed into the shop, shouted "Police!" and told everyone to leave. I ordered the shopkeeper to phone the fire brigade. People stood motionless, thinking I was mad. I ran back out and shoulder-charged her front door but it would not budge. A voice yelled "Round the back!" I ran around the corner of the last shop and found an opening in the low wall from which the gate had long gone. I entered the dark yard. I heard the baby crying and saw her white cot blanket coming towards me held by a dark shape. Then I collided with a wheelie-bin and went flying. As I picked myself up I felt a tremendous crack on my skull.

When I woke up I was soaking wet and utterly baffled. I sat up and touched my sore, thrumming head. Nothing made sense. Why were there flames roaring from those upstairs windows? I heard shouts and sirens. Now a tall figure came rushing past me carrying a hose. I got up and stumbled over the wheel of the wheelie-bin and went my length. Someone fell over me and cursed me. The swelling hose hit me on the head and I nearly fainted with the pain. Now I was picked up under the armpits and dragged out of the gateway and thrown unceremoniously onto the pavement. Whoever had dumped me there rushed off, cursing me still. A distant voice said – "This was the man who ran round the back before the fire brigade arrived". Now my ears were ringing louder. Faces were staring down at me. Mouths were opening and closing but not speaking. Now a beautiful vision knelt down at my side. Was it an angel? An awful thought struck home - had I just died, skirted hell and arrived at the threshold of heaven? The blonde angel was saying something to me and looking closely into my eyes like an earnest lover. I laughed and she smiled back. Then I was rising away from the ground. I wondered, astonished, how that was possible. The blonde angel was holding my wrist. I wondered then why she wore a uniform. I heard her say, as my head cleared "Just concussion, I think." I was floating through a corridor of onlookers towards a vehicle... an ambulance...on a stretcher. I saw a fire engine. Fire. FIRE? Then it almost came back to me.

The onlookers had turned away from me and were being pushed back, brutally, by others in uniform. The hoodies and others fell against me and knocked me and my stretcher-bearers to the ground. I laughed again.

"Get back, get back, you BASTARDS" someone was yelling. I heard this really clearly now. The onlookers began to scream and turned their heads away. I stood up as the fog in my head finally lifted, just in time to see a smoking bundle laid on the tarmac. The fireman who had delivered the bundle suddenly sat down in a great puddle a few yards away and began to wail. An ambulance man ran over and, for a few seconds, went through the motions of placing a resuscitation mask over the smoking face before stopping. Instead, he fetched a blanket, soaked it in the puddle,

dabbed it over Charmaine's corpse and then spread it gently over her, as if he was tucking her in for the night. Only her tiny, blackened feet were now visible. Watching all this, the fireman screamed abuse at the medic and tried to get to his feet, but fell back onto his rump.

"THE BABY!" I yelled, suddenly remembering Tayler and staggering towards the open smoking door. A great burly fist grabbed me and held tight to my shirt..

"Get your hands off me! There's a baby in there!" I stopped as a hulk emerged wearing an unearthly mask. It tore its mask off, revealing a panting human head, hair plastered down with sweat.

"Fellow reckons there's a baby in there!" shouted the man gripping me. The human turned alien again and plunged back into the smoke. Another, then another rushed past me and disappeared. As the body was removed the crowd came creeping back. "Where's the babby?" a female voice shouted. "There's a babby in there! A babby!" yelled others like a tragic chorus. Then there was silence, until the crew re-emerged.

The first man strode over to me in absolute fury and all but laid into my chest. "ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THE BABY?" he screamed.

Before I could answer the chorus of neighbours sang out a huge YES.

Now the fire-chief pushed his way through.

"Any sign?" he asked. They held their masks in their hands and shook their heads. Then I remembered with a sinking heart the very last scene played out in the back alley before I had been knocked out. Unnoticed, I slipped away to my car. Still groggy, I drove away at a crawl.

As I drove through a mist of guilty tears my mobile phone rang. I pulled over. It was a mechanical voicemail message.

"Miller. Keep your nose out of private business. You have no friends. None at all. Beware." I listened to it again. The number had not been withheld. It was of a mobile but no doubt a stolen one.

I lay in bed thinking. I had slept until three. Maxime was sound asleep beside me. I listened gratefully to her soft breathing. What on earth should I do? Evil things were going on and I was withholding evidence. What evidence? I was virtually an accessory to crimes I could not prove. I concluded that I would have to be courageous. I had to tell my wife my secret and go to Gilbert, no to Lapworth in Leicester and remove Turner from the board. Either he or Brierley had sent the warning message. I could play it back to Lapworth!

"Maxine. I'm being blackmailed. But not for money. For silence. It relates to you. I've been trying to tell you but I feared you would misunderstand"

"Derek. I think I know what's coming next. Oh God, please God, NO!"

"No, Maxine. YOU MUST NOT JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS. I gave my WORD to you. I promised -"

"Like you promised in church to forsake all others!!"

"Maxine stop! I will not lie to you. This is what happened -"

"GO AWAY. GO....AWAY...LIAR..LIAR!"

I turned my head on the pillow and grimaced, arresting, yet again, the dialogue raging away in my lonely imagination. I knew that this would be the line she would take, no matter how carefully I phrased it. Could I write it all down and leave it for her to read so that she could not

interrupt me? Of course! I composed the letter in my head, but no matter what form of words I used, it looked shabby. If it was all so innocent with Jackie why had I not told her straight away? What could I do? In whom could I confide? How could I stop the evil that was taking place? I began to try and comfort myself, to convince myself that I was in an impossible situation. How could I ever get close to Brierley and expose the whole sorry mess, even if I had proof? How many more friends did this monster have in high places? What evidence had I got? An unsubstantiated diary written by a dead man; Mrs Jolly's final words confirmed by Clifton, another dead man; allegations of a vice-ring made by an unwilling, stupid sixteen-year-old, now a blackened corpse in the morgue; the baby packed, indeed, with Brierley's vile DNA, but now missing, presumably dead.

As quietly as I could, my head reeling in confusion and pain, I got up and went downstairs. I felt truly dreadful. A huge stroke or a massive heart attack would be a blessing now. The only consolation I had was that due to Gilbert's humanity I did not have to go to work. I made a pot of tea and tried to pull myself together. I wrote out my letter to Maxine. It was pitiful. I heard her keep shouting COWARD as I watched her tear it to shreds in front of me. I tore it finally into shreds myself and flushed it away. I fetched the diary. There must be something in there that would stand up and which Conway could make stick. After all, Brierley wanted it so badly that the Jollys had been killed for it. What was there in it beyond doubt? The letter from Gilbert at least confirmed that Jolly had been involved in amateur surveillance and that the events detailed had probably taken place.

"Probably?" I heard a learned counsel say with a posh sneer "Beyond a reasonable doubt?" But there was also Charlie Hurley from the Duke. He would confirm all that too. I made a note to bring him in and interview him. I began to feel better. That day I would make up my mind what to do. I would phone Conway. Surely Conway was a good guy?

I opened the diary and read on.

Friday May 9th

Charlie is not in tonight. I sit down with a pint in the corner and wait. There is a steady stream of young girls, all dolled up. But I can still tell they are only about 15 or 16. Ben's group aren't in either. I think I'm probably wasting my time on such a busy night and am about to go when Griffin walks in. He buys his bottle and looks over in my direction. He nods at me and then, with a last look behind him, he saunters over and pulls up a chair. My heart is thumping. Convincing Charlie, an old drunk, was easy. How easy will Griffin be? He tells me I'm a new face. I smile and agree. He tells me Charlie has told him I'm after some "shit." (Do I gasp? Am I in the shit?) I nod at him. Now he asks, what for? He tells me I don't smoke and I have to agree with him. Well, am I going to eat it, stick it up my arse, or what? I sense his brutality. I tell him it's for my sister. Sister?? He laughs. What? Is she trying to get the local WI stoned on fairy cakes or scones?

I throw back my head and roar with laughter. He joins in. He relaxes. He drains his bottle and offers to buy me a pint. I accept. Does he believe me? I have the rest of the story ready when he comes back. He looks at me and shakes his head slowly. If I'm an old lag, like I told Charlie I am, then he's the Pope. I tell him that I told that to Charlie as a cover. The truth is that my sister has very bad arthritis. Cannabis (in cakes) relieves the symptoms. Her old supplier had left the area to spend some time as a guest of the Queen. He laughs again. Who would that be, then? I tell him I have no idea. A little bird had mentioned The Duke to me. The truth is, I'm an

ex-teacher. Ex left-winger, a Liberal who has no hang-ups about breaking an illiberal law. I wax lyrical. He rubs the stubble on his red moon face. His black eyes examine me and seem to pronounce me genuine. I think I have an honest face and I have been telling some truths. Now Steven comes in. Griffin calls him over. I freeze. He makes up his mind not to give me away. Has he decided after all to go along with my plan? I smile. He stares back. Griffin whispers in his ear and leaves us. Steve signals to me to follow him outside. Griffin turns and tells him to make sure it's cake quality. He laughs. So do I. But not Steven.

The sky is turning that stone white colour, like plaster, before the twilight comes. For a while he says nothing. He waves briefly to a group of young girls on the way to the next stage of their pub-crawl. I sit down next to him on the low wall. Now he tells me quietly that if I ever come in again he'll tell Ben and Griffin what I'm really up to. He asks me for thirty quid. Griffin will expect it. I give him the money and tell him that I will not stop. That I owe it to his sister, as he does. He looks me coldly in the eye. Sister?? She was nothing to him - just a quick screw whenever our backs were turned. I am speechless. He gets up and leaves me sitting there.

I stopped reading and poured the rest of the tea into my cup. Ben. Ben who? I made a note to mention him when I phoned Conway. I would ask him to search the records for juvenile Bens and young Bens, probably involved with drugs. It might be a nickname of course, but it was worth a try. Then there was Charlie Hurley. Could I go into The Duke and find him? I was too old, not the type. Conway might get away with it, in his scruff. I needed to pick Hurley up and talk to him, without compromising him with his fellow drinkers.

I read on. There were mainly details of other transactions involving Ben and his friends. There was no mention of Steven. I read on, seeing nothing very new, until I came to June 15th.

I have left another message for Steven behind the bar. But he doesn't phone me. I meet Charlie again. He has had pleurisy. He is not very talkative though and seems wary. Hoping he will open up, I keep mentioning Griffin, saying what a nice bloke he is and what a sense of humour he has got. I tell him the tale of my sister and the fairy cakes. He doesn't laugh. He taps the table with a beer mat and now looks me in the eye. Griffin had told him about me. He had said that I couldn't be Mr Plod because I'm too old. So who was I really? What did I want? I tell him I'd already told Griffin all about me. Charlie looks doubtful and uncomfortable. He rises, goes to the bar and sits down with his drink at another table. Now Ben comes in. He looks first at Charlie and then at me. He comes over. Do I know Steve Jolly? I tell him I've met him. He hands me an envelope, smiles knowingly and walks back to the bar.

I turned the page and saw a note glued to the other side. It was written in a scrawled, immature hand and read:

I've told Griffin you used to work in my childrens home in Leicester. I've told him how you used to interfere with me. Griffin hates peedies, so you had better not come back.

The diary carried on on the page opposite.

I look up from the letter. I sense hostile eyes. I need to go to the toilet. I leave my pint hardly touched. As I sit in the cubicle thinking over my options someone comes in to take a leak. I hear a ring-tone I recognise as Ben's. "Griff? Tell Brierley it's sorted....No, honest, there's no need

to do him.....I doubt if he'll come back... Steve says he's just an old peedie....used to touch him up...dirty bastard....he'd come looking for him, that's all.....OK? Cheers.”
I sit as quiet as a mouse. Ben finishes, zips up and leaves. As soon as the coast is clear I slip out of the back door.

I heard the chink of milk bottles outside and then the whining milk-float pulling away. I sat and reviewed what I was now sure was the full picture. Brierley was not only supplying drugs through Griffin to Ben and his friends but was also recruiting girls on drugs, partly for his own pleasure, partly as favours for his friends and associates, partly as a lucrative sideline and perhaps also thence to ensnare people in his web for various devious purposes; of extortion, bribery and corruption, with the intention of, for example, get drink-driving charges dropped; or to warn off nosey-parkers from “making wild, unfounded allegations”. I thought again of the crying baby in the dark back yard. Was it Ben carrying her? Had Ben been Steven’s murderous accomplice that New Year’s Eve? I sensed again, that if my instincts were correct, that the search for the orphan would be futile. Yet the thought that the ill-starred infant was Brierley’s, vile fruit of his vile loins, mitigated, despite my inner protest of shame, the gravity of that crime. I heard Maxine stirring upstairs. I made another cup of tea and poured some cereal into a bowl. When I came back downstairs I turned on the local radio station to hear the news. The fire, the death and the mysterious disappearance of the baby dominated the bulletin. Police were appealing for the “Tall man who had been found at the back of the premises and who raised the alarm to come forward. He did not have a local accent and probably came from the North of England. He had shouted “police” in the shop.” I realised that any security camera footage from the shop would soon give me away. It would not be long before Turner was on his way round to pick me up. Then the next news item stopped me in mid-thought.

The Jolly’s house had been razed to the ground in another suspicious fire in the early hours of the morning.

At nine o’ clock I decided to take the initiative. From home I phoned Conway and told him to track down a local Ben in the records. And I wanted to know the findings of the post-mortem on Charmaine Bishop. Then I took a deep breath and phoned Turner. I told him that I had been the missing witness at the scene of the fire. Turner replied that he knew and then fell silent. “Well, aren’t you coming round to arrest me?” Silence. Then he said “Derek...Can we talk?” He sounded worried, even upset. “Give it an hour, Jonathan. Until Michelle comes round. I’ll meet you in that café in The Wharf at ten thirty.”

Conway phoned back. There were five local Bens or Benjamins under 25. Four of them seemed very unlikely candidates; a drink-driver; a shoplifter; two minor assaults. The other Ben, Ben Taylor, 23, from Stancote, a nearby village, was currently doing eighteen months in Winson Green for pushing drugs in Leicester. Might he be the Ben he was looking for?

“No, this one is on the loose.” I said. “Cast the net wider. Go for Leicester and Coventry Bens.” Conway sighed. “I thought you were having two days off, guv.”

“I am. I’m working from home. Get your finger out! And try surnames... B-E-N-Nand Bensons...and anything similar. This is number one priority at the moment. ”

I made myself some toast. I had helped Maxine into her relieving bath where she would soak for a good half-hour. I opened the diary again. There were no more dated entries. It was now mainly a case of Jolly ranting on and on about how useless the police were. There was no further mention of The Duke. Jolly felt sorry for himself, cursing the day he had taken in Abigail and Steven. I scan-read the next few pages looking for those key names, until, turning over I came across an entry dated 12th August which said bleakly in block capitals

PAT HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH BOWEL CANCER. I HAVE PROMISED HER I SHALL STOP NOW.

Obviously for a while he had been as good as his word for there was nothing else in August or September. But on the next page was the first draft of a letter.

To the Chief Superintendent, Earlstone Police. 16 10 0-

Dear Sir,

I need to bring to your attention what I have discovered relating to the death of my stepdaughter, Abigail Jolly, from a drug overdose in April this year. I am a retired primary school teacher with no detective experience whatsoever. That has not prevented me, however, from finding out where and how Abi was obtaining drugs. I managed to do this by asking a few simple questions which did not, apparently, occur to your officers.

My stepson Steven Jolly, now unfortunately alienated from us, told me that The Duke of Marlborough is the main outlet for drugs in this benighted town. The Earlstone police must also know this.

Within half-an-hour of drinking in there I witnessed a young man called Ben selling drugs to a young girl at the back of the pub and a man called Griffin taking money from him. I also overheard that Ben works for someone called Brierley. Could this be one of THE Brierleys, Bernard or Simon, Messrs High-and-Mighty? Might this be the reason that the police turn a blind eye?

I shall now expect you to investigate my findings. I have kept a detailed diary of my investigations. Unless I hear some positive news from you by the end of this month I shall contact The Earlstone Gazette.

The next entry, dated November 6th was the next to last. It was the draft of a letter to the newspaper.

Dear Sir,

I am writing to inform you that the police in Earlstone are turning a blind eye to drug dealers in the town. I have evidence in the form of a diary that Bernard or Simon Brierley are involved in or are indeed controlling the supply and distribution of drugs from a public house in the town centre.

I turned over and saw an acknowledgement of receipt of the letter from the paper, the sort that readers get when they have written to the letters page. It was initialled TS at the bottom.

Then, the very last insertion of all, stapled to the paper, was a short letter from Swanson and Ricketts, Solicitors. Dated December 9th it read:

Dear Mr Jolly,

It has been brought to the attention of our client, SH Brierley, that you have again made malicious allegations against him.

Our client has instructed us to inform you that, should you decide to repeat these once more, he will have no hesitation in issuing a writ against you for defamation of character.

Now something dawned on me which until now I had not noticed. SH Brierley? Why not Bernard Brierley? I flicked back through the pages to make sure that I had not missed a specific mention of which one. Gilbert's letter had mentioned Simon too. But nowhere had Jolly written which one he had in mind. I realised with a leap of my heart that I had discovered an indirect proof which would not convince a jury but which was conclusive enough for me. I mused about what Jolly might have said or done between that date and the last day of the year which had brought about his demise. Had he contacted the police again? The newspaper? Brierley? And who had leaked the letter written to the Gazette to Brierley? TS? Now my phone rang again. Conway spoke.

“Still ploughing through the files for Bens, gov. And that report on the fire.....the girl had enough heroin in her to kill a small horse. It looks as if she took a deliberate overdose. I had a word with the fire-chief. Off the record he told me that it looked as if the fire started by accident. Some kitchen roll had fallen onto the electric fire in the kitchen. We're searching back gardens, wheelie-bins and in the fields behind and the brook for the child. She might have dumped it or left it outside somebody's door. There was no sign of a pushchair.”

