

(Author's note: I have corrected Maddy's spelling errors and improved her style a little, but the content is hers)

THE GENTLEMAN

It was as if a long icicle had been thrust down into my chest. My heart paused long enough for me to think I would die. Then it bumped and beat again, and I took a long shuddering breath.

Mark looked across at me and said again "What a goal!"

I began to cough and he patted me on the back, asking me if I was alright.

"You look really weird, Madeleine."

"That was the man!" I could not help gasping, immediately wishing I could unsay it.

"What man?"

The man who raped me a year ago. November 16th just two weeks after I'd moved into my house in Bordesley Green. One wet Saturday evening. He had promised not to kill me if I kept quiet, and not to kill my sleeping daughter, Joly.

I was terrified but did not move or make a sound. I let him manipulate me like a doll. An hour later he was gone, leaving the house dark and quiet as if nothing had happened. He must have watched the house and waited until he was sure the coast was clear. Perhaps he had sat in his car, watching me walk down the street pushing Joly, watching me unlock. Maybe he had followed me on foot from the supermarket. How had he found out I lived alone? Was he a gambler? A black girl with a child - what were the odds that I was a single mother?

I had left the front door unlocked. He just walked in and grabbed me as I was making a coffee. He was wearing a balaclava turned round with a slit cut for his eyes. They were unforgettable - very pale blue - glassy blue - and there was no pity. He pushed the wool of the balaclava into his mouth when he spoke so that his voice was disguised. He didn't hit me - or hurt me below. In that respect he was puny and I thought it was really odd that such a big, strong man should be so puny. He didn't smell: no fags, no sweat, no alcohol, no aftershave. Nothing. He was like a robot going on for ages. All the way through I kept trying to think about holidays and outings but he made me look into those eyes, holding my head between his hands so I couldn't move it, pinning my eyes open with his fingers and thumbs. Below one eyelid there was a wart. He showed no sign he was taking any pleasure in me - just kept staring, until he made a noise like he was going to be sick and just lay on top of me breathing softly. After ten minutes he whispered *two*, got hard and started again. I thought, would this go on all night? I was dreading Joly crying out upstairs. I pleaded with him to keep his word. He did. He even patted my cheek before he left, telling me, very quietly, not to forget he knew my address.

Afterwards, as quietly as I could, I went up for a bath. I sat there for an hour, washing myself with a bottle brush, and emptying and refilling the tub until I felt sure I was clean of him.

"What man?"

I improvised.

"Nothing. I thought I recognized him. The man who scored.He looked a lot like the man who shouted abuse at me and Teresa at the lights the other day."

Mark wound back to the goal. It was - not that I'm an expert - a brilliant shot. Mark called it a scorpion kick. He mentioned the player's name - something Serb or Croat or whatever - something unpronounceable.

"Why would he be driving round in Birmingham if he plays for *_____?"

"He must have a double then."

I never told anybody about my ordeal. Try to understand why. For three days I was in a kind of limbo, between shock and terror. I was terrified he would come back, and *telling* - not that I'm a superstitious person - seemed, the state I was in, to invite retribution. I didn't report it to the police. I had no injuries - no tears or bruising - he had been such a gentle rapist that I was almost grateful to him!

I knew the police would be sceptical - being who and what I was, I expected little sympathy. At sixteen I had been nicked for shoplifting three times and my elder brother Joe was a drug pusher. The prospect of being opened up by a medic for a scrape-round was nearly as offputting as the rape. I'm shy, whatever others might think. And what evidence would there be? All down the plughole.

The passing of days and then weeks made it all less and less believable even to me. How would it look to report a November rape in December? When I had my period I cried in relief. I was too ashamed to tell my mum. And I was alone. My rapist had guessed well. I was just another young mother abandoned by her bloke, the father of a child he took no interest in.

“Are you recording this Mark?”

“No. Why? It's on again early tomorrow morning. BBC1. Repeat.”

I had wanted to tell Mark all about it when he came into my life the next summer, and show him that disgusting card. But the words just wouldn't come out. I loved him and didn't want to risk losing him. A white guy had raped me. How would he take it? I just couldn't bear the thought of being alone again. He was hurting badly after his girlfriend had ditched him, and said he wanted to draw a line and concentrate on us. That event began to seem irrelevant to my new happiness. Odd days, I never even thought about it. I was healing.

But seeing those wicked eyes again ripped the new skin off. I couldn't sleep. Over and over the scene played out in my head, from beginning to end. A fury grew in me I had not experienced before. How dare that bastard follow me home? How dare he stroll into my home and threaten me in such a throwaway manner, saying in a casual by-the-way he'd kill my baby daughter? Abuse my body as if it belonged to him, like a slave owner? What kind of man could do that - and then send a card?

And even more horrible thoughts gripped me. What if he'd been doing the same to other vulnerable women?

And still was?

The next morning, early, while Mark and Joly slept, I crept down and connected my old video recorder to the telly. I didn't know how to operate the new thingy Marky had brought with him.

* I debated long and hard whether to mention that venerable London FC by name. In the end, as you will see later, I decided there was no point. To make up a name - such as Denton Utd - seemed ridiculous.

*

December 28th

07981 32****

Dear David Bishop,

I know you're a black man. I saw you interviewed once after you brought those scumbags who stabbed that Manchester lad to justice. And I read your recent article about football racism in the paper. I found these three sheets of paper and the video last week in Maddy's wardrobe. I was clearing it out as soon as I could bring myself to throw out her clothes. She was killed on December 5th on a pelican crossing. The driver was on her mobile. She had a second to push Joly onto the pavement. She's not mine but I'm adopting her.

The stupid woman who killed her is going to prison and I reckon now I owe it to Maddy to get the bastard who raped her. He's a footballer. He used to play for ----- . I reckon he was transferred to a German club last summer. His name is something like Drovovic. You're a reporter. You have contacts. You can print stuff. You could contact him, pester him, expose him. I can't.

Mark Henry

I picked over the three stapled sheets and stood the video cassette on its end. Over the back a label had been carefully pasted, written on in thick, neat black felt-tip pen - **Match Of The Day, November 16th 20** - -. and felt paralysed by the responsibility this intruder Mark Henry had decided to thrust upon me. This was the last thing I wanted. Surely there was some easy way to resolve it, pass it on - or pass it over - with a convincing excuse and apology.

At the next desk, pretty Hazel was staring at me and at the contents of the envelope, chin in palm at that coquettish angle, practised in the mirror, no doubt, smiling in the quizzical manner which she thought men could not resist for long.

“You're pulling that funny face, David. Something big?”

- You want to be careful how you stare, Hazel. You might get taken wrong.

“You're pulling that funny face, David. Something big?”

I looked at her then straight on and tried to smile.

“I dunno. Got a spare minute while I go and see Peter? Have a look online and see how many rapes go unreported, will you?.....Don't look so shocked.”

She forced a laugh. “If they go unreported, how will anybody know?”

I grinned politely at her joke, and dutifully paid her the quick compliment of appreciating the expression she had set out for me in that unusual face - almond-shaped and anaemic, mannequin style, framed by drapes of glossy black hair which she loved to preen, twiddle and stick behind her ears - hair in which the office lights shone blue - and I searched for any hint of embarrassment at the request, but saw none, only her eyes very big and very clever over her riposte. How many women, I wondered again, were walking around keeping the terrible secret which Maddy had kept? Not Hazel though. No, no, no - not yet.

-Not yet! Trust me....

- You're beautiful, Hazel, and so vulnerable. Ugly women tend not to be victims. Why tempt fate?

- *What? I thought you were a feminist. You're as bad as the Indians!*

I felt ashamed to think this exchange, got up and sat down, indecisive and dismayed by the long day and dreary stuff in front of me, and read through those neat, handwritten sheets again. I could hear the whiny voice of my editor dismissing it all. I wandered off to the coffee machine and phoned the number on the letter.

"Mark Henry? It's Dave Bishop speaking. I got your letter. I'm very, very sorry about Maddy.....but I reckon you should take this to the police."

"I did! Why d'yo reckon I sent it to yo? They said they'd get back to me - but I could tell they thought it was bullshit. *Did she write stories?* - one of 'em said. I was loik, how can you not take it serious.....You gerring me on this, mate?"

It was hard - because I was feeling tense - not to laugh out loud at this sing-song account of a tragedy, which he felt so keenly. That stopped me. I breathed in deep. "Did she though? Tell stories?"