I thanked him. I decided not to point out to him the rather obvious possibility that she could have started the fire deliberately (although of course she had not) in which case it would have been rather pointless for her to get rid of the child outside somewhere when inside, in a blaze, would have done perfectly well.

Just before half past ten I pulled into the car park of The Wharf, the mall which was sucking the last drops of blood out of Earlstone's dismal shopping centre. Eventually it would have to be bulldozed and grassed over and, good riddance, I thought. The mall was very quiet after the frenzy of the New Year sales had calmed down. Turner was sitting in a far corner of the cafe, brooding over his mug. I bought myself a coffee for an exorbitant amount and sat down opposite him.

“Jonathan, you are involved with a murderous criminal, Simon Brierley. Don't worry. I'm not telling anybody. Yet. I have no proof. And I don't know who to tell, for another thing.”

Turner looked up. I expected to see a sneer. To my amazement there were almost tears. I waited. I stirred my coffee, tasted it and grimaced.

Turner began “I never thought.....” but could not finish the sentence.

“You never thought what?”

“That all this...shit ...would happen.”

“Shit?”

“Murder. He’s blackmailing me, Derek.”

“Why?”

“I owe the Brierleys.... Big Time.....Thousands....”

“Why?”

He seemed to debate with himself how much to tell his old adversary and then said “I gamble. It was one night not long after we moved here, about three years ago. I had no friends. I play golf. Badly. One night I got rat-arsed at the club...we were playing poker in the back...I staked all we’d got...and hadn’t got...on a full house....That bastard Bernard had a running flush. I lost. The hand was fixed. It must have been. I began by paying it back a couple of hundred a month. Then out of the blue one day Bernard phoned to say he’d let me off...as long as I did him a favour. The drink-driving charge. I’d promised my wife that I would never gamble again after I lost a packet in Birmingham once. He kept threatening to tell her. Anyway, as soon as the case collapsed Simon phoned me to thank me....and, oh, by the way he’d bought the rest of my debt off his dad. There was no need to pay back by instalments. Every time I did him a favour from now on he would knock a thousand off until I was clear.”

“Simon Brierley is a psychopath, Jonathan. You’ve sold your soul to the Devil. We need to think of a way to get it back.”

“He’s untouchable.”

“Nobody is untouchable. He might think so....big shark in a small pond. You offered me a truce. Are you still willing? We need to find a way to get you - and me - off the hook at the same time.”

“I’m in too deep. He’s got me on tape. He told me that he’d recorded me after I had a real go at him over the Jollys and threatened to turn him in. I’m fucked, Derek. Absolutely.”

“What did you have to do with Charmaine?”

He hung his head. “I only told him that you’d been snooping around. I never dreamt....”

“What? After the Jollys? You never dreamt?”

“He told me that murder at the Jollys was never the plan. Steven had suddenly gone berserk in the kitchen. He’d taken loads of pills and had been drinking Jolly’s brandy straight from the bottle. Then he had tried to attack his mate when he had had a go at him afterwards. He drew a knife on him....but it finished up in Steven instead....”

“And what about Gilbert?”

“What about him?”

“How is he involved?”

“Involved? Involved in what? Gilbert? Elephant Seal?? He’s as straight as a dye!”

I could tell that he was not pretending. He really had no knowledge of what Gilbert’s proclivities might be.

“Did Mr Jolly never write to you, Jonathan, about The Duke of Marlborough? Did you know that there were serious drugs being sold there? Not just a bit of cannabis?”

“Write to me? Never! Why do you ask?”

“Why did you only interview two girls at the party where Abigail died?”

“I didn’t! I interviewed everybody I could track down. It’s on file.”

“And the host?”

“Yes, her too! It’s all on file. You saw it. Nobody could - or would - tell me who brought in the E.”

I believed him. So had Gilbert been blackmailed into tampering with the file?

“What were you searching for at the Jollys?”

“I wasn’t. When?”

“Come on, Jonathan, I was there. I heard you moving stuff about. You weren’t after your mobile. Look, if you won’t tell me the truth about that, why should I believe the rest you’ve told me?”

“Alright, alright. Brierley told me that there was a diary somewhere. But I couldn’t find it. What am I going to do? I never thought for a second I’d sink this deep into the shit. How will I ever get out?”

I thought for a moment. “The first thing you can do is to go on the sick. Get a note for two, no, three weeks. Have a bad back. If Brierley phones you for a favour, tell him you’re out of circulation.”

When Turner had gone I phoned the offices of The Earlstone Gazette. Who was TS? The receptionist thought a while and said it must be Terry Schofield, a senior reporter. I asked her to put him through to him. I introduced myself and asked him if we could meet. In Schofield’s voice I could hear that tell-tale tremor of anxiety which was such a give-away when people not used to having dealings with the police had a guilty secret to keep. I arranged to meet him for lunch in The Mulberry Bush at 12:30. I waited until 12:45 and then phoned the newspaper offices again, only to be told that Mr Schofield had gone home, poorly. I asked her if she could tell me who owned the newspaper. She said it was a syndicate. She broke off now to ask a colleague a question. Then she came back on line and said that the chairman was someone called Bernard Brierley.

I found out Schofield’s address and called around that afternoon. A large, attractive middle-aged lady in a floral dress opened the door.

“I would like to speak to your husband if he’s feeling better. My name is Miller, Detective Inspector Miller.”

The woman’s breezy composure now shrivelled before my very eyes like a dying flower. She fell against the wall and sat down in a sorry heap. At the end of the hall a tall man, appeared and, together, we helped her to her feet. She was shaking with terror. We sat her down on a settee and her husband sat beside her. He was pale. He looked as if he had been vomiting.

“You have obviously guessed something of why I am here,” I said after a decent pause. She moaned softly.

“Mr Schofield, your wife has had a shock. Stay with her while I make some tea.” I found what I needed and a few minutes later came back with a tray of mugs. “I’ve made this one weak and sweet. Try to take a few sips, Mrs Schofield.” She sat up and drank.

“Now tell me what you did with Mr Jolly’s letter written to you last November,” I said quietly. Schofield stared at me in utter amazement. His wife looked at him and whispered to him to get it off his chest. He raked his thinning hair with the tips of his fingers and sighed.

“I gave it to Jim, the editor. He read it and told me to forget that I had ever seen it. It was a libel. We had a big row. I threatened to resign and take it to The Mercury or The Post. Except that I hadn’t got it. He had. We compromised; he told me he would raise it with the boss and let him handle it. Well, when Jim - the editor - took his own life before Christmas we were all shocked. He was looking forward to going to Canada this Easter to see his daughter. It didn’t make sense. I nearly phoned the police then. Then the Jollys died. I picked the phone up but couldn’t dial. Then it hit me. Had my name been mentioned to anyone, by Jim? Then, when you rang....” He broke off and held his head in his hands.

I hardly knew what to say. I was quite a senior police officer but could give no assurances. The woman looked at me with pleading eyes. She asked whether Terry had committed a crime. I told her no, none that I was aware of. He had not withheld evidence because it was not evidence, neither then nor now. She sobbed with relief.

“Listen. As a precaution, go away for a few days. Phone me on this number and I will be in touch with you. You are probably perfectly safe and no-one, apart from me, knows how you are involved. I’m going to speak to Bernard Brierley and sort all this out. I’ll make sure any suspicions anyone might have in your direction are dispersed. Thank you for your help.”

Back at home, I phoned Conway. He had still found no Ben who fitted the bill. I asked him if he fancied a spot of overtime. Was he busy tonight? He was not. I told him to meet me at The Three Crowns which was just across the road from the Duke. I went out to fetch Maxine the sweet and sour prawns I had promised her, and not bought the previous night, then made sure she was comfortable and left home to meet Conway.

I decided to tell him a very partial version of the story and keep Turner and Gilbert’s name out of it. I told him that Charmaine had mentioned someone called Ben, who was working for some unknown local businessman. Conway looked surprised.

“I need to identify Hurley for a start. Here’s my plan. At eight go into The Duke and call out “Taxi for Smith....or Brown”or whatever. At the same time I will phone the pub and ask for Charlie Hurley. Pretend to be on your mobile until he comes to the bar. Get a good look at him and then come back out. As soon as he picks up the phone I’ll end the call.”

Outside it had begun to freeze and pavements were sparkling with frost. We sat together in the car within view of the pub. The condensation of our breath was trickling down the windows. I wiped the side window with my sleeve. Three skateboarders were taking it in turns to launch themselves, over and over again, down the wheelchair access ramp to the bank and coast along the pavement as far as they could go. The record shop next door, closed since anyone could remember otherwise, was plastered in posters. A spider’s web of cracks seemed to hold the door pane together. The McDonald’s next door was more or less empty and three fast-food staffers stood idle. A couple further on were trying the cash machine. Above the dingy urban light scarcely a star could be made out. Odd pairs and trios shuffled past with their collars high. This was Earlstone town centre, a pedestrianised street where most nights only a scatter of pub-crawlers, and virtually no-one above a certain age would stroll. Shop fronts were dark; metal roller-blinds were grimly locked down tight. Above them, garish shop signs were lit, some flickering. Otherwise, a string of public houses were trying hard to outdo each other, with bunting, union jacks and flags of Saint George to win the vote of the patriotic young shaven roundhead, unconsciously warning of their unsuitability for those of a more genteel, more cosmopolitan inclination.

At the edge of this brutal bleakness stood the Duke, more than making up for His off-centre position with the amount of noise He was blaring onto the street and with His proud red and white livery.

At eight Conway walked into the bar. I rang the number as soon as he went in. As the phone was picked up there was a sudden cacophony of music and voices. A voice announced the name of the pub.

“I want to speak to Charlie, Charlie Hurley.”

“Hold on, mate.....(Er....Anybody order a taxi?....For Brown?)....(Hey, Charlie! Phone!).....He’s just on his way, mate.” The phone was put down on the counter. Then I heard a hoarse voice say “Hello?” For a start I said nothing as I had planned, but to hurry things along a bit I changed my mind. I saw Conway leaving. Charlie again said “Hello?”

“Charlie. I’m a friend of a friend of a friend.”

“Hey?”

“Charlie. You’re in danger. Drink up and leave. Now.”

Conway sat down next to me, blowing into his cupped hands. It was bitterly cold. He began to describe Charlie to me just as a bent old man emerged looking like a frightened rabbit.

“The very man! There!” exclaimed Conway. Hurley turned and walked quickly away past a boarded up factory and disappeared up an alley. Conway knew where it came out and by the time Hurley popped out in the next street we were pulling up there. He hobbled across the road in front of our headlights. I wound down the window and called to him.

“Charlie! I want to talk to you. Come on, it’s OK, get in. I’m a friend of a friend of a friend.”

Charlie now looked terrified until I pulled out my credentials and smiled. I opened the back door and tentatively Charlie got in. I then drove out of the decrepit town centre, out past the enormous cemetery, dropped off Conway at home and was soon in open countryside. It was beginning to snow a little. In Stapleford we stopped at The Punch Bowl.

We sat around the log fire and Charlie began to relax and enjoy his pint.

“You put the wind up me; how do you know I’ve not got a dodgy ticker? Telling me I’m in danger.....”

I did not reply and Charlie studied me more closely. “AM I?”

I sipped my tonic water. “It depends. You know some very dangerous people in that bar. Griffin and Ben, for starters.”

“They’re OK with me. I mind my own business and they leave me in peace.”

“That’s not quite what I’m hearing, Charlie. You talked last year to a man called Jolly. He pretended to be an old lag looking for some weed. Remember?”

“Jolly? Was that his name? The peedo?”

“He wasn’t. At least I don’t think he was. But that doesn’t matter. The fact is, he’s brown bread, Charlie. Murdered. Cock and bollocks cut off. You might not like it but you are a kind of witness. And therefore vulnerable. Best take your custom elsewhere. At least for a while.”

Charlie stared at me, put his hand to his crotch and then gulped half his pint as if it might be one of his last. I told him not to worry. They had no idea that he was talking to me. “You’re safe as long as you help us a little - on the quiet.”

“What? Grass them up? No fear.”

“No grassing. We’ll have another drink and I’ll tell you what I want you to do.”

Some time later Charlie re-entered The Duke. While the barmaid was filling his glass he propped my envelope against the wall, as I had told him to do, making sure that no-one was watching him. He sat down. It took a while but eventually my ploy worked.

“Hey, Ben! There’s an envelope here on the counter for you. Looks like a Christmas card,” the barman must have shouted, or words to that effect. Ben came over and opened it. It was a card. The message inside told him to go out the back if he wanted to do a bit of good business.

Curious, he went outside. The light was bright and, hidden behind a stack of crates, I managed to take a reasonable snap before the baffled thug tugged on his curtain earring, turned and went back in.

*

Roy Griffin was a repulsive piece of work but he had two saving graces. The first was his sense of humour which even made interviewing officers and clerks to the court laugh, though rarely judges. His second was his honesty. In a situation where he could see there was no way out he would invariably put his hand up and exclaim "Fair cop". Then he would make a full and frank confession in the hope of some leniency from the Bench. And it often worked. Thanks to his later frankness I have been able to piece together pretty well, with some poetic embellishment and licence, what happened to Jonathan Turner the next day.

Turner had been back home from the doctor's a few minutes after securing his month's sick leave when his phone rang. It was Roy Griffin calling at the behest of Simon Brierley. He needed another small favour. Where did Derek Miller drink? Shocked, Turner replied that he did not know. He had nothing to do with him, socially. They did not get on.

"But Jonathan, there must be someone at HQ who knows. Just ask around."

He stammered that he wasn't at work. He had hurt his back - in the garden.

"Gardening? What in January? Keen gardener are we?"

Turner must have silently cursed his own stupidity. "Listen Roy..."

"No, Jonathan, you listen. You still owe Sime eight K. This will reduce it by 50%. Miller's a bloody good detective. Too good for his own good, one might say. He's been upsetting a few people; he seems to know a lot of things he shouldn't."

Turner was tempted by the offer and could tell that Brierley urgently wanted to know. Could he exploit that to his own advantage?

"Tell Simon I really can't go on much longer like this. It's making me ill. I'm in pieces. Just tell him to wipe out the debt and...I'll tell you. Please." On the other end it went silent. Finally he said.

"OK Johnny. Simon says you have a deal. He'll send your IOU back 1st class post. Now tell me."

"Do you promise?"

"Honestly, Johnny, you know he's a man of his word. After this you will never hear from him or me again. He's tidying a few things up himself...putting his own house in order...a bit like you in your winter garden..."

Now Turner must have made up his mind. "OK. He goes out most Fridays. Somewhere in Burwell for a game of chess. He walks, I think."

"You're a star, Jonathan. Cheers then"

Gasping with relief, Turner had no doubt put his phone down and poured himself a celebratory scotch. He didn't need that Miller! Clever lad, he had got himself off the hook. He might have thought about warning me but decided, no doubt, that I would have to fight my own battles.

In his mansion in Wolverley, Simon Brierley had come to a decision about Turner. His father would tell me later about a lecture he had given him on liabilities and assets. He had drummed it into him that when the latter turned into the former then they had to be disposed of, no matter how sentimental one felt about them. He had flipped open another stolen mobile phone and sent Griffin a voicemail.

"I'm giving you a name, quite an urgent one. DCI Turner. I'm afraid he's cracking up. I think he

might even do himself an injury. See if you can go around and help him out. Make it convincing. I'll fax you a sample of his handwriting. A note would help. Show it to our handwriting friend. The poor man is worrying about a gambling debt, apparently."

Turner was singing along to an old Moody Blues album when the door bell rang. He answered the door. A young man in overalls stood there, holding a clipboard. He had a curtain ring in his ear-lobe. He had come to repair the washing machine, he said.

"I think you've got your wires crossed, mate" sang Turner. "Wrong address."

He glanced again the door and then back to his paper-work.

"That's weird. It says 12 and you're 12. Are you Potter?"

Turner shook his head and replied that he was Turner.

The youth sighed and exclaimed "Great! Dimbo's given me the wrong number again!" Turner went to close the door when the caller asked him to hang on. His mobile was flat. He needed to call HQ. Any chance he could use his phone? He would pay. Turner smiled his most magnanimous smile. He felt on the top of his form, rather merry and all was well with the world.

"No problem...No need to wipe your feet...It's at the end of the hall look - " But Turner never said another word. Now he was gagged and prostrate on the carpet, as a second man, Griffin, hidden around the corner, rotund and moon-faced, carefully added his considerable weight to the wiry strength of the younger. Turner doubtless wondered why they were wearing plastic bags over their shoes. They pulled plastic hoods over their heads and surgical masks over their mouths. Carefully they wrapped him round and round in a wide lint bandage till he looked like a huge wasp trussed in silk in a spider's web. The stout man opened the tool box and spread out a plastic sheet and together they laid him down carefully on it.

"We've got to make sure there's no booze around you, Johnny, just inside you, otherwise the forensics mob might say "Hey up, Sherlock! This might be foul play." The younger man laughed at his friend's jest. Turner's eyes bulged with horror and he yelled but it came out as a buzz through the gag. Now the fat man tied more plastic around Turner's neck and chest as a bib and took out a bottle of whisky from his bag, saying it was a late Christmas present. He sniffed the air and said "Nice of you to give us a head start. Our mutual friend says that this is your favourite tippie, Johnny. Let's see."

One held his head immobile in the vice of his knees, while the other, as quick as a flash, pierced the gag with the end of a funnel and slowly introduced a narrow tube through it into his gullet.

"Be careful not to bruise him...lovely job....Our friend says you take your wickey with water, Johnny...this is half and half...it won't burn and it pours slow so you won't be sick. Just lie back and enjoy it."

He snipped the end of the syphon and gradually emptied the bottle into the funnel and, as the level very slowly sank, he took out another and then added its contents to it. He looked at his watch. Griffin told me they discussed where they would watch the match later and had a bet on the score. They had watched Turner's eyes turn glassy and then closed. A whole bottle of paracetamol in solution slowly followed. As soon as he was quite unconscious they carefully removed their wrappings and carried him into the living room. They sat him on the corner of his sofa and placed a tumbler, an empty whisky bottle, an empty bottle of paracetamol, an empty jug of water, a ballpoint pen and finally a suicide note on the table beside him, did a double-check for anything dropped, hoovered the hall carpet and left. It was going up for one. Mrs Turner would be back from her school office at four thirty. By then her husband would be long cold.

As I was making some scrambled eggs for our lunch I heard my fax machine whirr into action. It was a message from Conway with a monochrome mugshot of a teenager.

CRAIG BENNER 20 of Leicester. Convicted of arson when he was 14, setting fire to his primary school. Sent to a young offenders' institution for two years. Sentenced to a further 18 months in prison for GBH (wounding a fellow inmate with a screwdriver). Medical reports suggest that he has psychopathic tendencies.

I looked at my photo and saw that this was our young man. Our other Jolly killer. I faxed back my thanks to Conway and told him I would email him a more recent photo of Ben. Could he now go out and interview one Zoe Knighton at 163 Coventry Rd about her fateful party on April 1st the previous year, and show her the photograph of Ben?

I learned of Turner's death just before five. When I arrived at his house they were zipping him up into his body-bag. His shocked wife was on her way to hospital. I tried to suppress my relief but could not help it. I felt my low spirits, like a hot-air balloon, rising. The ill wind which had blown through this household had now blown me a golden opportunity I could scarcely believe. Although I felt a sharp pang of guilt, I persuaded myself that, shocking though it was for his wife – a surprisingly lovely woman, causing me to conclude that there was a decent side to Jonathan after all – this way out of a dreadful mess for such a corrupted, compromised man was an obvious, even a desirable solution. I called the thoughtful pathologist over. What did he think? He pulled down the spectacles resting on his high forehead, knelt down, and read the label on the bottle of paracetamol and the note propped up against the bottle and stood back up. "Well, on the face of it it looks as pretty clear a case of suicide as you will ever see." "Yes," I agreed. "Very neat and tidy." I looked at the sofa-side table with its neat array of objects. I picked up the note and read it.

Please, Christine, forgive me. I'm in massive debt. I couldn't tell you.

Jonathon

I felt uneasy. Everything was in its place. The suicide of a house-proud man. It was too pat. Turner was Brierley's creature. Had they been in contact again? I checked his landline. He had been called at 09:54. Number withheld. Perhaps a cold call. There was no sign of a mobile. "You know, DI Miller," said the pathologist, looking around the smart living room with its white carpet and coffee-coloured leather sofas, "There is just one thing I can't stop thinking about...." "Go on...." "Well, I was talking to a colleague at a meeting just this Monday. She mentioned an odd suicide in December in Leicester...Strikingly similar circumstances to this one...." "Was it the editor of The Gazette?" "How on earth did you know that?" "It was just a lucky guess. Mr Hault...I don't mean to tell you your job...but please, make this the best post-mortem you have ever done!" I took the note. Back at HQ I went into Turner's office and compared the handwriting to one of his notebooks. I could see no difference. I stared at it for five minutes. What was it that did not ring true? Then it hit me. Jonathon. Did he spell it with an A or an O? I ransacked his drawers

but, infuriatingly, I could find nothing with his name on. Whom dare I ask? I did not wish to alert anyone. I looked around the room. His Christmas cards had been thrown away. Then I had an idea. I phoned down to the desk.

“I need to know how DCI Turner spelt his Christian name.....for my report.....”

After a long wait the voice came back and spelt out“J-O-N-A-T-H-A-N”

I put the phone down and the note into my pocket.

The post-mortem concluded there were no suspicious circumstances. Mrs Turner admitted that her husband had been silent and seemed unusually troubled in the days prior to his death. A very lugubrious Paul Gilbert summoned the station personnel together that next morning, praised Turner beyond all reasonable measure, as is the tradition when a very ordinary, flawed mortal retires, leaves or dies, and invited donations for his widow. Now returned officially to duty, I went in to see Gilbert after a decent interval and told him that I might have a lead on the other Jolly killer, one Craig Benner, and was intending to bring him in for questioning.

“What evidence have you got?” asked Gilbert, as he sifted through some papers on his table, not looking at me. I watched him carefully as I told him about a call from a girl called Charmaine, who had come forward in response to our TV appeal to say that Craig Benner had been a close friend of Steven. Gilbert stopped and frowned and asked if that was the same Charmaine who had died in the flat fire? I nodded. There was not a flicker of apprehension in Gilbert’s sagging face. He was either truly innocent or a consummate actor, giving an entirely controlled performance.

“Is that all?” he asked.

Now I told him, truthfully, that the hostess of the party at which Abigail Jolly had collapsed had been interviewed and shown the picture of Craig Benner by Conway. Under pressure from her father to tell the truth she had admitted that he had been at the house that night and he had been giving out tablets; but she hadn’t known then, she assured them, who he was. The father had rued and cursed the day they had let her have a birthday party. Contrite, she had made a statement. Now Gilbert approved the arrest.

Early the next morning two squad cars quietly pulled up outside Benner’s address. But there was no sign of him. When they raided The Duke that evening he was not there either.

The timely disappearance of Craig Benner had finally convinced me that someone else at HQ was Brierley’s man too. The voicemail message after the fire, Turner’s (and the newsman’s) demise made me realise with a shudder that I, and Maxine, were not safe. The relief I had felt to be under pressure no longer from Turner’s threat of destroying my marriage had proved to be very short-lived. Yes, I could operate against my enemies now without that particular fear hanging over me. But operate how? How many foes - and friends - had I got? Whom could I recruit to my cause? Should I take my “evidence” - the diary and the suicide note - to a neighbouring force? How far did Brierley’s web extend? Should I involve the PCA? How impressed would they be with my evidence? I imagined their straight, indignant backs departing the station with a shrug, leaving me high and dry. Would anybody take much notice if I were to meet with some accident some months later? And if I had caused such a huge rumpus at HQ - me, a relative new boy - had caused such a stink of suspicion to hang over the station for months or years from a flimsy concoction of a diary, much hearsay and the miswritten name of a suicidal man, who would much care about my fate? But how flimsy? What about the fire at Charmaine’s

and her infant's disappearance? What about it? Why, I heard an officious voice asking, why had I been outside the flat at the exact moment when the fire had broken out? Why had I slunk off? Why had I wished to keep my involvement secret? How dare I accuse anyone else of professional misconduct?

What solid evidence had I actually got against Brierley? I read the diary again from cover to cover carefully, but nothing struck me. I had nothing but that definite, unprovable knowledge within me.

"Maxine, I want you to go and stay with my mother for a while."

"Why?"

"I'm investigating a very nasty business. There are some very ruthless criminals involved. And there's corruption at the station. Turner's suicide was no accident. Tell no-one."

She stared at me indignantly. Who did she know to tell? Who did she ever see? I could sense that in her depressed state she was getting the wrong end of the stick and was simmering to boil up into one of her appalling rages. I told her a little of the case and this seemed to disarm her.

"Are we in danger?"

"No. Forewarned is fore-armed. Turner didn't think he was in any danger. The fact of the matter is, I can't leave you on your own here. They might try to get at me through you.....somehow." She opened her eyes wide as she took this in.

"What? They might.....kidnap me...or something? They'd soon bring me back, the state I'm in!"

She laughed bitterly and briefly. The crow lines on her temples took a time to relax.

"No, I'm not saying that, Max. I'm probably over-reacting. All I know is that I would feel easier if you were away from here and definitely safe. It would make whatever I've got to do much less....difficult...."

Maxine looked out of the patio windows at the pale sun floating like a large egg yolk in the gathering mist. She thought the proposal over. I knew she hated this joyless time of the year. And the claustrophobic, obligatory jollity of Yuletide disgusted her. She slowly unclenched the large claw which had been her right hand and watched it immediately resume its new predator shape. She was conscious of me looking at her. Was she wondering what I secretly thought about being the husband of a prematurely ageing cripple? I sensed in her the despair she had felt when I had confessed my infidelity. Why did I really want her out of the way, she snarled, turning her face back from the window.

"Don't get depressed, Maxine. I know the winter is hard for you."

"Get depressed? Telling me not to be depressed is like telling me not to be a cripple."

What was there to look forward to later on, she sobbed. And my mother? A woman she could just about tolerate on Christmas day but whose trivialities drove her to near lunacy! I retorted that my mother loved her; that there was no other option. But I had hardly ever seen her look so utterly desolate.

"How long for?"

"As long as it takes."

"And what will you do?"

"I honestly do not know."

That evening I took a silent Maxine up to Cheshire and was back just after 1am. I phoned

Michelle early the next morning, put her in the picture and went off to work. I waited until gone nine and then phoned a nervous Mr Schofield. I told him to stay put, wherever he was. He said they were in Ashbourne before I could tell him not to. I told no-one at the station of my wife's departure. Without consulting with anyone I phoned Rhona in the laboratory. I wanted her to examine Turner's paracetamol bottle for prints. She came back twenty minutes later to me. "Just one set, Derek. His."

I thanked her and asked her to write me a report. I parried her curiosity by saying I was just dotting an "i" or two, asking her, as a favour to me, not to mention my enquiry to anyone else. She promised.

Perhaps, I thought, she would manage to work out for herself how odd it was that a bottle, handled so much between distribution, shelf-stocking and point-of-sale, managed to have only one set of prints on it - those of the victim. This was all the confirmation I needed that Turner's suicide had been staged.

As casually as I could, I told Conway that I had no further interest in Charlie Hurley but I was going to have a chat with the landlord of The Duke, just in case something turned up. Until we could track down Benner the case was cold. I asked Conway to have a look at the Fairleigh Parva car-thefts as another large saloon had gone missing and the Chief was after a result. Conway said despondently that enquiries at fancy-dress hire shops, far and wide, about cat suits had drawn a complete blank. I left the station. But instead of driving into town I headed in the direction of The Maltings. If a junk culture could have junk food and junk values, it was quite obvious that it would develop junk words as well - The Maltings, site of an ancient brewery. As I turned into the serene, mock-tudor islet, a huddle of houses, black and white somewhat like great penguins on the edge of the drab, abandoned waste of Earlstone, I wondered if one day the entire English countryside would consist of archipelagos of such estates, as the population turned its back on and fled the derelict urban and exhausted suburban areas. Would - or should- the latter become England's new wildernesses? Here in The Maltings and hundreds of other -ings and -lands and -woods and -fields were the new frontiers of the aspiring, self-bettering, respectable-tabloid-reading classes, the new cabins where new lives and fresh starts were being swept in by new brooms, jealously guarded and protected. Surely here I would discover precisely what I needed? I had noted that Turner's residence had no security camera. At the house opposite (and next door) I had spied one over the front door. The thirty-something fellow shining his Merc on the drive was more than well disposed, on the production of some ID, to inform me about his brand new security system.

"All the images go down to a hard-drive."

"And have you got all the week's footage recorded?"

"And the rest!" and he began to tell me how much memory there was, interpreting my wide-eyed grin as technical curiosity, and not as unbounded, unheeding delight. Then I began to listen, as intently as I should to be polite, waiting for an opportunity to interrupt him.

"Well, the reason I am here is regarding the suicide across the road on Tuesday."

"Oh, terrible business!"

"I don't suppose that you were in during the day?"

"No. We were both out at work." He smiled and held up his bottle of wax and leather in triumph.

"I'm working from home today!"

I enquired if I could have a copy of Tuesday's footage. It was a routine part of the investigation for the inquest. The neighbour was only too willing to oblige and within twenty minutes I was

driving out of the sturdy future back into the ailing past, with a copied disk on my passenger seat.

I inserted the disk into my computer, clicked and waited. Within a few minutes I had found what I wanted. At 10:32 a white van pulled up. Two men, one thin and athletic, and one portly, got out. The fat man carried a black bag. Their faces though obscured partially by hoods were visible and I was sure that enhancement would do the trick. At 11:07 they came out and drove off again. Now I had enough to make a move, I thought; at least in the Turner case. Linking Brierley to Turner, and all the others was the tricky part. I took out the disk, drove home and locked it away with the suicide note and the diary.

I cooked myself some pasta, and thought of my chess night at The Anchor with eagerness. Dutifully I phoned Maxine in Nantwich. She said she felt "alright". "Alright" meant quite a degree of discomfort. I tried to get her to elaborate but she had little else to say and seemed in low spirits.

"Are you going out?" she asked after a dull silence.

"Yes...Just for a game of chess...with David..."

"Just for a game of chess..."

I heard her unspoken reservation and suspicion but pretended I had not. I told her lamely to keep her chin up. She whispered something I could not hear and put the phone down. Feeling somewhat guilty I donned my winter jacket and left the house. The monkey puzzle tree in the garden was hung with frosty webs and at the centre of the most perfect web I imagined Simon Brierley, as a huge black spider, waiting for the slightest tremor on the filaments he had spun.

I kept thinking about my call to a despondent Maxine and the risk I was running. I felt uneasy. I had always needed her unqualified approval in order to enjoy myself. And I kept noting the comings and goings in the bar at the front of the pub, on the look-out for Ben and his friends. I was the bait on my own hook. He must have either a photo or a good description of me, courtesy of Turner or others. So with all these things on my mind I was not playing very well that night. My chum and opponent, Dave, the chirpy owner of a ironmongery in Leicester, was on particularly good form. He was beating me by two games to one. We always played the best of five for a fiver. By nine o'clock I found myself in a poor position again.

"Too much on your mind Derek. I can tell."

"Don't get too cocky Dave. Drink your pint. It's your round. Stop gloating. I'm thinking."

I had white. I stared at the black king. I imagined Brierley now, not as a spider, but as that sinister king hidden behind a cluster of pawns, protected by a rook and a knight. The king looked in an unassailable position. And Dave's bishop and queen were threatening a checkmate in three moves on my own king. I could prevent this, but to do so would further weaken me on one flank. My own forces were scattered and under-developed. I had been trying to lure the black queen to where I could deliver a knock-out blow with my own lurking knight - with a check on the king, threatening the queen at the same time - a classic and inescapable fork. I sensed that Dave had not spotted the potential danger, and that he was too intent on inflicting his own imminent coup - and that he was a little tipsy. When he returned with the drinks I took a deep breath and, careful to appear hesitant, pushed a pawn forward onto the target square, in the hope that the big fish would take the tiny bait. Then I had a thought. The gobbling of the pawn would actually, in the short term, in a way I had not anticipated, strengthen my opponent's position, while not being immediately fatal to my own cause. I sensed that Dave, now eagerly taking the top off his pint,

had just spotted this intriguing new option himself. Without being, I hoped, too theatrical, I rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers, closing my eyes to convey the impression that I had just spotted - alas - the latest of several booby traps I had made. Now Dave had picked up his own queen and had knocked the proffered pawn off its square. It was sitting smack over the trap-door. For an age he did not let go of the piece. Surely he would spot the danger? Was he playing games with me? I sneaked a look at Dave's face through my fingers. He was looking so intently at the board that I almost giggled, imagining his horrified reaction when the full consequence of his move would strike home. I held my breath and bit my tongue. Then I saw, with a feeling of elation, the hand withdraw and reach eagerly for the beer. Dave was questioning me with a raised eyebrow, a sidelong, sparkling eye and a smirk. In response I now slid my knight onto the key strategic square and slyly announced a check. His smirk at first broadened into a smile - over a move which he had no doubt anticipated some time ago and had already dismissed as futile and merely delaying - then died as he saw its full force and deviousness. Obligated to move his own king by the check he now watched helplessly as his mighty queen was removed from the field by the tricky knight.

"Well...fuck...my...old...boots..." muttered Dave, crest utterly fallen, as he heard it clatter in the box. I did then what I had not done in weeks, months. I threw back my head and laughed till tears ran down my face and I was gasping for breath and sneezing.

"Every dog has its day" muttered Dave again. Within six more moves he had resigned. Twenty minutes later I had won the tourney 3-2 with a very sweet checkmate. Dave handed over his fiver and congratulated me through clenched teeth on a cracking comeback. He tried to persuade me to stay and make up a four in dominoes but I declined. I had had enough to drink. I stood up and walked to the coat-stand to get my jacket. Through the glass door I caught a glimpse of a young face I felt I recognised turn too rapidly away. My heart leapt with a thump of fear and excitement. I stood thinking what my next move should be. Had I perhaps imagined it? I saw that a group of men were just about to leave through the front door. I quickly joined them and left the pub in their company. I whispered to the hindmost that I was in a fix.

"Let me walk with you for just a moment. Someone might be following me."

They were walking in the direction I wanted. A car started up behind us. In a glance over my shoulder I saw a youth in a baseball cap running over to the car and pointing my way. His earring glinted in the lamplight. I hurried to the front of the men who were walking slowly, and turning to look at me in perplexed silence, to their new port of call, The Swan Inn. As we reached a fork in the road I thanked them quickly and began to jog left, as they went right. I saw the car dawdle to the right in pursuit of them. Now I ran as fast as I could. I needed to get into the narrow lane which culminated in a swing-gate into the recreation ground. I was about a mile and a half from home. I reached the junction at the top and turned left. I was thirty yards away from the right turn into the lane. I ran. The silence and darkness were now broken by the revving engine and of searching lights approaching rapidly from behind. They sent my immense shadow grappling up the side wall of the house twenty yards in front of me. I threw myself into the lane as the car came screaming up behind me onto the pavement. It had to stop, reverse and manoeuvre itself so that it could take the sharp, narrow turn. This gave me precious seconds. Now I saw my silhouette again, sprawling in front of me along the lane like a monstrous spectre. There were tall hedges on either side. I saw a gap on the left and leapt through it. The car sped past my foot like a charging bull and stopped. Doors opened and slammed. Instead of running through the trees into the park beyond, I had already doubled back towards the house at the top. The spinney ended in the hedge of the garden. I crawled underneath it and ran to the left side of the building.