"No! It's gorra be true. The way she reacted when we were watching the footy - Oi'll niver forgerrit."

His voice began to break and I told him feebly that I'd do my best. When I got back to my desk Hazel's face had been transformed. Shaking her hair and an unpractised face full of scowls, she said in a whisper, more to herself than me "Unbelievable....website after website....between seventy and ninety percent aren't reported. HELL."

I put the letter and the video into my drawer and, after another disconsolate tour of the newsroom, went home - back to the empty house - to think it over all night.

The next day Peter the editor wanted me to get onto three MPs about their expenses - somebody had blown the whistle to us and a new scandal looked probable. So I had a good reason to ignore the video for a few days. I kept wishing I could escape back onto Sport - the way I had begun years ago in Manchester - but Peter would be against it.

A day later, a white A5 letter dropped onto my desk. The handwriting made me go freezing cold. I dreaded to open it but inside found a Christmas card. Over Santa's laughing face there was a post-it and I read - *Found this yesterday in M's bedside drawer. Now will u understand what kind of man we're up against? - Mark*

The *we* made me feel almost sick. It took me a while to decide to open the card because I knew it would not be pleasant reading.

Dear Madeleine,

Yes, I saw your name on a letter in the hall on my way out! I hope this card finds you well. I expect your little girl is looking forward to Santa coming. I send cards to all my girls. I want to make sure they remember me and how gentle I was. And make sure they remember that Santa has their addresses!

I think often of our little get-together. You were reluctant at first but soon got into the swing of things. Do you know, I reckon in the end you even enjoyed it. Made a change? Your nigger is no doubt bigger but what is what compared to how? It makes me really angry when others who do what I do are violent or worse. So stupid, so crude and so unnecessary. I just enjoy it! So just be grateful that it was somebody as considerate as me who came down your chimney. Have a lovely

Xmas!

The Gentleman

I compared the handwriting to Maddy's account. You did not need to be an expert to see they were written by different people. If the card was written by a foreign footballer, then he had a very remarkable command of our language. I picked up the phone.

"Howard? Is there an old VCR anywhere in the office?"

He told me to try the cupboard by the coffee machine.

It was a bit dusty. I took it and connected it by scart to the TV in our common room.

Remarkably, the cassette played - albeit with a bit of a rumble - and the picture was crystal clear.

I *am* a football fan - Bolton Wanderers - and I did have a vague recollection of that goal even though I would never have remembered the name of the scorer without Mark's letter to jog my memory. What the Serb looked like, I hadn't a clue. The game in question was first up, and the amazing goal was scored after just a few minutes. I paused the tape as the player, stupidly looking heavenward and stupidly crossing himself, was surrounded by adoring team mates. His hair was jet black, the eyes dark. I picked up Maddy's account and read - *very pale blue - glassy blue - and there was no pity*. I looked at the other players, mostly tops of heads. Nobody fitted the description. The goalie? I wound on at slowest speed until he came into view, disconsolately scooping the ball out of the net and kicking it in disgust downfield. He looked more bemused than anything. He was fair-haired, but could hardly be described as sinister. No-one, not the players, home or away, neither the ref nor the linesman, nor the celebrating manager nor his downcast counterpart looked remotely psychopathic. Convinced that Maddy or Mark had made some mistake, I rewound to the kick-off and gave it one more play for luck.

Then I would have to go back to that dreary corruption story with which I was making little headway. As the celebrating players broke from their huddle and ran back into position for the resumption of play, I froze.

There he was. In close-up. Hands clasped over his head. Celebrating. But not with his eyes. His chin was square; the mouth thin and small; the hair ginger and close cropped; the nose flat, like a boxer's; the cheeks pock-marked; the eyes icy, glinting in the sun like shards of glass on a discoloured pavement. He had a wart below his right eyelid. He was the ugliest man I had ever seen, even by Anglo-Saxon standards. Standing in the crowd.

A fan of the winning team.

I went to fetch my camera and took a picture of the frozen frame before releasing the pause button in the hope of still seeing him in the context of the stadium, in his seat, in his row, because names, addresses and seat numbers were kept on file for security reasons. But to my intense frustration, his fame lasted but a few seconds and he was gone.

*

"I'm surprised you've even bothered me with it."

I put the camera onto the editor's table.

"Look at him, Peter. He's bad. I know he is."

He picked it up and looked at the snap I had taken.

“Not the nicest looking bloke around, I grant you. But you can’t go round accusing ugly men of being criminals. What about me? Nice as pie under the crusty exterior.”

“Well, I reckon he’s a serial rapist.”

He laughed.

“You don’t even know this is the guy Maddy meant. It’s moonshine! Even if she hasn’t invented it all...what proof -”

“You haven’t read the Christmas card. Look - *other girls*. Shall I tell what I reckon? He goes to away games and adds the odd girl as a bonus. They would be all over the country. No pattern to alert any particular police force. And if Maddy’s typical, the rape would not even be reported. He’s careful not to injure them. He selects his victims - young and single and vulnerable. Tells ’em he has their address. Gets home in time for Match of the Day.”

He began to rake his scalp with his finger tips - which was always a warning sign.

“This is really, *really* soft.....”

Peter still walked his estranged wife’s dog and he loved to boast - after a glass of wine or two - how much he hated it. Here came his favourite metaphor.

...”If it hardens, we might pick it up.”

I did not smile this time.

“A woman has been raped, Peter.”

“Right. How do you mean to progress it then? Shall we publish the photo and say - This Might Be A Rapist?.....You *can’t* go to the police with it...”

I gathered up the stuff and nodded at him. He was right of course. He had already gone back to his computer screen and was tapping furiously at the keyboard.

“BLOODY internet!.....Listen - you can waste your *own* time with that if you want. But not the newspaper’s.”

Yes, I should have left it at that. But I’m glad I didn’t. Back at my desk, I studied the photos of the three MPs I was trying to pin down. Their grinning hypocritical faces made me sick. I turned them over. Hazel asked me if I was alright. I shook my head.

Later that morning, I was back in with the editor.

“I thought if I came back, it’d take my mind off Trish. Truth is, Pete, it’s been making me feel worse.”

Journalists, like coppers and people in other walks of life, have to try and be objective, remain uninvolved and unaffected by the darker side. I had managed to walk the thin line between being hardened and desensitised. Trouble was, this reporter had seen his dear, unselfish wife of ten years fade slowly and distressingly away with a muscle-wasting disease, so that the daily witness of the stupid, brutal, selfish and greedy behaviour of his fellows could no longer be left outside, at the close of a front door, and dispelled by her warmth and affection. In her permanent absence, bad behaviour could only reinforce his pessimism and despair. Why you, Tricia? Why not that bastard who oversaw the destruction of his own bank, pensioned off with not far off a million quid? Why not that man who so gently and considerately raped Madeleine?

Peter unfolded his arms and leant forward across the table. He was at base a kind man.

“You go back to the doctor’s, David. Take another month. Take as long as you need.”

As a concession, he invited me to write an article for the supplement on rape while I was off.

Trish, I needed to do some good to lift that gloom; to see the effect of it in a smile of gratitude, to hear a sigh of relief, to feel the firm press of a hand in recognition of a kindness. I promised you

at the end that I would not go downhill, and I felt guilty to be sliding.

I left the building and took a long gulp of the drizzly January air. It was the month you hated most, but it was a time of day when the rushing, headlong commuters had left the pavements to meanderers, and feeling no pressure or obligation, and in spite of the drabness, my spirits did rise - a little.

Near the tube station there was a cosy café I liked to sit in sometimes after work until the rush below had quietened down. The young Big Issue pedlar whom I always ignored, pretending to be so wrapped up in my own issues that I was oblivious of his presence, was not outside - and I was disappointed. That morning, I would have bought one. I honestly would have done.....

I sat stirring my coffee, staring at the frothy coin which you always took as a sign of good fortune. *The bigger the better!* - you used to say. At the corner table sat two young black women chatting, and at their feet was a pushchair in which a boy of about two years of age, in a woollen bonnet with chin straps, sat kicking his legs and singing to himself. He reminded me a little of Paul Driscoll and of our younger son. He had a good grip for a toddler - he was clasping a balloon which reminded me of a strange earth with its green and blue swirls and patches. At any moment, though, it would surely burst because he was pushing it so much out of shape and making the rubber squeal and groan. It set my teeth on edge. The women - sisters? - had stopped talking and were playing on their phones, paying him no attention. Finally, the balloon escaped from his grip and came bumping along the floor towards me - as I knew it would. I went to pick it up and realised I was weeping. The boy clambered out, tottered over and grabbed it, but then stood staring at me. I was crouching, unable to move.