A muffled shout came from some way behind me. I clattered against a pushbike leaning against the wall. I grabbed it and tried to open the wrought-iron gate. The ring handle would not budge. A dark figure was almost on me. Another was at the bottom of the garden. I sent the first pursuer spinning backwards with a punch and then hurled the bike over the gate. Putting the toe of my shoe into the central metal spiral, I heaved myself up and over. Benner had rushed past his prostrate mate and had his hand on the top metal hoop. For an instant we leered at each other. Then, using my fist sideward like a sledge-hammer, I smashed it against the fingers gripping the cold metal. He let out a yelp and fell back. I jumped onto the bike and rode away as the front door of the house opened and a stream of golden light flooded the drive.

I heard the whine of the car in reverse gear coming back out of the lane. I glanced behind and saw a bemused resident on the pavement and the two youths giving up the foot-race after me. I thought quickly. The junior school - the jitty..... Which way would the car have to go? They must know where I lived. I raced the few hundred yards to the school, took the jitty alongside the building and free-wheeled down the steep hill. At the bottom, at the crossroads, ran the main road. Straight on, then three streets away to the right was my own road. I could hear and see nothing as I approached the junction. I closed my eyes and went straight across. Now I was within half a minute of home. I pedalled furiously up the steepish incline. I could hardly breathe; despite the cold air I was soaking in sweat. Now a car rounded the corner at the top and sped down the hill towards me. It passed by, showing no interest in me and did not stop. As I came to the home corner, three houses away from my own, I braked and leapt off the bike, abandoning it within the garden of the corner house. I crept towards the end of the tall private hedge and peeked along my own road. There was nothing. I was only thirty yards away from safety. But might there be somebody there already posted? I crept forward. One house passed....one more..... one to go. Suddenly the car of pursuers turned into the road by the sub-post office fifty yards ahead of me. I ducked into my next door neighbour's front garden. Had they seen me? The car engine stopped. I heard no door open. They must be waiting for me. My heart was thumping with fear and exertion. My head hurt and my wind-pipe ached. I noted for the first time a tear in my right palm, ripped on the gate. Freezing black blood trickled down into my sleeve. My fingers were going numb because of the wound and the biting cold. I fumbled for my set of keys in my right-hand pocket. I could hardly feel them. I looked and in the gloom tried to pick out my back door key. My fingers were hardly working. Still there was total silence. I transferred the keys to my left pocket. Soon I would make a move. Or should I? Perhaps they were debating whether I had come this way at all or where I might be hiding. There were at least three, probably four of them. In their situation surely the best thing to do was to leave someone in my garden in wait and then drive around in an attempt to find me. I knew I had to make my move while they debated. I crept down the left-hand side of my neighbours' house, through their gate and past their dark kitchen window. I felt the urge to seek sanctuary with them. No. Not fair. I could do better. I found myself in the left corner of their garden. All curtains were drawn. There was only the faintest light to see by. The car started and drove away. Had they divided their forces? Were they trying to make me break cover? In the right corner of my own garden there was a shed. Could I get into the narrow gap between it and the fence? A six foot fence. I looked around. I remembered my neighbour's hated brazier. I found it and dragged it into the corner to my fence post. Pushing its legs firmly down into the soil, I tried my weight on it and managed to stand up and balance. I grabbed the post but could see that there was no way to haul myself over without making a great din, and possibly breaking down the fence. Then I thought of the hedge which divided our front drives. There was a slight gap between the end of the hedge and my

neighbour's garage. I went back the way I had come and turned right at the front porch. There was a lantern burning and I slithered like a snake past the door and then past the bay window. I could hear voices within and laughter from the television. The hedge was of conifer, about seven feet tall, but who might be on the other side? I stood in the corner and listened hard. The conifer smelt acrid. I slowly edged my way through the end branches. I could see that my side gate was open. I never locked it. But had I left it open? I stood perfectly still and held my breath. A dark body passed by me, an inch away. There was whispering. There were two of them on the side-path. I realised that my best chance was to sneak past them to my front door. I fingered the keys and felt around with my foot until I found a large round stone and rolled it towards me. I tried to calculate at what angle and trajectory I needed to throw it over my neighbour's garage in order to hit my own shed. I opened and closed my numb hand to restore some sensation. In my left hand I took what I hoped was my front door key between index finger and thumb. I picked up the stone in my stiff right hand and rehearsed over and over, trying to decide the right force and line. I had one shot. After several deep breaths I finally hurled the stone over my head and the garage. I thought I had miscalculated until a crack rang out, as the stone crashed against my shed or back fence. As soon as I heard it, I edged through the gap, crossed the path and entered my dark front porch. My left hand trembled but I managed to place the key in the lock; it turned and I was in. Immediately I closed the door silently behind me. The house was warm but pitch black. I made my way into the lounge at the back and looked through the patio doors. As I had anticipated, in the starlight, two figures were moving about beyond the flagstones in expectation of my immediate capture. At the back of the room in the total dark I sat in the armchair and watched them look in every cranny and then peer through the window - apparently - directly at me, before going.

Unable to prevent their recall I began to review other instances in which I had been close to death. I saw again the black saloon screech to a halt as I ran out into the road, a seven year old child, on my way back from Saturday morning pictures; I sat again on the bicycle whose brakes I could not work, and hurtled from the lane, falling in a heap, grazed but otherwise unscathed, on the normally busy road; I saw the car flash beneath me as I vaulted the fence to the service road, on a mission to find a foot pump at any nearby house as my brother's car stood stranded on the dual carriageway; I saw the knife lunge at me as I tried to arrest the betrayed husband who had slit his wife's throat; I felt the puny assaults of the numerous drunken men and women on various Friday and Saturday nights. I had cheated death again. But no, I concluded, this time I had played it well and deserved my victory. The two shapes had not returned to the garden. Some time later I thought I heard their car pull away. I did not stir for an hour. Then I crept upstairs and satisfied myself that they had indeed all gone, leaving no Trojan horses behind. I lay on my bed and wondered what to do next.

When I awoke it was unnaturally bright. Flurries of snow danced at the bedroom window. I cautiously looked out on a pure, white morning. The phone rang. I debated whether to answer it. I let it ring off then dialled 1471. It was my mother's number. I pressed 3. She came on sobbing. She was dead. Tablets. I put the phone down.

Maxine was dead.

After the shock I detected relief, followed instantly by fury with myself, then guilt. Ultimately I found utter misery and floundered gratefully in it and tried to seal every other sentiment out. I lay

on our bed below our wedding picture watching the haphazard snow. Memories whirled, painful and pleasurable. They piled up, now in nostalgia, now in wincing regret, now in exquisite grief. Yet to my disquiet, dismay and disgust, after each thick flurry had waned, there was, still, as at first, despite my every effort to exclude it, relief.

Time scurried on. The tall clock in the hall blindly struck the hours, the quarters and halves. Several times the phone rang. I ignored it. The heating switched itself on and off. The day obediently faded. I watched the sky turn first white, then navy blue, then starry black. I slept. I woke. How was Maxine? She was dead. It was not a bad dream, I eventually decided. The telephone rang again, again and again and finally gave up for good.

A fist was hammering at the door. My instinct was to look out and see who it was. But my prostrate body did not respond. In the dark house I felt as if I had ceased to exist. As far as the world knew or cared, I was nowhere. The thought gave me comfort. The hammering stopped. I texted my sister: "I'm OK. Have Max cremated there. Send bill here. Tell no-one I texted you." Now, with Maxine gone, I owed no-one an obligation or explanation. I would be an eavesdropper on the world, a peeping Tom from far beyond. And as such I could make up my own rules and play by them. And routine concerns about working, shopping, cooking, washing as well as the longer term ones of planning, budgeting and pension all seemed ridiculously superfluous. The world could impose no further claims on me. Lying sightless on my bed as the moon fell I achieved a state of utter indifference. Except in one respect. I resolved to kill my soulless enemies.

*

Sunday morning

There was another hammering at the door. Then I heard glass breaking. Someone was forcing their way in. I straightened the bedclothes, pulled down the loft ladder and climbed up, hauling it back behind me.

There were doors opening below and the sound of voices. There were feet climbing the stairs.

"Derek?" It was Conway and other officers. They looked around and sniffed the air.

"No sign of him. Check the kitchen for dirty cups, dishes, anything...."

A pair of feet descended. For a moment there was silence. Someone checked my wardrobe.

"It doesn't look like he's packed anything. Ask the neighbours again if they've seen him. We'd better get someone out to board the window up."

"I'll see to it, Jim. It looks as if he hasn't been back."

I was freezing. I waited. I judged that half-an-hour had elapsed. I slowly lifted the loft lid. They seemed to have gone. I edged my way quietly into the kitchen, ate some cereal, washed everything up and put it back in its place. I phoned Schofield.

"You work for Bernard Brierley, Terry. Where does he live?"

"I don't know."

"Bollocks. Tell me - or I'll charge you with withholding evidence."

I listened to the quickening of his breathing and imagined his eyes widening with fear. "Put your wife on, Schofield. Stop wasting my bloody time!"

"OK, OK. He used to live in Burwell, last I knew....he gave a reception for the staff once....I don't know the number...It's not such a big place...You go past the Wesleyan chapel and there's a long drive with a white farm gate....old Victorian house.....That's him...."

“Are you both OK?”

“More or less. When can we come home?”

“I’ll let you know. Relax.”

I reached to the back of the coat cupboard and put on my old duffel coat. I pulled up the hood and buttoned the chin strap. The snow was thawing. The cold snap had ended. I slipped into the back of my garage and disentangled my old pushbike from amongst the rake, the hoe and other hanging and leaning impedimenta. I checked the tyres with my thumb. Softish. I took the black pump and blew them up until the bike bounced. I oiled the gears and brake-grips and tightened the blocks till they bit hard. I found a cloth and wiped away years of dust and grime. I put on my dark glasses, took my keys and ID and slipped out onto the drive. The sun was brilliant and warm. The snowfall had been reduced to a translucent crust on the verges and hedge tops. Birds were prematurely celebrating. I rode away as upright as I could, like the nuttiest eccentric I could pretend to be. I approached The Anchor. Tom, the landlord I got on so well with, was opening up. I saw him pause and watch me pass without one sign of recognition. I was pleased. At the bottom of the hill the congregation had begun to emerge into the blinding sunlight from the chapel. I dismounted. I wheeled my bike across the road to the white gate. There was one car at the top of the drive, an old Jaguar. The large villa was tall and elegant, but in no way ostentatious. I closed the gate and leant my bike against a conifer. As I approached the door it opened. A thin anxious woman, with white hair stared out at me.

“Can I help you?” She had a self-cultivated posh voice.

“Is Mr Brierley at home?”

Now the door opened wide and he appeared. In one hand he held a trowel. He wore an old jacket and a mustard coloured cardigan buttoned up tight beneath it. He looked weather-beaten. He wore a flat cap. Was this Brierley, wheeler-dealer, multi-millionaire? He looked - and sounded - like an under-gardener, for now he growled, without any attempt to conceal his local accent “Oo might want to know?”

As they stood together framed by the door like a very large photograph, her refined, quite tall, slender, silver-haired and elegantly attired beneath her pinafore; him squat, pot-bellied and reminiscent of a Toby jug my grandmother had owned and never liked, they struck me as remarkably ill-matched. Given ten men and ten women scattered in a large room, could anyone decide successfully who was married to whom? These two were the most unlikely married couple, as if stuck together by arrangement and by money as sons and daughters used to be. His hostility and inhospitality contrasted markedly with his wife’s friendly, if nervous, courteousness.

“I’m DI Miller. Here’s my ID. You might have heard of me.”

He inspected my credentials with screwed-up eyes and handed them back.

“It’s the sabbath. Ker n’t it wait till Mond-eh? Yer doon’t look much like a copper to me!”

I managed to smile at him. I told him I had important news he needed to hear. It could not really wait.

“Then you’d best cum in.....”

I knocked my shoes clean and followed him through a cosy living room into a long, warm conservatory. On either side were rows of potted lime green plants, in various stages of growth. His wife came as far as the door and offered to make me tea. She had Earl Grey, Darjeeling, green tea, but Bernard cut her listing short with an impatient snort and growled “Later, woman. Leave it. Goo and see to yer dinner.”

“Fuchsias” I said, looking round embarrassed by his rudeness. Brierley turned and smiled at me in surprise, almost affably.

“Are you a gardener, officer?”

I shook my head and told him that my uncle had bred fuchsias but that I preferred dahlias to fuchsias. Brierley sighed at such a want of taste and then smiled again.

“What’s a dahlia to a fuchsia? I’m still searching for the perfect hybrid. There’s not a lovelier plant on God’s earth. Look!”

In the corner by a radiator was a standard in spectacular bloom, a mass of lavender and blue ballerinas, with slender red legs splayed out beneath their inner pink skirts. I congratulated him on such a magnificent specimen. He thanked me with a glow of pride and then eyed me up.

“Well? You had something to tell me.”

“This isn’t going to be easy, so I’ll just say it. Your son is a murdering psychopath.”

Brierley said nothing. He turned, took his dibber and continued winkling seedlings out of a tray to pot them carefully on into richer soil. His wife appeared at the door of the conservatory again and told us that it was no trouble at all to make some tea. No, we would not require any bloody tea, shouted the old man adamantly. I could tell she wanted to hear what I had to say. There was an awkward silence. Had Brierley heard me right?

“What I’m not yet quite able to prove, Mr Brierley, is how far you are involved in his schemes.”

“Me!” He did not stop and turn, but I saw his hand shake as he transferred the next precious seedling.

“Was it you or your son who ordered the murder of the editor of The Gazette?”

He laughed. “Murder? Ridiculous! Silly buggar killed hisse’n! Is that it?”

“No. Did you blackmail DCI Turner to destroy evidence against your son?”

“WHO? Turner? Never heard of him!”

“Were you a party to your son’s sexual abuse of pubescent girls? To his pimping off them? To his drug-pushing to them? To his murdering all four members of the Jolly family? To his blackmailing and murder of DCI Turner? To his murder of Charmaine Bishop and the abduction and probable murder of her - and - his daughter, Tayler? To his attempt to murder me?”

My voice had grown slowly louder from a whisper, so that Brierley suddenly threw down the dibber and trowel and turned.

“Keep you effing voice down, she’ll ‘ear!”

“Is that all you can say? She’s going to hear anyway, sooner or later.”

“Come into the porch!”

I followed him into the garden and he shut the door behind us. Lines of brassicas at various angles, bearing clusters of sprouts, stumbled away up the slope of the garden. A crow complained, flapped and flew off.

“I know pretty well what my son is. He’s my son. Everything I ‘ave now, I’ve worked ‘ard for. Look at these!”

He showed me his calloused palms.

“That’s through working with bricks and tiles and wire in the bloody freezing cold at five and six in the morning for fifty year. I paid for ‘im to ‘ave it easier than me - paid for ‘im to have a good education. I bought ‘im The Manor as ‘is 21st birthday present. Our Simon made it into the best hotel in the Midlands. I know ‘e’s no angel, and ‘as a....few....sidelines and.....bends the rules a bit....All successful, wealthy men do....they have to, to get where they are; but ‘e’s no bloody murderer and no child abuser. ‘Ow dare you come ‘ere and so say?”

Now he had gripped me powerfully by the toggles of my coat.

“Please take your hands off me, Mr Brierley” I whispered. Taken aback, he relaxed his grip. I looked back into the greenhouse.

“You know, it’s a real pity.”

“What is?”

“That you breed such beautiful flowers.....but bred such an ugly son.”

“Aren’t you....a clever bastard!” he replied. Then something seemed to dawn on the old man. He brightened up and smiled.

”Hey, why are you here on your own, if we’ve done all you say? You should be here mob-handed, squad cars, the whole works, not on a bloody old pushbike! You can’t prove it, can you! Not one word! And you want to watch your bloody step! I know your superiors pretty well. One word from me!”

“Oh I’m sure one word from you carries lots of weight, Mr Brierley. As far as proof is concerned, I have more than enough!” Now I gambled everything on the next move, my sacrifice. I knew that, in a legal sense, the diary was utterly useless. But Simon Brierley did not.

“Just tell Simon that I have in my possession a jolly good diary. He’ll know what I mean, even if you don’t.”

Now I turned and left. I found a pensive wife, an anxious mother, in the rose-patterned hallway. She had heard alright. I had meant her to.

“I’m very sorry to disturb your Sunday, Mrs Brierley. Happy New Year.”

As I left her at the door I gave her a slip of paper with my mobile number on it and the instruction to ring three times, ring off then ring again if she wanted to talk.

“Is it very bad news?” she whispered.

I said nothing and went on my way.

I cycled as upright as an old church vicar past the chapel. The doors were now firmly shut. Ahead of me jolly, paunchy Sunday lunchtime drinkers were entering the pub. Two or three pints would loosen those slack tongues, I thought with disgust, and it would not be long before many were slagging off a range of class enemies, particularly asylum seekers, easy targets, the New Blacks. At the very same time, up and down that staunchly Conservative county, very many of the accused would be waiting at table or taking out the rubbish or washing up or cleaning up after such people, who had been regurgitating the semi-digested miasma fed to them by their Sunday newspapers, designed to stir up their self-righteous indignation. Were they that much less disgusting than the Brierleys – with whom they undoubtedly rubbed shoulders? How much did I have in common with them, apart from a language and a passport?