“Troy,” whispered - or rather hissed his mother. “Get back here - NOW!”

Her companion leapt to her feet and scooped the tiny hero up, without a word or glance at me. He began to wail. Conversations had paused. The nice lady behind the counter with whom I was on such good terms was looking at me oddly. Gathering up my overcoat and briefcase, I left.

Some days are special - as if God is deliberately throwing things in our path to trip us up because of our certainties, or to supply answers to the uncertainties plaguing us. It began with Peter being kind and the women suspicious; but was about to get much more interesting. On the Tube, I had the misfortune to be seated near to a foursome in football colours who had come down for a Wednesday evening match. They were young Midlanders out to make an impression. One in particular, their leader, a young man with a florid, boneless face, with lowered eye-lids and wearing a head-set, seemed determined to broadcast his brainless views on London, liberally spiced with every expletive he could muster. His companions were not blessed with his wit so had to be content with forcing themselves to laugh as loud as possible at his. I should have moved there and then - but I'm glad I didn't.

The young black woman across the aisle from the main man had turned away and was pretending to be absorbed in her book. Other passengers were feigning slumber or absence of mind. Seeing no takers of his bait, the youth ducked down to try to read the title of the book. The reader sensed his intrusion and turned even further away which provoked him to make another remark under his breath which sounded like *black cow*. I felt my right fist clench. He sat back, took a swig from his beer can and belched. My fist tightened. A passenger behind him buried his face in a copy of *The Sun* which made me angrier still. My left fist clenched as far as it could - against the pain and resistance of my prematurely arthritic knuckle. I should have known then that a punch-up, with one decent fist, was inadvisable.

The job was drawing even more encouragement from his beer and the lack of passenger

opposition. Reaching down and across, he grabbed the book and turned it towards him.

“Do you mind?” said the woman with a soft Caribbean lilt which seemed to sweeten her indignation. She sprang to her feet and moved past me down the carriage.

“Do you mind? Do you mi-i-nd, man?” sang the harasser in poor mimicry of his prey, causing hilarity amongst his admirers which encouraged him more.

“That a Frenchie book, you readin’ there, Molly? What you readin’ that load of wank for? Not enough good British books for you?”

Rage propelled me up and forward. At that instant he represented all that was awful in the world. He looked up at me with a leer. Fear, hatred and fury were making me shake but my voice delivered clearly the sentiments I had been practising for the last few minutes.

In my broadest northern accent I said “What gives you the right to inflict your stupid views on us? Why do you imagine you have anything to say which could remotely interest anyone here? Why are you so determined to embarrass a young woman who is on her own? Would your own mother approve, you coward?”

If I imagined that the whole carriage would burst out clapping and cheering, how wrong I was. Drawing more encouragement from the even more intense silence my speech had created, the man got up and pushed me over, pouring the remainder of the beer over me as I floundered in the gangway. Now I would get a good hiding....But no,no,no. The train slowed and one of the four hissed *CCTV*. The doors opened and they got out.

Struggling to my feet, I surveyed my fellow passengers who were still pretending to sleep, to read or to meditate.

“What is wrong with you half-alive people?” I screamed. “What does it take to get you annoyed?”

I walked further down the carriage, passing the astonished young woman, to stand strap-hanging, with my back on the scene. The train sped up.

“I’m sorry,” said that gentle voice. “I should have....but I was afraid...here let me..”

She stood in front of me now and reached up with a hankie to dab my chin and pullover.

“I should have, you know...but it all happened so fast...”

“It’s okay, love. I was stupid. They could have been carrying knives. Truth is, I was already angry before they started. Should have minded my own business like the rest. Not worth it.”

“No. You were right.”

The train slowed. My stop. I said goodbye to her but when I turned to see the lovely creature whisked away for ever down the tunnel, she was just a few feet behind me, hesitating, uncertain and embarrassed.

“My stop too,” she said, as I stood awkwardly still and waited for her.

We walked side by side along the silent and emptying platform. She kept her wonderful eyes modestly down. I noticed how well wrapped up she was and decided that she could not have been long in Britain. The corner of the novel she had been reading was sticking out of her shoulder bag. She was a mystery.

“You studying French here, then?”

“No. Teaching it.”

She mentioned a Grammar School in Whetstone. I nearly said that she didn’t look old enough to teach but stopped myself in time.

“Term starts on Monday. My first term. I’m a bit nervous.....Why are you angry?”

“Oh.....just one or two things. I’m a journalist, see. I’m not coping well with bad news at the minute. So I knocked off early today.”

We separated for the escalator and I stood aside to let her on in front of me. It was impossible not to look.....but, honest, I only glanced at her legs - shapely and sturdy - modestly clad in grey woollen stockings....and her sensible, clumpy black bootees trimmed with grey fur. She looked around at me and slowly smiled.

The electric glow gave way to cold, silver light as we stepped off into the ticket hall and moved towards the entrance. Tyres were rasping through the wet street, the brakes on a stopping bus were squealing. Why leave a tropical island and blue skies for this grimness?

Half-expecting her to peel away, I pointed with my briefcase and said "I live just along there, left past the pub."

"May I walk with you a little further then?...I live that way too."

We walked on in silence, she hooded now against the drizzle, me bare-headed, not bothered. The lights in the shops made the street feel even more like an alien place. She paused and looked up at me

"If you can't stand the news...maybe you should get another job."

We had reached the pub and she stopped. She had taken my absence of reply as a sign that she had offended me.

"Sorry to be so familiar, but it just popped out. It's a bad fault of mine."

"Not at all. I just hadn't got an answer."

"Can I buy you a drink - for being my gallant knight? I've never seen the inside of an English pub and my mother says I should not go in alone. Is it true there's sawdust and spittoons?"

"No! Let me show you how harmless it is. Safer than the Tube."

She began by asking me to guess where she was from. I went through all the Caribbean islands I could think of and she shook her head at each, eventually giggling more and more as I ran out of ideas. She took the book from her bag - *La Symphonie Pastorale* - and said it was a clue. In the end I gave up.

"Well, my dad is Barbadian. He met my mother on Guadeloupe. That's where I'm from. Guadeloupe."

"My granddad came over from Jamaica after the war."

I was nearly at the end of my pint and began to tell her about Trish. Towards the end of my second I was telling her about Maddy. I had opened my briefcase and spread everything out on the table. She showed no emotion as she sifted through the account and studied the card. Finally, she knocked the sheets straight and placed them squarely in the corner of the table. I wondered how old she was. Her skin - velvety smooth - gave no clues. But something about those eyes told me she was older than she looked. Late twenties?

"Now perhaps you can see why I'm a bit depressed. It's easy to think we're mainly bad - or don't care."

"I know. This...thing.....happened to my elder sister. She swore me and my maman not to tell papa. He'd have killed the guy and got himself thrown into jail."

"Why not tell the police?"

She sipped her Cola and went silent for a while, staring at the polished table as if re-seeing there painful scenes.

"The boy was a rich man's son. The local police chief his fine friend. My sister got over it. Well, more or less. We prayed together. Jesus helped."

The rain had turned to sleet.

“Oh my!” she said with a childish delight. “Is it going to snow?”

“Maybe later.”

We turned left and walked along until she stopped outside a large villa.

“I share a flat way up there with two others - one’s a teacher. Thank you, Mr Guardian Angel.”

“I’m Paul. Paul Bishop. From Bolton - way up north. That way.”

“I’m Adeline. I enjoyed the pub. No sawdust.”

As I approached the corner, by the pillar box I looked back. She waved and went in.

*

Something was wrong with Maddy’s timing. She had pasted the same date on the video as the date of her ordeal a year earlier. November 16th. A quick internet search revealed that the club in question had lost to a side in Birmingham on that date by two goals to nil. For me, the venue and the date proved that she was telling the truth. The match she had seen on television had been played in Liverpool, not on the 16th but on November 10th. Despite that wonder goal, the home side had fought back to win 2-1.

Something else was bothering me about her account, which at the first reading I had passed over with a frown. At one point, the rapist had said *two*. I went cold when I realised what that might mean - that he was exacting crazy revenge for goals conceded. If so, what horror had the child experienced to so badly warp the man? And had two women suffered for the Merseyside result, or one woman twice?

I was reluctant to make contact with the officer who called himself Geordie, but my repugnance to meddle with corruption was overcome by higher motives. I supposed that he had contacted most dailies and regionals with offers of information. One morning, a couple of years back, I had found a message from him in my Inbox. I had saved it for a rainy day.

Hi Dave Bishop!

I am a serving P.O. I sell tasty info on celebs and politicians. For example, want to know which member of the Cabinet was playing poker with a certain London mobster when we paid him a visit one recent evening? Worth £250?

Sort code: 09-01-43 a/c 48328604

I know you work for a snooty outfit, but I might be able to do you other favours,

Geordie

I went back onto that football club’s website and noted down the dates of their other two away defeats before Christmas. I opened an email box and wrote the following.

Dear Geordie,

I have never used you before. Truth is, bent coppers disgust me. And the tittle-tattle they peddle. However, I reckon there must be some honour in you and I’m appealing to that - as well as

*offering you a chance to be involved in stopping the reign of a serial rapist. I have no proof - yet- strong enough to bring before a court, only an inner conviction that a supporter of -----
--- is attending away matches and then raping young women when they lose.*

I need you to go on the PND and see whether rapes were reported on the evenings of these dates in these places last autumn.

I'll leave it with you,

David

A while later he got back to me.

Hi Dave,

This is way out of my league - I just make a bit on the side from the tittle-tattle you clearly disapprove of. If you have evidence of a rape, you should report it - it would have to be investigated. As far as tapping unauthorized into the data-base as you suggest - a) it would be my career if I got caught - b) how many days a year are rapes reported in Liverpool, Newcastle and Manchester? Saturdays would be prime!

You're wasting your time,

Geordie.

But it *had* been reported to the police! Mark Henry had been fobbed off. Except that he didn't have the photo....

Geordie,

If I reported it to you and showed you the evidence, would YOU take it seriously? The rapist most likely lives north of the river. I assume you are based somewhere in London. I have a photo which the victim took of a man in a football crowd. She is now dead - a road accident. How many Saturday rapes take place on the early evening, like hers did?

Okay, I told a white lie about the photo. So what? I made myself Trish's special chicken gumbo while Geordie thought this over.

How old was Adeline? Don't get me wrong. I'm thirty-eight. I just felt protective towards her. How brave of the girl to come to this pressure cooker in the middle of winter - to teach French! I hoped it was a good school. Maybe a girls' school....lots of black girls, kind ones.....

In the other room, my laptop jingled - Geordie had got back to me.

You're making so many assumptions! If the victim is dead, no chance of a conviction. A face in a football crowd? How convincing would a jury find that? Any decent brief would tear it to pieces! Why do you assume the man is a Londoner? My cousin supports Sunderland. He lives in Bristol.

Geordie

I fired straight back -

Geordie,

Let's do this legit. Will you meet me? Do you know the Dick Turpin in Finchley? Tomorrow at seven thirty? I can show you everything I have - and you can make your mind up.

I owe the girl and the girl's partner at least that much.....

*

It was getting on for ten to eight and I drained my glass, preparing to leave the bar and cursing Geordie for not showing up. I picked up my briefcase and glanced at the brunette at the bar in the leather jerkin who was drinking a pint of Guinness and looking my way occasionally. Whatever she might have in mind, I was not the least in the mood. I swept past her towards the door.

“David? Bishop?”

I wheeled round.

“I'm Geordie.”

She was smiling through her curls. It was a wig. And the glasses were probably part of the disguise. Was her Tyneside accent phony as well?

“You're drinking London Pride?”

I sat back down and she brought the drinks over into the corner where I'd been seated in an alcove. I told her sardonically that I loved a mystery.

“Sorry to play my little trick on you. I needed to weigh you up. Can't be too careful....”

“How much do I weigh, then?”

“Pretty heavy..... I reckon it's the baggage you're carrying.”

“The briefcase?”

She smiled and shook her head. She said my face had given away how much it mattered to me - but she was promising nothing. I put our drinks to the edge of the table and spread out my treasures. She was lifting her glass to her lips when she noticed the photo and put the glass down. “That face looks familiar,” she said, picking it up. My hopes rose. I pointed out what Maddy had written about the eyes - and the wart. She took the stapled sheets and read through the account, stroking a knee with her palm, pretending to do it absent-mindedly.

“She saw his eyes through a slit in a balaclava? Hold on, how many eyes are there like that in Britain? Granted, he looks an unpleasant type, but how could she be so sure? Look, there's a guy by the cash machine with pale blue eyes....”

Nothing daunted, I took the snap from her side of the table and asked her if she could just have a look to see if the face was on file.

“It could just be part of a routine enquiry. If he's there, you could get him in and ask for a sample of his handwriting. Look at the Christmas card....”

“You joking? Our Super would never allow it! There is no evidence to link this man to any crime. Any Duty Solicitor worth his salt would crucify us on the basis of this stuff - and tell him to say nothing. No forensics and nothing to suspect him rather than a million other blokes - other than her gut reactionand for a rape that was never even reported.”

“So, he can just carry on raping *his girls* - go on, look at the card.....unhindered? You could at least ask for access to the PND to see if *early*-evening rapes have been reported when his team is in town and loses. What harm can that do?”

“You’re not getting me, Dave. I don’t doubt Maddy got raped and that the rapist has raped others - most do. But there’s no evidence that *this...is...the...MAN!* And the woman is dead.....Hold on, where does she say in here that he’s a spectator?”

She went through the account again and I felt my face burn. She grabbed the video and held it up in my face, asking me why Maddy had not mentioned the spectator or the photograph. I turned the beer mat round and round and round.

“Okay....I took it. He appears just after the goal. But he’s the only man she could possibly have had in mind....Wait!”

She was on her feet, draining her glass.

“You’ve tried to con me, mate. You’ve wasted my effin’ time. This is a load of bullshit.”

Her flouncing out on me look bad - like a blind date gone wrong. A few heads had turned and there were knowing smirks. My briefcase - how romantic - added an extra touch of farce. I scooped my items away and sat back.

I took proper notice then of the wall-mounted screen which was showing pop videos. Teenage girls were writhing about orgasmically in their underwear, eyes shut and mouths agape, fingering themselves in near-erogenous places. Don’t get me wrong - I was bound to look, of course, and even, to my shame, stirred a little, but after a while I began to wonder what latent messages about women were being sent and how a variety of watchers were deciphering them.....the man at a nearby table, for instance, with greedy eyes.....and me.....

I could not help but compare the grotesque posturing of those singers and dancers with Adeline, whose grace, modesty and dignity made her beauty even more delightful. I recalled Hazel and her coquettish pose. Like it or not, beauty imposed responsibility on the women it blessed, and placed them in peril, even if they tried to withhold their messages. At that moment of watching the screen, I found it distasteful, unethical even, to misuse and exploit it - and so looked away.

I drained the bitter beer and left.

I walked home, imprinting the thin fall of snow in the empty avenue with my dawdling shoes, pausing to look up at Adeline’s high window, wondering if she would be looking out on our winter novelties, deciding, when she did not appear, that she was away in her Pastoral Symphony. Perhaps I would drop her in a note, offering to be her guide, her advisor, her friend....to invite her round maybe and cook her one of Trish’s great recipes....But, no, she would see some baser motive in it.

Dear Geordie,

*Okay, I’m sorry. I took a stupid liberty. But consider - can it all be a massive coincidence? The eyes Maddy was sure she recognized - and she stared at them for an hour - belonged to a man who raped her **twice**, a man who supports a team that conceded **two** goals in Brum - her home town - on the very day of the assault: - November 16th. Check it out for yourself. She lived in Bordesley Green, a short walk - check it out - from the stadium. Surely, that should make a detective as astute as you at least a little curious....*

Anyway, I hope you’ve climbed down from your high horse by now. A bit self-righteous of you to

have a pop at me for my deception, don't you think? You peddle confidential information to the gutter snipes. I was only trying to help a bereaved man come to terms with a double whammy - the loss of a partner and the shock of discovering her rape....oh, and I nearly forgot, maybe stop a rapist who threatens to kill "his" girls' kiddies.....But you're right. It's bullshit. Everything is....