Freewheeling down the long hill back into Earlstone, I thought over with revulsion Brierley’s self-important reaction. “Bend the rules.....All wealthy men do....One word from me.....”

Bend the rules. Nobody liked the rules any more. Bugger the rules. Give me the rules, I will bend them and I shall give you the laws which you will all obey. Except me. and a few of my friends.

The powerful had always made the rules. They were the rules and the rulers. So who could seriously blame them if they, at local and at national level always felt tempted or entitled to bend and break them? Should we have a revolution then? What for? Had not their smaller, severest critics, once installed on usurped thrones, invariably turned themselves into their equals and more than equals in sheer brutishness? In the current era, men of little importance, such as I, a clever detective, spent my time trawling in a revolting sea for the simple transgressors; the stupid fish, the ones easily caught, the ones on the surface, turned over on their sides, gasping, in the shallows, the ones who made all the decks and the beaches stink. Here I had a chance to spear a

larger one, though by no means the most massive, in the murky deep.

As I cycled along the main road I tried to imagine myself on camera, even though I knew not one solitary eye in the whole of creation took any notice of me. At least I hoped none did. I thought again with a terrible pang of Maxine. She lay no longer in pain. This suddenly made sense to me and I began to persuade myself that this was why I felt relief. Her heaven was to be pain-free for ever. I suppressed the darting accusation, made now by her dead voice, that I had not loved her - properly - for years. I had. I had!

Back in my bedroom I drifted off into deeper thought. I sought consolation but in vain. I had no religion. But in every man, I reasoned, akin to a useless, primitive appendix or coccyx, there was a religious bone, even in the most sworn atheist, like Richard Dawkins, who might vehemently deny, suppress it or make no conscious use of it. Who on earth never felt, even for a split second, a sense of awe, a sense of a greater Law, a Guiding Hand, a watching and caring Eye? Did not Religion begin in the scream of the newly detached new-born child? Would not an unattended child eventually struggle up to the teat of the mother, like any tiny, blind, puckered mammal? Children had mothers, dying soldiers cried for them; God was the mother. How could anyone live a sane, happy life if, at every moment, they expected the worst to happen, to themselves, their children, their spouses or their partners? Everyone believed instinctively in a kind Providence. I remembered with a smile the domestic dispute I had been called to, where a wife had finally gone berserk because her neurotic husband insisted on a daily obsessive tidying-away routine, believing it staved off evil to the family at home and abroad. She had finally hit ci hard with a pan. The blow on the head had cured him.

I imagined Maxine in death. I closed my eyes tight and looked into the most utter blackness in which she might be drifting. Was it too ridiculous to imagine that she was, at that very instant, already waking up, crying, in a purer light somewhere beyond this era, even beyond this eternity? How could it be natural for a tiny, vulnerable, naked, sensate being, perhaps unique in creation, wrapped in swaddling clothes at birth, not to expect love and succour in the quandary and cold of the universe? Poor men. They thought that there had to be reasons for sudden death and the curses of illness, misfortune and catastrophe. Sin, sacrilege, inobservance, insufficiency of spiritual ardour or a bad previous life had surely brought, they were adamant, whichever divine retribution was theirs. What a cruel, vindictive streak had this loving Parent! What a sense of its own importance had the infant! Our mangy old cat had slunk off to die and had known no god to blame. It had not been grateful for its life. It had lived. It had died.

I broke open a bottle of brandy and sat on the side of the bed and looked at the blue swirls on the wall which reminded me of galaxies. Where had pity been conceived in that immensity? I shut my eyes. In the same measure as it was instinctive to hope for the love and protection of a creator, so it was also instinctive to have faith in natural justice; that the good shall be rewarded and the bad punished. Like Maxine? I held my head, rolled from side to side and wept. Does evil triumph on earth? In that case, invent a scorching hell beneath it in which the triumphant shall suffer eternal torment! Do the humble, poor and virtuous suffer? Then create a heaven in which their sores and wounds shall be salved and deny the wealthy an easy access!

Paradise was strictly for paupers. Earth was for the rich.

I lay exhausted by grief and fury and I was quite pissed. I knew that I and Brierley had at least

one thing in common: we both knew that a loving God was all a fairy-story. Brierley knew he would not go to hell.

Ergo, it had become my duty to provide one for him.

If Brierley could bend the rules, or if the very rules were in abeyance, if that insignificant person could bring the local rules into suspension due to his local pernicious sway, then I had no choice but to bend the rules myself. There would be no penalty to pay. No reckoning. I felt utterly alone, a free agent, an ill wind about to blow unto Brierley, like Brierley blew unto others, nothing but ill. Like him, become an amoralist, I dismissed the thought that my good deeds might be as meaningless, or as amoral, as my adversary's foul deeds in this tiny, horrid locality, the armpit of this fair county. I wanted a reckoning. That was only human.

Once home I had switched my mobile phone back on, after all those silent hours since my escape. Now it rang. It was a voicemail. That robotic voice told me that I was *a dead man*. An hour and a half later it rang once more, waking me, first three times, stopped then rang again and I heard the nervous voice of Mrs Brierley.

"I overheard some of what you were saying. Is it really as bad as that with my Simon?"

My Simon. Not our Simon.

I told her that she had to prepare herself for a very difficult time. I asked her what her husband had told her.

"We had a row. He's gone over to Simon's to have it out with him. Bernard's not to blame. Well in a way he is."

"How?"

She hesitated.

"Mrs Brierley, what you tell me over the phone will incriminate nobody. It is not admissible evidence. I just want to know. I will not pretend to you that I can help you."

She told me how she had gone into the conservatory and asked Bernard to tell her all I had said, but he would not. After years of misgiving her feelings had got the better of her, she confided.

She had known, she said, as soon as she had clapped eyes on me, that the dark angel she had expected for years had finally arrived. Gradually, with coaxing, and the promise to be absolutely straight with her about Simon afterwards, I got her to tell me about the following scene. Bernard had told her that what I had said was *all lies*. He had phoned somebody after my departure and been told that I, Miller, was not right *in the head*. *I had had a shock; I had lost my wife on Saturday*. When I confirmed this to her she commiserated with me, then with growing confidence carried on.

"Bernard told me the old, old story I'm so....bloody sick of....How Simon had gone just a bit too far...had bent the rules a bit to suit himself....And all the time he keeps looking at this bloody potted fuschia. I can't help myself...I get hold of it and smash it on the floor and tell him that he's always been more interested in the rearing of his flowers than his son."

"And was he?"

"He spoilt him, bought him anything, him being the only one. He always backed him up whenever he was naughty, against the school, against other parents who complained, against me, when he was rude to me and ignored me, even hit me. "Boys will be boys" he kept saying. He paid for him to go to a snooty private school and made a proper little snob of him. I should have spoken out but I didn't, and that's that. I knew exactly what he was. I watched him pulling the

wings off butterflies and cutting caterpillars in half and catapulting birds and cats. I told Bernard I was worried about his cruel streak and he just laughed. "Boys will be boys".

Her voice trailed off in weeping. I took a deep breath and told her exactly, without taking any edges off, what Simon was into.

"Mrs Brierley? There must be a good side to Simon, you being such a lovely woman. Get him to hand himself in, to confess. It's only a matter of time before the Law catches up with him."

I did not add that the Law was me.

She told me that she would think it over. I told her to phone me again. She was my unexpected, if faint hope of a peaceful resolution to the case. I thought of Bernard phoning his police contact to be told who I was and that I was a widower. I thought of Bernard going around to his son to "have it out with him." The conviction grew, with the gathering dusk, that it would not be long before another attempt would be made to silence me. After all, I had been told I was a *dead man*.

Before there was a need to turn on a light I slipped downstairs, found a torch and filled a plastic bag with snacks. I found a stout wooden dahlia post in the garage, measured the width of the loft opening and sawed it as precisely as I could to size. I brought in the two litre bottle of white spirit and some sturdy nails and the hammer. I nailed batons across all of the upstairs window-frames. I took newspapers, soaked them in spirit and sealed them in a refuse sack. I left my spare back door key under a brick at the back. I placed a chair on the tiled floor within range of the back door. I removed my precious pieces of evidence – the diary, the suicide note, the computer disk and a backup copy - from their drawer and put them in the garage. I nailed a piece of hardboard to the broken door-light and sealed the letterbox with heavy-duty tape. I turned the landing light on and opened the loft lid just a fraction. I packed a case, put it into my car, sat in the cupboard under the stairs and waited for Brierley to make the next move.

Sunday night

A scraping noise woke me. The chair had moved. I sat in pitch black. I switched on a torch and saw by my watch that it was gone eleven. They had finally come. I listened hard. I was hungry, I realised. I ate a biscuit. A flash of light came through the gap at the bottom of my door. Now they were on the stairs. Two of them, I thought. Now they were on the landing, now in the bedrooms. I picked up my black plastic sack, crept out, opened it and listened.

"He's not here," I heard one whisper.

"Look! The loft lid! It's open!"

I knew now exactly what they would be doing, debating how best to winkle me out of my shell. Reaching up through the banister rail I emptied white spirit on the risers from the middle of the staircase downwards, and scattered the papers on the stairs. The landing light had two switches, one upstairs, one by the front door, which I now turned off and left us in total darkness and, for a split second, silence.

"What's that smell?"

"What smell?"

I struck a match

"It's white spirit, lads." I dropped the match on the bottom riser. An inferno roared up the stairs.

I watched Benner and his ally staring down at me through the flames. They were both in catsuits.

"Ah, you came in fancy dress again Ben! And brought a new friend."

They still stood and stared down. I produced my car fire extinguisher.

"You have one chance. The windows are all sealed. Throw down your mobile phones, go into

the loft and close the lid. Both of you. Now.”

Benner tried to come down but was driven back, swearing furiously.

I took hold of the front door and opened it a fraction so that the fire burned with refreshed vigour in the cold air.

“I reckon you have about five or ten minutes to live. Throw down your mobiles and do as you’re told!”

“We ‘aven’t got no mobiles. No pockets! They’re in the car,” shouted Benner. They began to cough and choke.

“MOBILES! NOW!”

“Honest, mate. We ain’t got none!” the other youth whined.

I closed the door and watched as first one, then the other scampered up into the loft and closed the lid. I pulled a wet tea towel over my face and began to extinguish the flames. I reached the top riser and the loft lid began to open. I aimed the nozzle straight into Ben’s nasty face. He howled in pain. I turned on the light, picked up the dahlia post I had left in the bath and rammed it snug into the opening. Then I took a nail and hammered it through the post into the lid. I put out the last smouldering sparks.

In Stapleford Lane I drove past Conway’s house, an end terrace of five, and pulled into a dark layby. I looked back. Lights were on even though it was nearly midnight. From my glove compartment I pulled a bottle of scotch, took a mouthful and swilled it round my mouth. I got out and walked the few yards back to the house. I saw Conway’s shadow move across the upstairs curtains. I went around the back, spat out the whisky and tried the backdoor. It opened. I slipped into his lounge and sat down. The television was mumbling quietly to itself. I waited. Finally I heard descending footfalls. Conway came quickly into the lounge and switched off the TV. As he turned and took hold of the door handle he froze. His head swivelled round.

“Derek! What....?”

“Hello, Jim. I thought I’d drop in for a drink. If I’m not too late. Do you mind?”

Conway sniffed the air.

“Are you pissed, Derek?”

“Not quite. Not yet. I’ll have a scotch.”

“So will I.” He went out to fetch a bottle and two tumblers.

“Where on earth have you been? We thought..”

“That I’d done myself in? First the Mrs then the Mr?”

Conway looked away embarrassed and lost for words.

“I’m sorry, Derek. Your mother phoned 999. It got referred to us. We came round to look for you....I’m really sorry....”

I scrutinised him and marked his sympathy as genuine. But that did not mean that he was not a corrupted soul. What line might the spider, Brierley, have attached to him? I sipped on my scotch. Conway gulped his down and poured himself another.

“Where the HELL have you been?”

“Never you mind. It’s a secret..... I’m not coming back, Jim. I’m finished.”

Conway did not know what to reply.

“Well, you need to take some time...get over it...a couple of weeks at least....and then -“

“And then NOTHING.” I held my head in my hands. Then I looked at him to see how he would take what I had to say next.

“Turner was murdered.”

There was genuine shock and disbelief. Draining his glass again and pouring himself another large shot, Conway asked me how I knew. I said nothing but proffered my own glass for more and to encourage him to drink his own.

“His suicide note. Not quite right.”

“YOU’VE got it?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, not quite right?”

“I’m not saying.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

I shrugged. I sipped at my whisky and waited for the right moment.

“Brierley,” I said simply with a drunken gulp. I studied Conway for some give-away sign.

“Brierley? Bernard Brierley?”

I looked into first one eye then the other. I could see no hint of guile in either.

“Turner was Brierley’s creature.”

“Creature? What do you mean?”

I told him about Turner’s debts and that Brierley owned them - but not about the court case which had been subverted. Conway again looked genuinely surprised and asked me how I knew.

“Jonathan told me.....the day before he died.”

I was almost on the point of believing in Conway’s purity but something urged caution. For all I knew Conway was in Brierley’s extortionate grip, exactly like Turner, or was even on his payroll. But why should Conway know of Turner and vice-versa? The less anyone had on Brierley, so much the better for him. They were very probably like spies who were only granted their tiny segment of the truth.

“Let’s have another drink, Jim!” I slurred. I half-filled both tumblers again but poured some away while Conway went into the kitchen. He returned with some peanuts.

“So why was Turner killed then?”

I examined the question for a hidden purpose but found none.

“I dunno. Perhaps he was threatening to blow the whole gaffe.”

Conway drank deeply and hiccupped.

“The whole gaffe? But what could Jonathan possibly have to blow on Simon Brierley?”

Now I stiffened and put my glass on the nearby table.

“I didn’t mention Simon, Jim.”

Conway stared and then said too quickly “Did I say Simon? I meant Bernard.....” For the first time he looked in discomfort. I studied his face as he sought to change the subject.

“So what had he done then? Cheated at golf?” he laughed theatrically at his own joke. “He owns the Golf Club, doesn’t he?”

Now for the first time I took a proper drink of my scotch, relaxed and flexed my shoulder muscles.

“No. He landscaped it and built the club house. He chairs the committee. You told me.

Remember? Jim, I mean to destroy Simon Brierley. If you help me you’ll be off the hook.”

Conway sat up straight.

“Off the hook? Hook? What are you implying?”

“Conway. I KNOW. Turner told me.”

“How could he know? He didn’t - “ Now he stopped. He looked in disgust at his glass and threw it across the carpet. It was his turn to cover his face with his hands.

“Come on Jim. You have got to tell me. I can help. What did you do for him?”

For a long time he remained silent. Then when I began to press him again he took a deep breath and sighed.

“I told him what you knew about the Jolly case. I told him - and I’m ashamed to say it - where you lived. And gave him your mobile number.”

“Tell me what hold he has on you I’ll tell you everything I’ve found out.”

He shook his head. “I’m too ashamed to tell you.”

“Whatever it is, I promise not to land you in it.”

“How can you grant me immunity?”

“I shan’t say a word. Tell me.”

“It was...Charmaine...”

I started. “You helped to kill her?”

“NO! I wasa customer. Brierley had me on camera...with her...”

“You mean she was filmed with her clients?”

“He threatened to send the film to Gilbert.”

I sat back and whistled.

“He said she was only 15. I didn’t know honestly...”

“But what possessed you to go there in the first place. How did you find out about her?”

“Curiosity. This was when I was between girlfriends. There was a sex-line in The Gazette. I’d had a few. I phoned up. And after all the usual stuff - you know -“

“No, I’ve never phoned one...”

“Well it gave this other contact number in Earlstone. I phoned it and was given Charmaine’s number. I rang her up and arranged to go round. It only happened once. God knows how they got onto me.”

“Easy. 1471. Then someone at the nick traced your number - or already knew it. You said you were between girlfriends.”

“I was - apart from a little fling with someone at the station.”

“Who?”

“Jacky.”

“Jacky! Oh, wonderful!” I thought of our interrupted clinch that New Years Eve and cursed myself for my own naïve credulity.

“For a start I didn’t even know who it was who was blackmailing me. It was just a posh, fruity voice - obviously a well-educated man. He talked the local slang, but in a plummy way - *my* duck instead of *me-duck* ”

“What did he ask you to do?”

“He said he wanted five favours then we’d be quits.”

“How did you find out who he was?”

“By accident. I heard the same voice at The Manor. I was eating there with some friends and he came past.”

“What does he look like?”

“A bit like a stick insect...black hair....and a baby face, with a complexion like a girl’s. I thought at one time he had gone away and forgotten me. I hear nothing for months. Then he’s back, like a blood-sucker.”

“So how many favours have you done him?”

“Four.”

“Four? You told me two. What else?”

“The first one - ages ago - was to look up a number plate...The last one was to tell him you drink

at The Anchor.”

“Well tomorrow he’ll be asking for his fifth one.”

“What?”

“Me.”

I told him to go to bed and give me a key. I needed a bed for the night. I had just one job left to do then I would be back. I would try not to wake him.

At gone one o’clock I left my car a hundred yards away from home. Around the corner I noticed the car which had pursued me on the Friday night, and in which Benner and the other cat must have arrived. I let myself back into the dark house. It stank of chemicals and scorch. An hour or two in that freezing attic, I reasoned, ought to have done the trick. I stood beneath the loft-lid and coughed. I heard them scramble across the joists. They began to hammer with their fists on the wood. I let them carry on until the extent of their predicament sank in. They stopped to listen.