You sleep tight now,

Dave Bishop

I attached the photo of the gentleman to the email and went to bed at just gone nine, having unscrewed a bottle of red and then put the top back on, knowing there would be no stopping if I started. I was awake again at two. I drew back the curtains and looked out at the snow swirling and settling. What a surprise Adeline would have in the morning. Streetlamps, and odd windows as sleepless as mine, had become icons, with haloes, in a swarm of flakes, like grey moths. Somewhere, under one of those countless marzipan roofs, I was convinced a certain man was sleeping peacefully, his conscience untroubled - because he did not have one - while I watched. Others slept uneasily behind locked doors, suspicious, envious and even terrified of their neighbours, enjoying a few hours of respite before the dawn and necessity sent them scurrying out again.

*

On both sides of the railway line there was dereliction where any Dickens novel could be set without much amendment. The snow had spared Birmingham and brought no relief to its grimness. These old factories and properties were privately owned, and so had the perfect right to inflict their hideousness on us, and there was not a thing we could do about it, except close our eyes. But these were such familiar features of our towns, so much taken for granted, that hardly anyone cared; least of all their proprietors who lived in their idylls, far away, conscience-free. Would these eyesores still be there at the end of the century?

The train entered into the gloomy cavern of New Street station and we were cautioned again about falling between carriage and platform. Outside, I got directions and was soon on my way to the canal area which had been restored to a state better than its former glory - showing where a post-industrial nation's priorities ought to lie - and in one of its many brasseries I had arranged to meet Mark Henry. I chose a quiet corner table and unpacked the treasures he had sent so that he could spot me easily.

He came in - a burly, shambling and self-conscious man - reminding me a little of the footballer Emile Heskey. I felt for the photograph which I had held back in my pocket. We ordered drinks and food from the nimble waitress who seemed to love her job.

"It's good o' yo to cum all this way, David."

"No. I needed to get out of London. Who's got Joly? She at nursery?"

"No. At her grandma's. Maddy's mum. I told her I've go' an interview - which isn't really a lie." I commiserated again with him over his loss and he produced a photo of Maddy and Joly. They were lovely. I gripped his hand and he returned the grip with a gasp of sorrow which he soon brought under control. He asked me if I'd found out for which club the footballer was playing.

"Well, that's the point.....I had a good look at the video, Mark. Did you?"

He shook his head. He had not been able to bring himself to do it.

“I thought I’d leave that to yo.”

I told him all about my contact in the Met and that I was hoping she would help.

“Mark, you need to steel yourself for what I’m going to say next.”

“Why?”

“I’m a hundred percent sure the man Maddy recognized could not score a goal to save his life.”

I took the photo out of my coat pocket and slid it towards him, taking my hand away gradually until the face was visible. Mark began to shake with grief and anger.

“Bastard.” he hissed. “Bastard.How do you know -?”

“I don’t - for sure. He was in the crowd. You can just see he has a wart, look - amongst all the other blemishes. And the eyes make sense.”

He passed the photo back and took a large swig of his beer.

“What can we do then?”

“I’ve got a plan but I need your help. Trouble is - would you be able to keep your temper if we found him?”

His silence told me the answer.

I guessed he had no job. His shoes were old, his jeans out of shape. While he was in the toilet I paid the bill and scribbled him a note, saying I would phone him later. I added that he should buy Joly a nice toy and stuffed fifty quid in the envelope.

I had other business in Birmingham before my train left. I hailed a taxi and went out of the city centre. The last I’d heard of Samantha Grain - Sammie - was that she was sub-editing for at the Birmingham Post which had its offices at Fort Dunlop. I went into reception and found that she still worked there but was busy in a meeting. I wrote down my name and mobile and added that I had an interesting story. The receptionist promised to get the message to her. She told me the nearby hotel had a decent bar.

“Tell her I’ll be there until five. My train goes at half-six.”

At four thirty, I was beginning to give her up, when that angel from a previous life appeared in the doorway and came hurrying over to embrace me. She was warm and wonderful. Her pony tail had gone and her blonde hair was cut in a page-boy style. At twenty-seven, she still had that fresh girlish charm of a bobby-soxer. We both immediately said how much we regretted losing touch.

“And how’s Trish?”

I shook my head slowly.

“She’s gone?”

Trish had been her special favourite. My slow account of her suffering and death made her weep. Me too. I went to the bar and came back with her favourite tippie - a dry white wine with soda.

“What about the boys?”

“Up north. Trish wanted them to go to her sister Carole’s in Chorley. She didn’t want them to see her deteriorate. They’ll be there till the summer.I’m not good for them to be with at the moment. I’m living off memories and it’s really bad most days. Uncle Mitch is a Man City fan and he takes them.They’re fine. And you and Dan?”

“Yep. Still okay. Ups and downs - but we’re fine really. Are you on anti-depressants?”

“Not taking them. I’m going to work through this the natural way. If I can get a result on this case, I know I’ll pick up.still no kids, I suppose?”

“No. We’re still a Dinky couple.”

We began to reminisce about Manchester and got onto the topic of Terry Welfare* and how cleverly we'd trapped him into telling the truth; and how close I'd come to losing the hero in my trousers. She tried not to laugh at the mention of that but was soon giggling in her irresistible way.

"Your face.....was sheer terror....it was a wonder it didn't turn white!"

"It wasn't funny at the time, Sammie - and still isn't."

"And then Trish saved your bacon...."

"My black pudding, you mean...."

She threw back her head and laughed until she was hiccoughing.

"Not lost your black humour," she said at last.

"Now you're being racist...."

"No I'm not!"

After a while she fell silent and gave me an inquisitive look. Was there really a news story - or had I thought she'd be able to resist me otherwise? For answer, I opened my briefcase and spread out my treasures. They told the tale better than I could. I only needed to add the postscript of my encounter with Geordie. While she was away with her thoughts I got her another drink. When I returned she said she had an idea how it could be used. There were three top sides in the Birmingham area - four if you included Wanderers - and all had been in the Premiership off and on in the last few years.

"I could call Madeleine by another name and alter other details.....and appeal for others to come forward to tell their stories."

"Do you think they would? According to the Internet, most rapes aren't reported."

"But if I assured them that their real identities would be kept secret.....At the moment you only have a theory. The guy who did this could have been boasting about *his girls*. If we could get written evidence of similar attacks, then the police would be bound to take notice. I know! If I hold back details of the balaclava, the wart, the eyes and his little cock, and just invite other victims to tell me their story in full....."

"You genius, Sammie! Your editor wouldn't object?"

"No - he's a big feminist. Look at me - subbing at twenty-seven!"

I kissed her on the cheek.

"Anything to cheer you up. Listen...Dan's away at a conference till tomorrow.....why not come back for supper and for old time's sake? Trish wouldn't mind. She didn't bother you were two-timing her with me..."

"No, Sammie. It's kind but I couldn't."

"Dan wouldn't know....He's probably got plans himself for tonight."

"No - honest. I couldn't. Not today."

"Why? Am I ...?"

"Still gorgeous? More than ever! No. My ticket is only valid on the 18 33 to Euston."

*Maybe you should pause this and read **Prisoners** before continuing.

*

I was between sleeping and waking so that the knock on my door could have been the beginning of a dream. Fully awake now, I listened. The clock said 11:27, and I groaned. If ever I woke after just a short while asleep, my night was very long. I turned onto my back and began to breathe

slow and deep.

More knocks - almost frantic. I hurried downstairs.

“Who’s there?”

“I’m really sorry. It’s Adeline.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Please let me in!”

She was very upset and shivering. The snow had been followed by three days of frost. I led her into the lounge and put the fire on. While she warmed herself I made her some drinking chocolate.

“How did you find me?”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be.”

She confessed that she had read my address on an envelope in my briefcase. Then there were tears. I encouraged her to tell me what was wrong and finally she said it was Daemon.

“He has the room next to Caroline’s. He works for an estate agent. She teaches Geography. She’s nice. Well, she is with me. But the way Daemon and she talk to each other worries me. They swear a terrible lot and say nasty things I hate to hear. I don’t like to repeat, but she called him a smelly bell-end this evening. Is that what I think it is?”

I grimaced and told her that that was the banter a lot of younger people in Britain used.

“They don’t mean anything bad by it, Adeline. You should -”

“No, no. He keeps leering at me. Standing behind me in the kitchen while I’m cooking. I know what he wants. I hear him on the landing creeping around...he’s been drinking a lot tonight.....I can’t sleep. On Monday I’ll be teaching.”