“Are you listening to me Benner?”

“I’m listening. Who grassed me up copper?”

Now an inspired idea came to me. “I got a tip-off the other day. Out of the blue on my mobile. A posh, fruity voice...I phoned back. There was just a bleep..... Anyway, that’s not the point. The fire starts again in one minute. I’ve got bed clothes piled up underneath you. ”

I shook the bottle of white spirit and sloshed it around.

“Why? You’re a policeman, Miller, for fuck’s sake.”

“Who grassed me up then? Somebody called Conway? Or was there someone else as well?”

“I dunno. Honest.”

I sloshed the spirit around again.

“HONEST. You gotta believe me. I just do what I’m told.”

“OK....Now, I was a policeman, until I resigned. I’m a free-lance now. Now listen carefully, shit-wit....You have one minute to tell me where you put Charmaine’s baby.”

For a few seconds there was silence.

“Whose baby? I ain’t gorra clue what yer on about...”

“Bullshit...I’m the bloke you hit on the back of the head around the back of the flat the night you set her on fire, you.....BASTARD... fifty seconds.....forty.....” I held the box of matches high to the loft-lid and struck a match.

“You’re trapped like the putrid little rat you are....”

Now I heard the muffled entreaties of his mate.

“Is your mate’s name Josh?” I asked. “Josh, make him see sense.....twenty-five...”

“Tell ‘im Ben! Tell ‘im where yer put the effing fing.”

“Twenty....it’s starting to burn my fingers....I’ll have to drop it soon.”

“What guarantee do we get that you’ll let us out?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning.....ten.....”

“OK..OK..I took it to my sister’s.....in Leicester.”

I shook out the match.

“You mean to tell me that you didn’t get rid of her?”

“What kind of a person d’yer tek me for?”

“What kind?? If you’re lying, I’ll be back a lot sooner than you expect....to finish the job.

There’s one more favour I need. I want you to give evidence against Simon Brierley.”

“You must be joking! Griffin would have me killed. He’s been in more prisons than you’ve had hot dinners! He knows all the worst villains inside.”

“Well, I tell you what. You think it over. You’ve got all night – and all the rest of tomorrow to change your mind.”

“You ain’t gonna let us out till when? Tomorrow night? It’s fucking freezing up here! We’ll starve to death!”

I went downstairs and fetched my two copies of the video footage, the diary and the suicide note from the garage. In the kitchen I wrote a note.

“Craig Benner and his friend are in the loft. They came to kill me. Benner and Griffin killed Turner. This disk shows them arriving at his house. I can prove that his suicide note was forged. They will doubtless tell you how they killed him.”

I heard them hammering on the loft lid. I left one copy of the disk on the table and took the note and, on a whim, left it in a corner, on the floor, face down by the door, as if it might have blown there in a sudden draught. I drove away. I would get the sister’s address out of Benner or track her down, but I knew I had no chance of getting either of them to grass on Brierley. Yet I was in no mood to let them out. How could I anyway? Before returning to Conway’s I had just one final trick to perform. I drove past the cemetery, turned right, drove erratically onto the car park of a large supermarket on the edge of town to abandon my car there. I took out the whisky and sloshed some on the upholstery. I put on my duffle coat and stuffed my treasures into my pockets. Leaving the door open, I staggered, for the benefit of the security cameras, across the car park and crossed the road to the fence of the deep fishing pit, once a quarry. I climbed over the gate and left the empty bottle by the landing stage where it would be found. I made my way through the low trees, careful not to break any branches, and came back out onto Stapleford Lane. I jogged the two miles to Conway’s house, let myself in as quietly as he could, and scribbled a note in the kitchen.

TELL NOBODY YOU HAVE SEEN ME. ESPECIALLY NOT GILBERT. SAY NOTHING OF WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU.

While we were sleeping, a creature with nocturnal habits was up and about. He confessed later that when he had received no call from his accomplices to confirm my demise, he had gone round to apply cruder methods. He could not be charged with murder or manslaughter because there was no way of proving that he knew that they were inside the loft. Besides, what motive for killing them did he have? All he wanted to do, on his boss’s orders was to burn the diary. So he was only charged with arson. He had found the letter box stuck down and had punched my nailed piece of hardboard out of the way. A squirt of petrol from his squeezy washing-up bottle followed by a lit paraffin firelighter had done the trick.

Monday

It was just before ten o’ clock when I woke. I turned on the radio and heard that my house, and our life it contained, had burnt down. My phone rang three times, stopped but remained silent. Coincidence? I waited for five minutes and debated. Then, against my better judgment, I rang the number back.

“Oh thank goodness! You’re alive, Mr Miller!”

“Yes, but only for you. No-one else must know, particularly Bernard and Simon. Promise?”

She gave me her solemn word and took a deep breath.

“They imply on the news that you might have been involved with your house burning down, that you might even be in there, and that it might be linked to your poor wife...”

“I know. I just heard it.”

“It can’t be true surely? You didn’t burn your own house down?”

I did not know what to say. I had been absolutely certain that the fire I had lit on the stairs was out. It would only dawn on me later that afternoon that it was Griffin who had left his calling card. The irony that the monster had destroyed its own brood by accident would cause me to smile wryly to myself, until it struck me that it might not be an accident at all, but a deliberate tidying-up operation on behalf of his boss.

“Mrs Brierley, can we meet?”

“Yes, surely. I wanted to suggest it myself. I have some important information.”

I told her where to find me and within half-an-hour we were sitting together on Conway’s sofa.

“Bernard was a very long time at Simon’s. Our dinner spoilt. Simon had invited some very posh friends around for lunch and Bernard told him to finish his dinner while he waited in another room.”

“Posh friends? Who?”

She mentioned a few names – one an ex-director at Leicester City, she thought – but I recognised none of them.

“Anyway, neither was in the best of humours when they eventually got back together. Simon’s guests had left early. The afternoon was spoilt, Simon said. Well, Bernard doesn’t believe in beating about the bush, as you probably noticed.” She paused to laugh briefly, as old women tend to do when they have spoken, then thought better of it. “You asked me to persuade Simon to make a clean breast of it all, Mr Miller.”

“I did. Will you? Did you??”

“No, Mr Miller. As it turns out, it has nothing to do with my Simon at all.....”

My Simon again.

“.....but he *does* know all about it. He told me it’s a friend of his who’s responsible.”

Now I felt disappointed. “His name isn’t Griffin by any chance?”

“I really have no idea.”

“Do Simon or Bernard know you’re speaking to me? Did they send you?”

She retorted that they did not, and I believed her.

“So is that all you wanted to say, Mrs Brierley? That I’ve got it all entirely wrong?”

“No, there’s more. Simon never lies to his dad. I want to convince you by telling you what happened between them.”

She began to tell me of the following furious scene. Its authenticity was later confirmed by Bernard himself and by Simon’s girlfriend who had partly overheard, partly witnessed what had happened.

The girlfriend had gone to fetch Bernard from the room where he had been waiting and he had brushed past her. He had gone straight up to his son and seized him round the throat. They had fallen and rolled round on his Persian rug. Bernard had shouted at the girl to get out and she had. “I had a policeman round this morning, name of Miller” he had yelled with his knees pinning the son’s shoulders down. “Says you’re a murderer, multi-murderer, child-abuser, pimp, blackmailer – it’d be a sight easier to say what you’ve not done than what you ‘ave! And your mother heard. What’s she supposed to think?”

“Get off me, you savage!” Simon had screamed. He would not, he said, deign to comment on

such scurrilous accusations. He had come to know about Miller; he had lost his wife; he was imbalanced.

“Maybe. But why descend out of nowhere on a bloody old pushbike this morning and say such things if there was no truth to them. He said to mention a jolly good diary. What’s that about? I can see in your face it means summat! If you bring shame on your mother and me, I’ll kill you with me bare hands! I gave you life and I’ll take it away. I were out at five and six every morning in frost heaving bricks and tiles just for you– “

Simon had shouted at him not to give him the old bricks, tiles and wire speech.

“Bernard’s strong,” said Mrs Brierley. “But not heavy, and Simon managed to roll him off and get to his feet. He told him to calm down and started to tell him that a friend had got the wrong end of the stick about an old man making trouble for him, saying he knew something about his daughter taking a drug overdose. The friend mentioned it to somebody else and he had gone round to reason with him, but that the old man had got angry and collapsed and died with his heart.”

“Go on,” I said.

“That’s all he’d say.”

I considered whether to tell her at that point that “the old man” was one of the Jollys in that awful murder case, then decided I would wait. I wanted to hear more. I reminded her of all the other shocking things that had happened and she told me again that her son was not the person responsible.

“Mrs Brierley, if he knows the culprit, then he is an accessory.”

She appeared not to hear this. I realised then that she was burying the truth inside her. Bernard had not been a very good example, she said, almost under her breath.

“Tell me about it. Has he broken the law?”

“Oh no! He never would! He’s just a very sharp businessman. Ruthless, some might say. He once put it about that a rival builder’s floors were rotten and nearly put him out of business. And he got The Manor for a song for Simon. He’d do anything for him.”

“For a song?”

“Yes, it needed structural repairs doing. Bernard put all scaffolding up, cement mixers at the front, everything he could think of and then went off to do another job. In the end the man who owned it lost so much custom that he went bust. Bernard kept his gear there until he got the place at the price he was offering, then gave it to Simon for his twenty-first. I couldn’t look at his wife again. Her husband tried to kill himself. I stopped going to chapel over it.”

She began to weep, and then as a thought struck her she unexpectedly brightened. Simon was going away to Madeira to his villa in a few days and had invited her and Bernard to come out with them.

“When?”

“Next Sunday.”

I realised at that point it would be futile to remind her about the Jollys. She had persuaded herself that her son was not a psychopath after all. Then she dropped her bombshell.

“I know Simon bends the rules. All businessmen do. That’s why they’re where they are. Bernard thinks he takes after him, and it’s never struck him how different they look, Simon tall and dark with those great big sad eyes; Bernard squat and ginger with eyes like slits. Bernard shouldn’t feel so bad if Simon’s a crook. It’s not in his genes. He’s nothing to do with Bernard. He’s another man’s child.”

I went into the kitchen to see what Conway had got in the cupboards. The healthiest thing I could find was a tin of tomatoes and some white bread. I fried the tomatoes and grilled some toast and told Mrs Brierley to try to eat something. She say red-eyed and exhausted. I put the plate on her lap and gave her a knife and fork.

She told me, even though I told her she was under no obligation to do so, about her one and only act of betrayal, which had taken her so completely by surprise. Bernard had been away on a fishing trip in Tewkesbury all weekend with his mates. She had met a man in a cafe in Leicester and he had come over that afternoon with an envelope she had left behind on the table.

“I was twenty-three and very unhappy. The man was big and awkward, not good-looking, ugly even, but he was ever so kind. A policeman would you believe. Name of Paul. I never knew his surname. When Bernard came back on Sunday night he thought I was beaming because I was pleased to see him. I could never understand why Simon was such a cruel child. I was nice, Paul was nice and I just put it down to Bernard spoiling him. I stuck at it. I tried my hardest to make it a happy home. I was always sure the child would come good though in the end.”

“And Bernard has no idea?”

“If he knew, I don’t know what he’d do. That one weekend of joy and the guilt afterwards has kept me at his side all these years. Can you understand what I’m saying? Bernard has provided well for us and I’m grateful. I must go now. I hope you accept now it wasn’t Simon behind all those horrid things. He’s rich and successful. What possible motive could he have?”

“What indeed, Mrs Brierley. Let me see you out.”

Conway returned at about two o’clock. He had unexpectedly been whisked over to Leicester for a meeting which I have reconstructed from the minutes taken – demanded by my Police Federation representative for my hearing – and from Conway’s testimony. I have taken a few stylistic liberties but not with the essential matters discussed.

“Miller was never a team-player. I didn’t trust him. He even kept evidence to himself. Unprofessional. He wanted all the glory of the arrest, if you ask me. Arrogant. Aloof. Superior.” Craddock, who had said this, stopped to blow his nose. His voice was still thick with the flu which had kept him away from work for over a week. He was a small, fragile man with an absurdly large nose, as if it was a stop-gap while his real one was being mended or being found. Its reddened state caused him to have even more the appearance of the Poison Dwarf which I had once dubbed him to Conway’s amusement. Gilbert thought these sharp criticisms over. He had begun to look bewildered, like a captain watching his smart ship slowly sinking beneath him. “Miller’s detection rates were first-class. The best in Earlstone. Amongst the best in the whole county. But I realise Miller wasn’t popular,” he trailed off lamely.

Sifting through his file, his half-moon spectacles sitting conspicuously useless on the end of his nose, Lapworth, the Chief Constable who had convened the conference sat opposite him and said nothing. DCI Morgan, on loan to Earlstone from Leicester, picked up the CCTV still photograph from the newsagent’s and studied it. Others followed his lead. The animated face yelling at customers intrigued him. I, Miller, looked every inch the hero. But was I?

Lapworth cleared his throat, knowing that it was about his turn to speak. There were four senior officers sitting around the oval table of his plushly furnished room, a hushed and respectful audience. Off to the side, lovely legs placed firmly together in order, it seemed, to be of

minimum distraction, a young secretary, face down amongst her chestnut brown hair, waited to scribble shorthand. Finally the Chief pushed his glasses back up to the bridge of his fleshy nose, leant back and made a roof with his finger tips.

“Well, gentlemen, not to put a fine point on it we are in the S-H-I-T. I’ve even had the Home Secretary’s office on the blower this morning. One is not H-A-P-P-Y, to put it mildly. To be honest - and I told old what’s-his-face the same - it’s difficult to know where to start clearing up. Paul? What’s your view?”

Gilbert gulped. He must have felt like a plate-spinner with too many wobbling and threatening to flop off, but he had to begin somewhere. He had not built himself a reputation for having a safe pair of hands undeservedly.

“Miller is the key. Find Miller and everything else will slot into place.”

Lapworth sniffed, as a brief alternative to saying, easier said than done.

“What if he is in the pit? It’ll take ages, I’m told, to drag it and search it with divers. If he is down there he won’t be able to help us much with our enquiries. Did you bring Conway, Paul? Right. Let’s have him in.”

Conway was rather under the weather from the previous night. He sat down obediently where he was told. The secretary stopped scribbling and her pencil waited.

“DS Conway, you knew DI Miller pretty well. Would you describe him as the suicidal type?”

Conway looked out of the window at the Leicester skyline and thought of me snoring away in his spare room that very morning as he had left for work. He shrugged his shoulders.

“He was someone you just couldn’t see very far into. He wouldn’t let you. Very private.”

Craddock snorted but decided not to speak.

“Did he talk much about his wife’s illness?” asked Lapworth.

“His wife’s illness was on his mind a lot. Let’s just say, in view of his wife’s death, I wouldn’t have been a bit surprised if....you know...”

“Had he ever mentioned, even in anger, taking his life?”

“No never. He never discussed his feelings.”

“Thank you Conway.”

Conway held his ground.

“Would you object if I sat in, Sir? I might be able to shed some light on the investigation... the investigations, I mean...”

Craddock glared at him but no-one objected. Morgan sifted through his copies of the file. “Well, they say there is no smoke without fire...but in this case there seems to be no fire without Miller.

Jollys, burnt-out car, Charmaine Bishop, his own house...” He let this sink in and then added

“To put it mildly, the man’s a bloody jinx.” There was a long silence, and finding that he was still being stared at, he felt obliged to wonder aloud who the smoked bodies in the loft had been.

“Who nailed the post to the loft-lid?” asked Craddock melodramatically. “Cold blooded murder in my book,” he added.

Lapworth caught the drift and exclaimed “Surely, DI Craddock, you are not suggesting that Miller set fire to his own house?”

“Someone did! Firelighter through the door-light. Says so here.” He tapped the report.

“Charmaine was an accident. Fire chief’s report confirmed that,” ventured Conway. DI Craddock glowered at him again. Detective Sergeants should be seen and not heard. Morgan leant back and found his most sarcastic tone.

“Ah yes, Miller the Jinx just happened to be passing...”

“DI Miller told me he had interviewed her. About Abigail Jolly’s death.” retorted Conway, stung

by the insolence of the look and the remark. Ostentatiously Morgan threw over page after page in his file.

“Notes, dear boy, where are the interview notes?”

“Well, we have Charmaine’s father’s statement. It must have been Miller who warned him and told him to take his daughter back.”

Doubtlessly sensing that the mood in the room was beginning to go against me, Craddock decided to sink in another barb.

“Miller was involved with something or, SOMEBODY, I can feel it in my bones. Come on Conway. You know much more than you’re saying, I can tell. You were closest to him, cold fish as he was. What was he really up to? We’ve got more suspicious deaths on our manor than in a bad whodunnit.” He looked surreptitiously around the room for approval. But he only managed to look comical, as if he might be wondering who, amongst the company, would be the next corpse. Conway felt his brow and realised he was sweating. Every eye was on him, even those of the pale secretary, who sat with her pencil poised to convert his next words into her gibberish.

SAY NOTHING OF WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU, he read in the window. But he was already speaking.

“He didn’t like or trust Turner. That’s partly the reason he came across as so secretive, I think. He was on to something about the Jollys. He did interview Charmaine Bishop, that’s how we got onto Craig Benner.” He glanced quickly at Craddock and Morgan. “But when we went to pick him up, he had vanished, almost as if he had been tipped off....”

The two officers looked up at the ceiling in god-help-us-all fashion.

“Are you suggesting, on the top of everything else, that we have a leaker, a corrupt officer in Earlstone, Conway? Can you prove it?” As Lapworth said this he lurched forward and his glasses almost launched themselves from the ramp of his nose.

“No Sir.”

“Did Miller tell you that there was such a person?”

Conway hesitated a second too long and Craddock was already on him like a hyena, at his quarrelsome and petulant worst.

“CONWAY! DON’T DARE SIT THERE AND TREAT US LIKE FUCKING IDIOTS. WE’RE ALL SITTING HERE... IN A - AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUA - “

His paroxysm of fury turned into a sneezing and coughing fit, which the dutiful secretary seemed to be converting frantically into squiggles. Conway thought things over quickly. Should he now offer up Turner? Would that divert them sufficiently from the ludicrous conclusion they seemed destined to reach? What would I want him to do in this situation, he asked himself, which, he was convinced, I had failed to foresee?

Now his mouth was opening again and it was too late to stop.

“Miller thinks Turner was bent.”

No-one spoke. Somewhere far off a police siren sounded.

“Thinks?” queried Morgan quietly. “Is he communicating with you from the spirit world, Conway?”

“What makes you so sure he’s dead?” he countered. “Before he went on leave he said to me, in confidence, “Jim, I think there’s a bent copper in the nick, and I think it’s Turner. That’s all he’d say -“

“Then why IN BLAZES didn’t you come and tell ME?” yelled Gilbert.

Conway and the others were astonished to see his face, normally so passive and lugubrious, swollen up like a great puffer fish in flushed, scolding anger.

ESPECIALLY NOT GILBERT sang the hungover voice in Conway's head.

"I just did tell you. Derek confided in me. Then Turner died. It didn't seem the right time. Anyhow, now you know, Sir..."

At this point the hoarse but revived Craddock rejoined the fray.

"I OBJECT! This.... JUNIOR officer has made an allegation - utterly unfounded - based merely on the say-so of a ...a...person who, to put it mildly, has gone WALKABOUT, against a well respected colleague - now and for ever more unable to defend himself - barely bloody cold in his grave -"

"I did no SUCH THING DI Craddock. I merely reported, under duress from YOU what my partner had confided -"

"THAT WILL DO." interrupted Lapworth. "This is not getting us very far. The best course of action is to keep an open mind but ACTION of some kind is needed to keep the wolves at bay. We must not appear to be doing nothing." He thumbed through his papers again until he found what he wanted. "Paul, what about the two days leave Miller took?"

"Stress and exhaustion. He was not sleeping well because his wife was so ill. The rest you know."

"But she took her own life in Cheshire. If he was such a devoted husband why did he drive her - an invalid - a 100 miles up the M6 in the middle of the week - in the middle of the night - and leave her with his mother? This doesn't quite make sense. There would surely have to be an extraordinary reason."

Conway could not help himself. "He did everything for her. He was devoted!"

"Thank you DS Conway. I think you can wait outside now. I'll call you back in if I need you."

He rose and felt the hostile glare of the room usher him out. As soon as the door was closed Lapworth had carried on.

"Make a note to phone the mother please Paul, in person, and see if she can throw any light on why he took her away from Earlstone. And where he might have gone since.... favourite holiday resorts, weekend retreats, close friends...anything.... DCI Morgan!"

"Sir?"

"What did you make of Conway?"

"I'm not sure. There's something he isn't telling us. I agree with DI Craddock."

"Conway is alright" said Thompson who had said nothing until then. "He's young and he's loyal, that's all. You were too hard on him, Phil."

"Hard-on-him, be bugged," snarled Craddock. "He's holding out on us. It wouldn't surprise me one tiny bit if he knows where Miller is. IS. Present tense."

"Supposition. You didn't like Miller. I think he's dead."

"Enough!" said Lapworth. "This is how we'll handle it."

The photos of Craig Benner and Derek Miller were to be featured in the evening papers and news bulletins, local and national. The press release implied that Benner, wanted for the murder of the Jollys, for drugs offences and possibly for arson, might also have information about my whereabouts. I had not been seen since my wife's death in Nantwich. Thus Benner was promoted to villain-in-chief to divert the heat of the press away from the disarray at police HQ. When it

was confirmed that afternoon that one of the kippered bodies found in the loft was Benner, and the other one was not me, Lapworth decided to sit on the information until the next morning, when the link between the body and my house-fire would lead to the inescapable conclusion that a distraught and mentally imbalanced officer had taken the law into his own hands before taking his own life.

It would be very messy. There would be a lot of unanswered questions and further press speculation, but at least there would be a plausible explanation of the chain of events leading from New Years Day, and maybe a solution to the whole conundrum. Heads would sway but not roll. Lapworth relaxed.

Then his telephone had rung. It was his lanky secretary. She had a reporter on the phone. The news about Benner's death had leaked. He had slammed the phone back down onto its carriage.

I sat all afternoon discussing the situation with Conway. We could not wait to watch Lapworth, not a popular Chief Constable, being roasted on a media spit, live on News 24. Looking as pale as a troglodyte dragged from its cave into the daylight, Lapworth faced a hostile, boisterous conference of the press. He did not do well. The words "I do not know" and "No comment" clearly began to grow as hateful to him as to his impatient audience. His carafe of water was soon empty and the phrases must have felt like hot ashes in his mouth.

"So, Chief Constable, are we supposed to conclude that these murders and fires are all an amazing coincidence, which by an amazing coincidence were either witnessed or in some way linked to one of your officers, who, by an amazing coincidence has now disappeared after the amazing coincidence of the death of his own wife?"

Lapworth gazed blankly back at the young woman at the back who had brought the house down with this question.

"Is that a yes or a no?" roared somebody above the laughter.

"I'm sorry, Miss... Could you... er... repeat the question?"

Pandemonium. Lapworth was almost dragged off stage as if collared by a huge hook in a pantomime.

Sitting eating fish and chips on our knees we could scarcely believe that the pompous ass had done so badly.

"Now you know why he's on so much more money than you, Jim."

The report moved onto images of officers rowing out to the centre of the quarry and then to my taped-off car. As the picture of my burnt-out house came on, my hand, reaching for another slice of bread, stopped in mid-air and I stopped chewing. Conway had already told me what the fire brigade were saying off the record about the petrol and fire lighter. He reached across and patted my knee in sympathy. He started to say something but I held up my hand, for now the report actually mentioned that accelerants had been detected behind the front door as well as on the stairs.

"Griffin set fire to his own! Poetic justice!" I said.

Now the news moved on to other stories.

"So they all think I did it? To my own house? Then put myself out of my misery?"

Conway began to fold up his empty papers and took a swig from his beer bottle. "Well, that's the way it looks, Derek. And to be honest that's the way that Craddock, Morgan and Lapworth want it to look."

"That creepy little bastard, Craddock."

“And it looks as if you wanted it to look that way, going and committing suicide like that.”

“Mmm. Things have not quite turned out as I planned. I had decided to phone you at work. You were meant to go round to my house this afternoon and find Benner, the other lad...Josh and the evidence about Turner.”

I wondered if it was now time to tell Conway the whole story. “Can I trust you Jim?” He looked up at me in some surprise.

“You’re still here aren’t you? Eating chips and drinking my ale, not in some cell!”

“Then I’ll tell you all I know.”

“Before you do, I have a confession to make.”

This was when he told me that he had informed the meeting of my view that Turner was bent. I was annoyed. The television news had gone onto some dispute about motoring charges in the capital.

“Why, Jim?”

“I had to give them something. Craddock could tell I was lying and was breathing down my neck.”

“Did you give them chapter and verse?”

“No. Turner was bent, according you, and that was it. Full stop.”

Outside in the lane a car had stopped. Conway reached for the remote but I grabbed his hand and shook my head. I gathered up the beer bottle and chip papers and checked carefully for any other sign of me and went into the kitchen. I pulled down the kitchen blinds and turned out the light. I sat and listened. As soon as the bell rang I turned the key in the back door to lock it. I heard voices in the front room, first Conway’s and then the high-pitched Cornish drawl I knew only too well as Craddock’s.

I watched as the handle of the back door slowly sank and then rose again. I saw a shadow pass back along the side entry. Anticipating the ghost’s next move, I turned the key and removed it, gathered up my rubbish, slipped outside and locked the door again. The garden was long. I went to the end and crouched amongst the shrubs. The light in the kitchen came on then increased. The lounge door had been opened. As I watched, the lights upstairs went on and a figure I did not recognise flitted from one room to another. Had I left anything lying around? Now the lights were out again. The kitchen light too. A few minutes later the car started and pulled away. I was freezing but I resisted the temptation to return just yet to the house. I prayed that Conway would have the good sense to give it a while before checking that the coast was clear. But the kitchen light had come on again. And now in one corner at the top of the garden there was the glint of a flashlight. Behind me, through the two-bar fence was the chance of escape into the fields. I could hear Conway trying the locked back door. The flashlight was coming too close. Still carrying my litter I slipped between the bars and found by moonlight a writhing bramble patch. A large animal scuttled out.

Now Conway had got into the garden from the front.

“HEY –“ On seeing the spurt of golden light on the lawn he managed to swallow his cry of DEREK, and luckily it came out as a warning. The flashlight switched off and I saw a dark shape vault the fence and run back around the side towards the lane. My suspicious mind thought the whole incident over and finally pronounced Conway not guilty of complicity. I waited a further five minutes and let myself back into the kitchen. I found Conway sitting in pensive mood on the sofa.

“I nearly kacked myself when Craddock asked for a glass of water. The nosy bastard insisted on getting it himself.”

“While he kept you talking down here that other person you found in the garden, came through the front door and was having a good poke-around upstairs. What did Craddock say he wanted?”

“Said he was just passing. Wanted to apologize for bawling me out today.”

“Two-faced bastard.”

“Do you think they’ll be back?”

“I doubt it, but best keep our voices down and the telly on.”

A thought struck me. “Did anyone follow you to the chippy?”

“I don’t think so. I went to that one in Stapleford. The road was clear.”

“And Brierley didn’t phone you?”

“I told you, no. Look Derek, you’ve got to trust me. I’m on your side.”

“I wonder if he’s made his mind up now he’s in the clear?”

Then I began to tell him everything I had discovered since New Years Day. I led him upstairs and showed him my treasures. We sat on the landing away from spying eyes. Conway read the diary, then the note and listened to me in silence. He thought it all over but if I hoped a fresh pair of eyes might see anything I had overlooked I was disappointed.

“The baby girl is the only proof of any crime Brierley has committed. Even if convicted of sex with a minor - who would give evidence against him? - in view of his excellent character and convincing protestations of ignorance as to her real age a suspended sentence would be the most likely outcome. Pointless.”

“You can nail Griffin though, Jim.”

“I will. But why did you tell me specifically not to speak to Gilbert?”

I had not mentioned Charmaine’s description of him. Now I did.

Conway laughed. Could I possibly be serious? There were dozens of fat, ugly men using prostitutes!

“I might be really wrong. It’s just so odd that he wrote to Jolly last October but seemed to have completely forgotten about it. He did Brierley a favour. Here, read it again.”

Conway did and pointed out that Gilbert had not mentioned which Brierley he had interviewed.

“When he says “interviewed” he might just have meant that he had a chat about it with him - Bernard or Simon - at the golf club. Had a good laugh about it over a drink. Perhaps Brierley said something back like, well, you tell him from me to watch his mouth.”

“Perhaps. But Gilbert doesn’t strike me as the saloon bar type, and certainly not very clubby.”

“Yes but is he the type to have sex with young prossies? I think you’re adding two and two and making twenty.”

“Perhaps I am Jim. I hope so. I intend to find out from Brierley.”

“But what if he won’t tell you?”

“Oh, he’ll tell me alright.”

“And then?”

“I’m going to kill him. Like a spider.”

Conway slowly shook his head and smiled.

“That will make you just as bad as him.”

I stood up and went into my room, clutching my treasures.

“Jim. Before you come to bed, tape the letterbox up. There’s a good lad.”

Tuesday

The next morning I lay in bed until I heard Conway go out to work. I heard on the news that I was still the subject of vigorous police enquiries. At nine thirty Conway came home looking

curiously euphoric. He had just resigned from the police. He was as astonished as I was. "As soon as I can, I go to see Paul Gilbert to ask whether I'm under some kind of surveillance. So he gives me that fishy stare and says, "What on earth makes you think that you are, DS Conway?" So I tell him of Craddock's peculiar visit and the prowler in the garden. I remind him that DI Craddock has got it into his head that I'm somehow complicit with you; that he had virtually said so yesterday. "And are you, Conway?" says he. "Absolutely not," says I. So then he puts his elbows on the desk and places his hands on his fat cheeks and asks me with a tear in his eye and a catch in his throat if you're really dead. He calls me Jim. I shrug. Anyway he gets to his feet and with his back to me he assures me that I'm not the target of any operation he has authorised and that he will speak to Craddock forthwith. So I go back to my office and sit there staring blankly at files about thefts of luxury cars in Fairleigh, about which I could not give a toss. The phone rings. It's the desk sergeant. A bloke is on the line reporting a sighting of you the previous Friday night. "We thought he was pissed at first" says this guy. He says you seemed really scared. You went left at the war memorial and they went right. Then a car full of youths came alongside him and his mates. They were checking them out, he thought. Then the next second they go roaring off and turn left the wrong way down the one way street. Anyway I note the details and the number of the car. But I know it's stolen and it's going to be a waste of time."

Conway began to gulp and cough. I fetched him a glass of water.

"So *that* was why Brierley asked me ultra-politely where you drank, Derek."

I had not mentioned the chase to him, only the intrusion of Benner and friend into my house. Realising then that he had betrayed me and nearly got me killed, Jim Conway hung his head in shame.

"You didn't imagine Brierley just wanted to buy me a drink, did you Jim?"

He sniffled. I told him to go on.

"Well, at that point the last person I wanted to see was Fanny Craddock. He breezes in and says "What have you been telling His Nibs, DS Conway?" "Telling him? Nothing," says I. "Asking him." "Asking him what?" "If he had ordered your little visit." "It was just a courtesy call," says he. "Courtesy? Bollocks." I can't help but shout. I can see him about to throw one of his wobblies so I stand up and beat him to it. "WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT COURTESY, YOU POISONOUS DWARF?" I yell. "You were SNOOPING. Seeing if Miller was there. Who was that in the garden?" I push him out into the corridor. He starts to back off. "In the garden?" he says. "Nobody I know. I came alone. You must have a prowler, Conway". So then he puffs himself up, the pompous twat, and says, "You assaulted me, Conway. I'm reporting it." I watch his thin back narrow to a pencil down the corridor. I look at the emulsion paint, the most dismal old custard colour. I look at the most basic chair it is possible to design or imagine plonked outside an interview room. The air smells of cheap disinfectant, armpits and tobacco. And the strong, fusty odour of Wigwam Wendy who can't be bothered to wash her hair any more. And that's when I realise I can't stay there a moment longer." I knock and go in to see Gilbert. "I have a confession to make, Sir. I am being blackmailed and I have abused my position."

Gilbert stares at me for a whole minute. He tells me to carry on.

"A Mr Simon Brierley of Wolverley has me on film in the company of a prostitute, a girl aged under sixteen at the time. Charmaine Bishop."

"Go on."

"It was just a voice over the phone at first, asking me for favours."

"What favours?"

“There was a number plate once...but it was mainly informing him about the movements of another officer. DI Miller.”

“I see. So you made unauthorised use of the data-base and betrayed confidential information.”

“Yes, Sir”

“Describe the voice of the blackmailer.”

“It’s of a well spoken man...a young voice....educated...but he uses the local vernacular...I found out by accident it was Brierley.”

“And when was he last in touch?”

“Middle of last week.”

“Has he been blackmailing you long?”

“Just over a year. He comes and goes. You can’t shake him off.”

Gilbert holds his face in his hands again. He struggles to his feet, walks to the window and stands spotlight in the sunlight.

“I think it best that you now go home DS Conway. I appreciate and applaud your candour. In due course I shall order a full internal enquiry into your conduct. You will receive notification in writing. You are suspended from duty as from this moment. That will be all.”

“That will not be all, with respect, Sir.”

He just carries on looking over the ugly skyline of the town.

“I intend to resign from the Service, Sir. You will have a letter from me in the post tomorrow. There will be no need to order an enquiry into my conduct or my guilt. I admit it. I shall go into detail about my misdemeanours. No doubt you will pass my letter on to CPS for their ruling. I was a bloody fool and I deserved to be trapped. It is up to me to free myself. It’s a great relief. Thank you, Sir. Goodbye.”

Conway sat down and I made him some tea. On coming back from the kitchen, I gently removed the whisky bottle away he had taken into his fist.

“Jim, you did the honourable thing, you bloody fool. No, I admire you, son. Listen, we’ll talk it over later. You’re knackered. Make yourself a hot water bottle. Go to bed. I’m just popping out for a bit of fresh air. I’ll buy the chips tonight and we’ll drink that crate of lager.”

I hid the whisky.