She put her head in her hands and sobbed.

“Adeline, please listen. I have lots of room. You can stay here. Let me show you.”

I took her up to my elder son’s room, the bigger of the two, which was full of Lego models. I explained why my sons were away.

“They’ll be with their aunt at least until the end of the school year. I won’t charge you rent.”

“Oh, but you must!”

“No. You can show me some of your best recipes - and brush up my lousy French. And you’d be totally safe. I promise you.”

We went downstairs. She had come without her stuff. Tomorrow, early - Sunday morning - while her flat-mates were sleeping it off, we would go round in my car and collect all her belongings. I told her how sorry I was she had had such a bad welcome to London - the lout on the train, and now this bother. I assured her again that she could trust me.

“I know I can. Because you walked past me on the train. You didn’t stop to ask if I was okay.”

Frowning over this peculiar logic, I fetched her one of Trish’s nightdresses and made a hot water bottle.

*

As we were leaving that impressive Victorian pile a couple of streets away, the door on our left creaked open, and a pair of fat chewing cheeks and eye slits appeared.

“Mr Veasey,” whispered Adeline, looking down in shame and terror at her clumpy shoes. The door opened wider and a pot belly in a very thin vest was thrust out. His navel was like the knot on a vast balloon. Essences of bacon, egg and tomatoes wafted past our nostrils.

“S’going on? Suitcases? You leavin’? You can’t! You signed six months...”

Ushering Adeline out of the door, I told him it was an emergency and I’d be back later to explain.

In the car she told me she was paying £650 a month and wondered if that was normal.

“For that single room? Did you pay him a bond?”

“Another £650.”

I stopped the car and did a three-point turn. Back at Veasy’s, I told her to wait in the car. Within ten minutes I was back with the thick envelope she had handed over - and a contract torn into four.

“Ça alors! What have you said?”

“Spun him a cock-and-bull story about fire regulations and threatened to report him to the Fire Officer. And told him you were being sexually harassed. Asked him if he wanted Plod tramping up his stairs. He soon saw the light, greedy little man.”

“Thank you, David.”

She pressed my hand on the steering wheel. (That’s all, Trish. That was reward enough. Honest.)

Back home I made a cup of tea and fried some tinned tomatoes while she unpacked.

Over breakfast she looked puzzled. I asked her if she was okay.

“Fine. I was just wondering what a cock and a bull had to do with it. And Plod?”

The next morning - early - I drove her to her school. It was a venerable establishment - in contrast to one of those cheap-builds of the sixties, like concrete ocean liners with porthole windows - and it commanded respect. At ten to eight there were only a few cars out front and not a single pupil. She told me then, with some evidence of trepidation, that her flat-mate Caroline had mentioned that Monday would be a teacher day. She had been too shy to ask her to explain. Did it mean, she wondered, that teachers had to perform some special task or service for their classes?

I laughed. “No, Adeline. You can relax. No kids today. Just staff. You can get everything ready and find your feet.”

She opened those wonderful eyes impossibly wide, put her hands to her cheeks and gave a cry of delight. Then she pointed to her black boots and giggled. “There they are!”

“What?”

“My feet!”

On the way home I stopped at my favourite delicatessen to buy everything I needed to cook Trish’s special jambalaya that evening.

Half way through the morning, I had two emails. The first, from Geordie, said simply - *subject not known to the police*. The second, from Sammie was much longer.

Hi David!

Attached is the first draft of the article for tomorrow’s issue. Please correct any factual errors and comment otherwise. Missed you and your friend the other night,

Sammie x

After much electronic to-ing and fro-ing and debate, this is the article which would finally appear

in the paper.

Jacqueline was making herself a coffee in her kitchen one Saturday evening when she was grabbed from behind and subjected to an hour-long ordeal on the floor, by a man who had followed her home. He had guessed correctly that she was a single mother living alone. To ensure her silence and compliance, he promised that her sleeping child would come to no harm. Like the vast majority of rape victims, for reasons this reporter understands, Jacqueline did not go to the police. But unlike most rapists, this man was special. He was gentle with her. Having threatened to kill her and her child, he had no need to be otherwise.

Almost a year later, as she was putting her experience behind her, by an amazing quirk of fate, Jacqueline saw her attacker on television, and eventually wrote to me because two police forces would not take her seriously. She had good reason to suspect that the man is a serial offender because of the context in which she saw him.

He may well, she thinks, have attacked other women in the Birmingham area, young mothers, vulnerable and friendless. Might you be one?

It looks likely that he strikes early in the evening. If you, or someone you know, have fallen victim to him, you can write to me in absolute confidence that your privacy will not be compromised. Indeed, you need not give your name or address - just tell us the area in which you live. We have deliberately omitted details about the man which only Jacqueline and you know - in order to discourage hoaxers - and to confirm our suspicions. So please give the fullest description of him and - very important - the date of your ordeal - even though it will be painful. Remember, you can help bring this man to justice and stop his reign of terror, maybe even save a life.

Keen to avoid the remote possibility that Maddy's family would identify her as Jacqueline, we did not mention the fatal accident. I phoned Mark, got his email address and sent the article for his approval. Equally important, I did not wish to run the risk - admittedly remote - of alerting the rapist that he was already on our radar. He knew where his other victims lived. How ruthless was that gentle man?

*

Adeline insisted on taking the Tube to her school the next day. I kept worrying how she would be, but I had a few errands to do to get the ingredients for her Ginger Turkey dish - her family favourite - in return for my well-received Jambalaya the previous evening. I came back and, as instructed, put the turkey breasts in a bag with a marinade of water, soy sauce, dry sherry, brown sugar, apricot jam, lemon juice, ginger and garlic. She would do the rest when she came home. At five, she returned, beaming. After weeks of supply teachers, her classes had been fascinated by her talk and pictures of the island. She had brought a memory stick from Guadeloupe with her, containing a PowerPoint. Later, after that delicious turkey with rice and fresh sliced mango

she showed it to me. It was a revelation that cold January night. The beauty of the forests, the beaches, the people and their dazzling costumes was astonishing.

“Is everyone really so happy there?”

“Oh no...well...we have problems like everybody...a lot of young people have no jobs....but we live long, eat well and laugh a lot. Until the big winds blow and the earth trembles...”

She told me that Guadeloupe was a department of France and elected MPs to Paris. They even used the euro. The next picture surprised me.

“You have a real volcano?”

“But yes! La Soufrière - the Old Woman. In 1976 before I am born, it erupted and everybody from la Basse Terre had to leave. At school we have earthquake practice. We live over a furnace. Up on the slopes...just there.....we go bathing in hot springs.”

She told me about the island’s violent past - how the ancient Arawak tribe had been slaughtered by the Caribs, they themselves slaughtered in turn by the French.

“The slaves rose up against the slave owners after the French Revolution - but that horrible Napoleon put down the revolt and made us slaves again.”

I looked at the beach framed by the sea and forests, and the volcano steaming into the perfect sky.

“Such a wonderful place deserves to be treated better by people, Adeline.”

That very morning a young girl from London had been shot dead on Jamaica, caught up in a stupid feud. Where might kind people go and be safe?

She moved the show on.

“Here is my big sister, Bérénice.”

“She’s a nun?”

“Yes.”

“She is so beautiful....What...”

I was going to say *a waste*.

“She is. She hides her secret well.”

I suddenly thought of my boys. Their early days had been so full of joy and I remembered being afraid of the first shadow which was bound to fall across and chill their sunny lives. They had got used to the illness of their mother but I wondered what pain they were hiding over her death. It had not been easy to tell them she had gone to heaven and I had taken new toys to Chorley with me to soften the blow. They were soon playing happily with them, so much so, that I even resented it.

That night I could not sleep again for long. It is supposed to be a symptom of depression. I could not stop thinking of our sons playing happily on the carpet while Carole tried to stifle her sobs in the next room. Time, always in a rush, refuses to mark our catastrophes properly. Look at our front pages; every fresh disaster must have its day too. Who still mentioned those awful school shootings in America a month afterwards? I felt as if I was sitting on a merry-go-round of horrors. What else could I do but close my eyes and block off my ears?

Then I thought of Adeline close by, tucked up warm and fast asleep, and smiled.

The next morning, at seven, there came a shy tap at my bedroom door. She had made me a cup of tea. She was dressed in a bright yellow blouse with a startling blue skirt. Who at school would even be tempted to play her up?

“The new snow has melted,” she said. “The road is a mess.”

“We call it slush.”

“What a horrible word!”

She wished me a happier day and soon I heard the front door pulled shut. How old was she? Much older than thirty seemed unlikely - she lacked the assurance of a woman in her thirties, though I had to bear in mind she was a stranger in London, on her own. She was here on a temporary contract until the end of July.

*

“Are you into footy, Mark? I’ve checked. The man’s team are playing in Birmingham soon. As long as you can handle it....I’ll need your help.”

“Send me an email and tell me what you want me to do. I just can’t talk about it over the phone.” I rang off and went onto the website of that famous London football club. Their Christmas and New Year form had been poor so that it was easier than I imagined to buy an away ticket - once I had paid a fee to become a member. Season ticket holders had had first pick so that I was forced to buy a seat way to the right of goal, four rows from the front. I went onto the West Bromwich website and bought Mark a ticket in the home end, opposite me and quite high up, at the end of a row so that he would not draw too much attention to himself.

The revolving news on my email page made me grimace. A singer called Katy had whipped off her skirt at a concert, revealing herself in bloomers, to the delight of her fans, and proving there was no substitute for talent. Next, the grey face of another Bank Incompetent appeared, accused of presiding over yet another misselling scandal. The tag mentioned his *regret and resolve to put matters right* but his tiny eyes hinted at malice and indifference.

Apologizing without really admitting you were in the wrong was becoming a fine art - maybe there was even money to be made, selling “apology packages” - a bit like off-the-peg after-dinner or best man speeches. Hospital administrators, politicians, police chiefs, bank presidents, rail company spokesmen, newspaper magnates, proprietors of old peoples’ homes and bureaucrats lesser and greater were becoming practised apologizers, subtle blame shifters and shit-shovelers - and always ended with the essential assurance that - (*definitely*) *lessons were being learnt*. Subject closed - move on - get over it. There was a war declared between the providers of crap services - nail-filers, coffee drinkers, clock watchers, small talkers, paper shufflers and bull shitters - and rapacious compensation vultures. How long would it be before an enterprising callous carer contacted a vulture with a plan to make a colossal balls-up in return for cut of the pay-out?

The most surprising thing about that fabulously wealthy and awesomely useless banker was that he looked so damned drab and uninspiring.On the right of the screen, a fleshy woman had popped up, hands on hips with a *come hither* look. I was informed that she was a bored housewife living 2.3 miles away from me. I was surrounded by cheeky cunts of various kinds. I went to look out of the window at the snow-covered garden into which a proper romping summer would never return. My laptop jingled. It was from Geordie and it made me shout YES.

Liverpool, Kensington, 10th November 20-- - Janice P reported attempted rape at around 7 pm - big man in balaclava - attack disturbed when neighbour knocked door - suspect escaped over the back.

A quick search confirmed that Kensington bordered the district of the home team. This was the

day of the Serb wonder goal and eventual defeat 2-1.

I fired the following message back: *Do you believe me now?*

She replied: *Never doubted it.*

Me: *Now you have a **reported** crime. Surely that's progress!*

Her: *But no suspect - apart from a guy **you** chose! Did he rape **you**????*

The next day Sammie phoned. "Struck gold, David! Have you got a fax?"

I connected it and watched the following emerge.

It was March 10th last year, going up for 7 p.m. I had just got my son to sleep and was unpacking my groceries when a knock came at the door. I always lock up because I live alone. A voice said "police - there's an incident along the road and we're evacuating." I unlocked and was pushed over. He said my lad would be unharmed as long as I was a good girl. He had a balaclava on with slits for his eyes and mouth. The eyes were so cold and I was scared to death. I let him do as he pleased and even helped him in. He never hurt me and after half-an-hour he'd gone. He patted me on the cheek, said I was a good girl and told me to remember he had my address. Since then I've moved from Smethwick. I didn't call the police - my main thought was to get rid of his scum. The last thing I wanted was his child. I hope this helps to get him banged up.

The internet confirmed that the Londoners had drawn that day, one each, against West Bromwich Albion, whose stadium was just north of Smethwick.

There was no name or current address on the statement. Not long after I had finished looking on line, the fax machine whirred again and spat out a copy of a card with a greeting almost identical to Maddy's. I felt light-headed. We had moved a square closer to the gentleman and he had no idea we were even on the board. Should I send all this stuff to Geordie?

I phoned Sammie and asked her not to print it - it was evidence and there was a danger it could be viewed as prejudicial. She agreed to be patient. It would make a great story further along.

*

By Friday, Adeline had a week behind her, and so, having seen her confidence grow day by day, I was a little surprised when she came in looking bewildered and upset. I dreaded to hear that she had finally been given a hard time by pupils, her novelty value having worn off. She sat down at the table where I was de-weeding mussels and stared at me.

"I've seen him, David. The man on the photo."

"What?"

I fetched the photo to show her again and held my breath. She frowned. The girls in year nine had been given a talk in the afternoon about internet safety and sexting.

"I'm almost certain it's him. He sat in the corner and made notes while the young woman gave her talk. I think he was appraising her. He got up and left when the girls were invited to ask questions."

I dropped the pan of mussels on the floor. "Good God. Are you saying he's a teacher?"

"No! A policeman.. He wore a uniform and kept his face down mostly. The woman was police too."

I instantly thought of Geordie whose first reaction in the pub had been to say the face looked familiar. While Adeline got down and picked up the mussels I went to my laptop.

Our subject may well be a policeman - a schools liaison officer or some such.

(Geordie never read the email. Georgina Richardson was already under arrest on suspicion of corruption and her computer had been seized).

“Adeline” I said, after we’d silently picked at the paella to which I’d forgotten to add the rosemary, “Don’t take this the wrong way....but it might be easy for you - for our kind - to muddle English faces. There’s a certain type - round and fat - that is not so pleasant to look at, and there are millions like that. They have bad skin because of what they eat - and the weather -”
“Why you trying to make me doubt? I watch him.....he keep pretending to think what to write - so he could look at the girls’ legs.”

“Did he have the wart?”

“The wart?”

“The thing on his face. Under his right eye, look at the photo.”

“He had lots of things - oh, I don’t know. He give me the creepy feelings.”

There was something else bothering her. She couldn’t believe that some girls were sending pictures of their intimate selves to boys.

“Why they do it?”

“They think they have to be cool and be popular with the boys. Other girls can be really cruel to ones who aren’t fashionable.”

“Where does it come from?”

I thought of near-naked video dancers and Katy showing off her bloomers

“Are the girls more modest back home?”

“Yes - well most. Most families go to church. Teachers are strict. Parents are strict.”

“There you are then. Parents here are scared now to intrude on their kids’ privacy - and give them too much freedom before they’re ready. Kids aren’t protected and easy to exploit.”

“It’s sad. They need Jesus in their lives.”

“No chance. Too much din.”

I told her - when she pressed me - that Trish had joked that I was a two-taps Christian.

“She meant I went hot and cold. Before she couldn’t speak any more she asked me to believe she was going to heaven. I tried then - and I still try. But it’s hard. Why be so cruel to such a kind woman? And then, other times, I wonder if God despairs of us.”

She told me she would pray for me.

“You’re so kind. Adeline. Who’s your sweetheart back home? You must have one.”

“There was a boy - a fisherman - but the sea took him in a hurricane. Since then, I meet nobody I like enough...”

She scraped the rest of her rice together and ate it with a spoon. I examined her face for upset but saw none. I asked her if she was starting out on her career - or had she been at it a couple of years - or more?

She grinned. “Why don’t you just ask how old I am?”

“Okay. How old?”

“I’m 31.”

“No!”

“And you?”

“A really old man. 38 in August.”

The conversation dried up as we delved into our private thoughts - at least I did - over the bridgeable gap between us. I did not dare look at her directly and only glanced to find her not staring at me, but the mussel shells. Her book was sticking out of her shoulder bag and came to my aid.

“I meant to ask - what’s your symphony book about?”

“La Symphonie Pastorale? Oh, it’s about a vicar....he takes in a wild girl found living in the forest and teaches her. She is blind. He falls in love with her - but when she regains her sight she sees the world is not as beautiful as he had told her. And she sees that he is old and...not handsome. It is very sad.....”