I looked at my stubbly beard of nearly five days and put on my dark glasses. Then my duffle coat. I would pass as the village idiot. I walked out into a glittering cold morning, vaulted by a sky as intensely blue as any in May, dominated by a sun threatening to brim over. I walked into Stapleford, past its tiny church, and found the old signpost leaning left into an even narrower country lane. It read

Wolverley 3 ½

Sharnstoke 2 ½

Duncote 1 ½

This was the route I had cycled with Maxine when she still could, nearly two years ago in another life. The name Wolverley had at that time carried no sinister connotations with it. The road before me narrowed even further as it rose towards a canal bridge. An unseen car beyond hooted, then appeared on the brow of the bridge and slowly squeezed through. I arrived on the bridge and stopped; I looked over the wall first one way along the canal, then the other. Below

me to my left a sleek red barge was moored, bringing a warm daub of colour to the greyness of the water. A steady stream of busy white smoke told of a snug and warm interior. To the right into the far distance I could see the first of eight or nine locks which stepped down painstakingly onto the Leicestershire plain. From around the slow bend came the helpless laughter of unseen mallards; and then they were aloft, perfectly spaced out above a coppice of silver birch, on the blue screen of the sky. To the north, the flat country in neat field-parcels, some ploughed, some pasture, like a chessboard, hedged with bare bramble, hawthorn and elder, with sparse clusters of barns and red-brick farmhouses, some overflowed by white birds and black birds, was laid out before me until it disappeared beneath variegated woods of conifer and shocked leafless trees. The lane dropped down from the bridge to a far huddle of oaks and houses shepherded by a spire. This was Duncote. The road threaded on then beyond Duncote to the smaller hamlet of Sharnstoke and there in the background, just visible, glinting in the sun like a gold star was the weather vane of Wolverley church. And somewhere in that farthest cluster of firs and pines was Wolverley Grange Farm, the den of the wolf-spider in all this serenity; or apparent serenity. In no hurry at all, I carried on walking; past farm gates and metal milk churns; past copses and past isolated, ivy-clad Victorian and Edwardian houses, often of three storeys topped with ornate red crests of roof tiles and stovepipe-hat chimneys. I had absolutely no idea about what troubled or comforted the unseen people within. But I ached with envy of them in their snugness. I approached The Old Soldier in Sharnstoke, a half-timbered, thatched building guarding a left hand bend. I pulled down my hood and unbuttoned the chin-strap and toggles. I was hot. A tubby grey cat sat in a patch of sun on a picnic bench and growled a meow at me. I tickled her ear. It was gone eleven and the door was open. I went in and bought a pint of Old Original.

“Out walking?” enquired the landlord.

“Yes, I used to cycle out this way. Beautiful country.”

“The best. You’d never guess we’re only four miles out from Earlstone.”

I nodded. Had it not been for the discovery of this gem of rural calm, Maxine would have turned straight round and gone back to Cheshire. She loathed the town. The agreed house-move out this way had never materialised due to her growing incapacity. She had been dead a few days. I felt no more guilt. But no sharp grief either; only sorrow that life had turned out as cruel as it had amongst all this peace and loveliness.

My mobile rang. Should I answer it? I studied the number and recognised the STD code. It was Ashbourne, hideout of the Schofields. I sat on a settle drinking my delicious beer. I had forgotten all about the Schofields, I wondered whether he was trying to make a name for himself with a scoop and imagined the headline I FIND THE DEAD DETECTIVE. I laughed bitterly into my glass. Another few hours of exile in their beauty spot would do them no harm at all. Then I saw I had a text message. I pressed SHOW and read: U R DEAD.

“But I’m not!” I could not help but say out loud, making the landlord look up from his newspaper. He began to pour another pint, thinking I had asked for it. As we exchanged glasses at the bar I looked at myself looking confidently back at me from the front page. The headline told me I had probably drowned myself. I realised how convincing my disguise was when the landlord shook his head and said what a funny business it was.

“I can’t make head or tail of it,” he muttered. I agreed with him, drank the beer quickly and left.

Across the clear air the chimes of Wolverley church clock, some two miles distant, rang out

twelve. To my mind it seemed to be marking the end of an episode in my life which had lasted nigh on thirty years, and perhaps even, I thought with a shudder, life itself. I walked on past the fields where we had stopped to pick blackberries and mushrooms. There was the stream where we had spotted a kingfisher, where we had picnicked shaded from the hot July sun and had made love with such urgency, as if time was running out.

Wolverley Grange Farm lay tucked away like a secret beyond a dense spinney of firs. A small gatehouse stood to attention behind tall wrought iron gates. These were shut tight. A long drive wheeled away to the left, skirting a cold field of static sheep, and then turned tight right up towards the sequestered house. I hesitated and considered my easiest plan of gaining entry. The entire grounds as far as I could see were surrounded by metal palings barbed at the top. Ripping myself to shreds was not an option I wished to entertain.

As I passed by the gate, a tall burly figure emerged from the tiny house and began working on a nearby car. I pondered how I might create a diversion. I carried no weapon. When I found myself finally face to face with Simon Brierley, I would have to rely entirely on the strength of my own loathing, on my wits and on whatever came to hand. But did I, a man who could not drown kittens, have the capability of killing a man? Even one as despicable as Simon Brierley? I thought of an article I had read by Richard Dawkins, prominent biologist, about empathy being hard-wired into the human personality, via our primate ancestors. Would a glint of pleading, even in those large eyes, sea-lion eyes, which his mother had described, but which I had never seen, automatically disarm me, a fellow if reluctant member of his tribe?

As I walked on I took in the extent of Brierley's wealth. The spinney dropped back and a large red brick building with four pillars, a grandiose portico and a balustrade emerged. From two tall central chimneys white smoke was rising. In the adjacent field, behind their metal girdles, spaced at regular intervals and now reduced to their conical winter frames were young horse chestnut trees. The meadow sloped away left for perhaps half a mile. After that, snuggling down in the vale, was a larger wood. Some rooks were stubbornly disputing landing and roosting rights in a few bare branches, idiotically ignoring the many others. Whenever I stopped and listened hard I could hear the faint drone of the motorway over the brow of the hill farthest away. I took bearings. The field in which the burnt-out car had been discovered lay a couple of miles to the south. Had a desperate, panicky Benner jogged this way on that first January night? To the north, just off the large motorway roundabout, sat The Manor, Brierley's hotel, motel, leisure complex and conference centre. Too rich for my own personal taste. Looking back up the slope I could see the stables, Brierley the Predator's hook and lure, baited with cute foals, to attract those imperfectly schooled girls, initiated in the dangerous ways of the world. In a far corner a chestnut mare was nuzzling a tiny copy of herself. I walked on irresolute until I reached a junction. The cold was gathering and invading my sleeves.

I turned and began the slow walk back downhill. A smell I had not noticed before now stopped me. It was rotting flesh. I knew this from the experience of breaking down the doors of old people and drug addicts who had not been seen for days. In the ditch, where it had been thrown, no doubt, by a horrified motorist, was the long stiff body of a badger. I walked on and the house began to cower backwards behind its spinney. There came from afar the popping of a shotgun. A farmer was probably out after rabbits. A magpie cackled like a football rattle and dived into the trees for cover. My mobile phone rang three times, stopped, then rang again.

"Mrs Brierley? Is everything alright?"

Everything was not alright. She was crying and barely able to speak.

“I’ve told Bernard!” she eventually spluttered. “It just came out in a row. He accused me of ruining Simon with my lardy-da ways and said he took after himself, not me, for his brains, and would have had his commonsense as well if it had been left to him. It just came out! I couldn’t help it! And now he’s on his way over to Wolverley to kill him. He took the shotgun!”

I told her I was on hand and that nothing would happen.

“What brought it on?”

“It came on the news. They’re digging up the editor of The Gazette and that policeman because of new evidence. We just turned and looked at each other and knew. The truth about Simon.”

I saw a car appear on the brow of the far hill. It was not the old Jaguar I had seen parked at the Brierleys’. It seemed to take an age to reach the dip in the road and finally drew up beside the entrance, before turning onto the driveway in front of the gates. I quickened my pace. The driver sounded his horn. And again. The keeper opened one gate and bent down at the driver’s window. I was two or three minutes away. The keeper seemed to be examining something. He went back to his lodge. The car waited. I began to trot. The declining sun at my back suddenly appeared in the passenger side window and dazzled me. I put my hand up to shield my eyes. The gatekeeper was back. He opened the gates and beckoned the driver through. When I arrived there a moment later I could see one leg protruding from beneath the jacked up vehicle and heard hammering, cursing and grunting. I tried the gates. One swung open. I edged towards the grass verge away from the noisy pebbles. But the man had spotted my shoes because now he was rolling out and challenging me.

“Hoy! Private land! What are you doing here?”

He stood up. He was not far off seven feet tall. And of athletic build.

“I’m a policeman, here to interview Mr Simon Brierley.”

The giant came to stand in front of me, wiping his long, thick, oily fingers with a rag. He stood back a little and looked me up and down. He smiled to himself.

“You under cover then? Or just plain clothes? Duffle squad?”

“No. I’m a detective with Earlstone police. Mr Brierley will be expecting me.”

The man shook his head and said he had left instructions to admit nobody. “He’s going to Madeira this afternoon.”

“This afternoon? I was told he was leaving on Sunday.”

“Show me some ID.”

I searched in all my pockets and then remembered shoving my credentials in the drawer at Conway’s.

“I’ve forgotten my wallet, would you believe? Phone Mr Brierley and tell him that a Mr Conway is here to see him on urgent business. Just phone and ask him if you don’t believe me. He’ll be less than pleased with you if you don’t let me in. He is expecting me.”

“I don’t think so.”

I went to the left but like a gross mirror image the giant matched my move immediately.

“Obstruction of the police in the exercise of their duty is a serious offence, you realise, I suppose?”

“Probably. But not quite as bad as impersonating one, I don’t think. And you’re so bad at it you ought to be locked up. This is private property. Whatever it is you really want I’d like you to leave. NOW.”

“ I AM A DETECTIVE INSPECTOR. LET ME PASS.”

“ Well, off-ic-er, one of your colleagues just beat you to it. He had ID.”

“You mean that car? Who....?”

But need I really ask? It would be Conway. A blunder. Another misjudgement. What a continuous disappointment people were! The silly popping of the distant shotgun seemed to mock me. The magpie cackled again. Then from the direction of the house a noise like the snapping of a branch rang out. I instantly looked up and away and strained to hear.

“Don’t worry mate. It’s only our Mr Gilliver out r兔biting. Rabbit stew tonight - dumplings, carrots and peas -”

Then another shot sounded. The unmistakable crack of a pistol.

“That’s a pistol you great pudding!”

As I swerved past him I was gripped from behind. I was still fighting in vain to free myself, when a scream from the house loosened the grip of Brierley’s brute.

“Let go, you arsehole! Somebody’s been shot!”

I tore off the seized duffle coat and left my adversary holding it. The thick pebbles on the drive slowed my racing feet down, as if I was experiencing a bad dream. The front doors were open. I ran in. With her back against one of the heavy dining room doors, legs stretched out together in front of her, like a resting ballerina gazing at nothing, with a pallor of shock, sat Jacqueline, the ex WPC who had been used by Turner to entrap me. She did not acknowledge and appeared not even to notice me as I walked into the hallway, past the staircases. Through the left hand window streamed sunlight, and there hung in the air with the dust motes a smell and a sound I recognised. The sound was the dreamy second movement of Bach’s concerto for two violins. The smell was cordite. The gatekeeper who had finally caught me up, came to a sudden halt, still rag in hand, as if transfixed by the sheer beauty of the music. I turned to him.

“You. Dial 999 and ask for police and ambulance. Make Jacky some weak tea. Plenty of sugar. Do it. NOW!”

Having seen him off, having stepped over Jacqueline, I walked into the room and gently closed the door behind me. By the French windows lay a young man, long and open-mouthed, staring up at the ceiling as if, like a guide inspecting it and pointing out to visitors some feature to marvel at, he had just been cut off rudely in mid-remark. A large plate of blood on his white silk shirt accounted for one shot. The other wound was on his long black hairy thigh, the ugly black mouth of a tiny volcano which had instantly swollen up around it but had failed to erupt. The immaculate left leg lay stretched out across the bent knee of the right. He wore navy blue, silky boxer shorts and was partly swathed in a burgundy red dressing robe. I did not need to check for signs of life. Simon Brierley was all elegance - and apparently innocence - in his death. The sun, wobbly and unsteady like a great lemon jelly, now speckled by a pair of rising birds, was planning to land and hide in a white cloud above the distant conifer ridge. From an ornate chair facing the prostrate corpse, a hideous, tall face was staring back at me. It had a crop of spiky black hair sprouting out above two rubicund ears, like a pair of fungus brackets on a tree trunk, and on the pink skin between them a long crease like a grotesque slitty mouth ran from the tip of one ear to the lobe of the other. There were no eyes and no nose. I felt a tremor of horror. Had some monster beaten me to it? Then the ugly head bent forward and the horizontal crease on the neck disappeared and turned into a long age-line. Its right arm, resting on the curvaceous arm of the chair, still held the gun from which a wisp of smoke rose. It cleared its throat. I found the source of the music and switched it off. I circled around slowly to look at the murderer side-on. I had never before studied the appalling back of Gilbert’s head. Now I had his fleshy profile in view. I compared the eyes of the victim and the assailant. They were identical.

“Pleased to see you, Miller,” he said simply, as if we had just bumped into each other at some

reception.

“So I was right. It’s true.”

“True?”

“About the prostitute. You went there. He was blackmailing you as well.”

“You’re a brilliant detective, Miller. He *was* blackmailing me. And until this morning - until Conway told me - I had no idea who it was. It was just a horrid voice. As soon as I realised he’d be arrested, I knew he’d spill the beans on me. I just thought I’d take a trip out here to make sure he wouldn’t spoil anyone else’s life.”

“What did you do for him?”

Gilbert weighed the gun in his hand.

“Do?”

“It’s a simple question, Sir.”

“I told him where Turner had moved to.”

“That’s all?”

He nodded.

“And what about the letter you wrote to Jolly? Weren’t you doing him a favour there too?”

He looked up at me and studied me with those sad, heavy eyes before saying that he had no recollection of writing a letter to the Jollys.

“A lot of correspondence crosses my desk, Miller. I might have handed the job to Turner or Craddock, and just signed the letter.”

“Is Craddock bent as well?”

“I have no idea.”

“And when Charmaine Bishop died, it didn’t strike you as odd?”

“I had no idea who that poor girl was, until Conway told me his story this morning. There was just a girl in a flat somewhere I went to once or twice on a dark night. She, you say, was Charmaine Bishop?”

“Yes. Just a girl. Just another poor, fucked-up girl.”

Gilbert studied the parquet floor.

“You forgot something, Miller. You failed to caution me.”

“I don’t want to. I’m finished. I resign.” I felt tears well up without warning. “I trusted you, Paul. Admired you. You’re no better than the rest...Now give me the gun.”

Gilbert again weighed it in his hand.

“We all have a flaw, Miller, no matter how good we try to be. You’re a perfectionist and find people disappointing and tiresome. I’m a paedophile - a white-knuckled one, a suppressed one - but one for all that. I looked on the internet. That was my big mistake. Once you look, you crave.”

“How did you find Charmaine?”

“Oh, Miller, does it matter?”

Then, I’m ashamed to say, my curiosity and a hunch got the better of me. I went and stood over the body.

“Do you remember a lady called Joan? Joan *Brierley*? Years ago, she left an envelope on a table in a Leicester café. By accident? A young policeman called Paul kindly took it over to her. She lived in Earlstone.”

Astonished, his eyes bulged and his mouth dropped open. He aimed the gun at me for perhaps ten seconds. Then he put it into his soft mouth, cleared his throat and fired. The green chair turned red but held onto the back of the head. The untidy crop of hair lifted and settled back. The

arm fell down. The gun tumbled to the floor. The sun touched the top of the cloud, broke and seeped scarlet into the wash of grey.

*

Once the threat of charges against me had receded and the professional misconduct case had collapsed, it was agreed I could retire early with a full pension.

I took possession of my hire-car at Munich airport and within an hour I had crossed over into Tyrol. Near Kufstein, where once Hitler had come to bolster Mussolini's failing morale in another age, the mountains proper began and rose up to domineer me, sheer on both sides of the road. I turned onto the road which traversed my favourite valley, passing the pretty village of Söll on my left. The Hohe Salve to my right, a great storybook mountain, like a giant teepee, was still half covered in snow. I glanced and caught the glinting of cable gondolas swinging up and down from the summit. I turned off the main road into the hamlet of Blaiken. I came to a halt outside the Salvenmosers. Maria kissed me on the cheek, held me tight and wept.

“Zo pleased to zee you, Mr Müller. Zo zorry about Frau Müller. Zo zorry.”

She showed me to my room - our room - from which balcony we had looked out on so many bright alpine mornings and on so many unfamiliar stars after sunset. I unpacked and took the flask containing Maxine's ashes. I drove up the steep road into Scheffau. The Wilder Kaiser range above the village glowered down pink in the sunlight. I parked within a mile of the Hintersteinersee and slung my knapsack over my shoulder. The road wound and unwound, almost sheer at times and ridiculously narrow. The April woods were full of snow. At every bend I expected to see the final approach to the lake. As soon as I saw the woodsman's hut I knew I was nearly there. I watched the final stretch unwind until the lake spread out before me, a sapphire in the clasp of the dark green forest and the silver snow. The path was quite unmarked by prints, showing me I was quite alone. I could only hear the shrill note of a buzzard hidden away in the woods. Soon I had trudged to a point far above the shimmering water in which the sun always let itself be splintered into a thousand glittering shards of gold. This had been our favourite resting place. Our bench was encrusted with ice. I sat down on it until I could bear the freezing chill no longer. I stood. The path began to drop again and another moment's walking brought me down to the fallen tree-trunk where we had made the solemn pledge which only one of us could honour. The log stretched across a tiny spit of land and jutted out over the lake. Here we had sat and picnicked many a time. It was our favourite place on earth. From here, on hot days, we had swum out into the crystal water amongst the mallards and tiny darting trout. I sat down and took out the flask. I stared at it for an eternity, unable to let go. Then unscrewing it, I coaxed her ashes to float out on the lozenges of water which every second were turning from green to grey to blue, and back again. A sudden thrashing dissolved everything and the trout took her. The water relaxed and I grieved properly and innocently, without relief or guilt or anger.

As I followed my own footprints back, a clumsy, stiff heron somehow took off in the cold, heavy air from the far reeds and disappeared amongst the trees.