“So the man on the Tube who was so rude to you, would have appreciated it, you think?”

“Probably not.”

She picked up the photo again and asked me if she should try to find out his name. I did not want to disappoint her, but thought it risky.

“The trouble is, it might make things awkward for you if you start asking questions. I’ll bear him in mind. Thing is, the weekend after this, with any luck, I’m going to catch him.”

*

“Are you sure you can handle this, Mark? Otherwise, let’s go home.”

“I reckon so. Yes. I can.”

Our plan was pretty simple. It depended on the gentleman following his previous pattern of attacking around 7 pm. What did he do between the final whistle and then? It seemed natural to assume that he would go for something to eat or drink while the crowds abated and streets returned to their normal quiet. Maddy and the girl who had contacted Sammie had both been food-shopping. Most supermarkets had cafés. I could see him sitting there until a lone girl with a pushchair came through the checkouts. Perhaps he parked his car there and walked to the ground. I had googled the area and selected the nearest supermarket to the Hawthorns - about a mile away. Had he done the same?

I had parked and met Mark at twelve there and we had thoroughly walked the area, making sure we knew the routes between all the pubs and supermarkets, so that we could find them again in the dark.

Now it was going up for three and we turned to walk to the ground. As we approached the home supporters’ end I handed Mark a copy of the photo and my slim but very powerful binoculars which would fit easily inside his jacket and not draw the attention of an over-officious steward. We parted with a handshake and I walked on past the coach of the away team, pulling their scarf up from below my collar. I turned the corner and headed towards the queue of away supporters, managing to resist the sweet allure of fried onions which could not quite hide the pungent sweaty-armpit odour of the burgers. There were only ten minutes before kick-off and faces were vivid with anticipation. These were the stalwarts of the club whose mood would be influenced for days by the events they were about to witness. Amongst them was a man who compensated in an original way for the disappointment of points dropped.

Inside, below the stand, on the concourse, fans were milling around and swigging overpriced and over-chilled lager. No face remotely matched the one I had in mind and in my pocket.

In the ground, the cold blast of the gloomy late January afternoon met me and I was directed to my seat - next to an elderly couple tucked into a blanket. After a few exchanges they soon gave up their effort to engage me in conversation. When I had settled I looked at my inbox and read -

Can see you, no sign of him.

The track suited players jogged off to applause, for their final briefing and exhortation, and the half-empty stadium began to fill from the concourses as pies and pints were polished off. The cauldron of excitement began to simmer as the music grew louder and the rhythm increased, occasionally and then more frequently accompanied by chants from various quarters, including - with a sudden deafening roar - mine.

To a standing ovation all round, both teams, led out by the match officials marched onto the pitch, already an unnatural green under the floodlights due to the early gloom as a storm threatened.

I studied the face of every late-comer and was beginning to lose heart when, after “my” side had forced a series of early corners and roused our end to fever-pitch - I heard my phone jingle with a message. - *just came in - row M - seat 162.* I calculated. He would be over my left shoulder - pretty high up - to the right of the goal, quite near to the staircase and an exit. I twisted my head round and saw him, munching a pie. I slipped out the photo to be sure. And I was.

Both teams had created good chances but at half-time the game was goalless. I walked down to the front and along the path behind the wall. He was reading his programme. Could he really be a policeman? I mounted the steps towards him, creating a text until I was just feet away. He glanced up and then back. *Am right next to him. Definite. Will w8 on concourse at 4 30. Txt me the sec he moves and then head str8 back to supermarket.*

Two rows behind him there was a single seat free on the end. As soon as the fans were drifting back for the second half, I took a gamble it was nobody’s and sat down.

“This free?” I murmured to my neighbour. “Better view up here.”

He shrugged. No problem.

The game restarted. Some younger fans below us had decided they would stand up to watch, until the gentleman leaned forward and tapped one on the shoulder and pointed to a man who had a crutch. Words were exchanged - the gentleman vigorously moved his head as he spoke and gesticulated with a meaty arm. They saw sense and sat down. Some spectators nearby applauded. I can’t really remember much about the second half. My eyes were set on that round, ginger stubbly head, trying to penetrate it and see what might be going on in there. With ten minutes to go, it looked as if the away side’s pressure would tell - but a breakaway by the home side and a goal froze our stand into silence as the rest of the stadium went wild. My quarry put his programme into his pocket and turned up his collar. Immediately I got up and ran down the steps to the concourse where only a few people were heading in and out of the toilet. I took up position opposite the staircase. The clock was running down and the cries above me were of frustration. The game was surely lost. *On his way* - read the new message. The endgame had begun.

The whistle had not yet gone, the game was in the balance, so the crowds were still quite sparse as early leavers hurried to their cars and bus stops. It was easy to keep the gentleman in view as he strolled the way I hoped he would. The low rainclouds had brought an early dusk and I felt comfortable to stroll at his pace about thirty yards behind him, absorbed in my phone - what a godsend they were for tailers - in case he turned round. But why should he? The fish and chip shop up ahead on the right glowed and smelt enticing. He slowed and went in. I crossed over, preparing to look as if I was sorting out the key for the car parked there. As his turn came to pay, he dragged something out with his wallet - something black - which he quickly picked up and stuffed back into a pocket. I felt a fearful triumph.

Instead of heading to the smaller Tesco where we had parked, he turned right. I texted Mark - *I*

think he's heading for Asda. Get in car and get set to come. I had given him my spare key. The gentleman finished his chips and screwed up the paper. He turned left and, sure enough, the large green sign came into view. Within a couple of minutes he was letting himself into a Vectra parked almost opposite the sliding doors of the shop. I went in, sent Mark a message and watched until my Focus appeared. I went out and hailed him down.

"He's just here - don't look - drive round and try and get that space behind him!"

As soon as he had parked I walked past the Vectra where the man was reading a paper and got into my car.

Behind the huge windows in the golden light, early evening shoppers were queuing, filling bags and walking to the exit. It was a quarter to six. Somewhere in there, deciding which offers she could afford and whether to buy herself a treat, was a poor, young mother pushing her child down the aisles, oblivious to the danger she was in.

The rain which had spluttered and threatened all afternoon now lashed everything and everyone, sending shoppers staggering and running.

"Turn the engine on Mark - and the wipers."

As soon as he had, I saw the gentleman had done the same.

"Right. I'm going in to have a look round....."

He left me in the car and I watched him jog into the entrance hall. I studied the head in front and the wipers constantly clearing his view. My phone rang.

"There's a teenage girl - at the self-checkout with a kiddie in a pushchair. Noice looking girl....she's paying now.....getting her receipt.....on her way out...."

A couple had got in the way between my car and his and were filling their boot, so I got out. A slim figure in a fur-trimmed hat, bowed under the wind and rain, was walking away past the lines of trolleys towards the car park exit, pushing her child, with a shopping bag hanging from each handle.

My heart froze when he got out and locked his door, looking around briefly, as I busied myself locking my own. Casually, he began to walk her way, passing Mark who had already emerged. I held my breath as he looked down, and prayed he would not react.

The girl had reached the busy road and stood waiting for a gap in the traffic. Her pursuer drew alongside, a few feet to her right. I patted Mark and he set off, with me a yard or two behind.

First the girl and then the man crossed over and she turned left, past a parade of shops - a laundrette, a café, a pizzeria and a newsagent's - with him not far behind. It was a long street of terraced houses. When she crossed over he stayed on the left hand side. She struggled up the hill and turned right, causing him to break into a jog. As soon as he had turned I sprinted past Mark and reached the corner - to find the next street empty. Into one of these houses - there were ten each side - she had disappeared. But where was he? Mark arrived at my shoulder. We stared in disbelief.

"We can't go bangin' on all of these, can we?" whispered Mark.

"I don't think he's gone in after her. He'll wait until she's put the child down. It's only just gone six. But where is he?"

Along the backs of the houses on the right hand side next to us there ran an alley. I told Mark to walk around to see if lights were being switched on and to listen for a child crying - then ran back to the supermarket.

I was relieved to find the gentleman back in his car. He had obviously noted which was the target house, had come back full circle and now would wait until he was good and ready. He was reading his paper, taking no notice at all of the people leaving the store. It was quarter past six

almost. *Back in his car* - I texted.

Getting soaked - came straight back so I phoned him and told him to go back to the café and wait until I texted - *NOW!*

Was the girl upstairs trying to sing or whisper the child to sleep? Or in the kitchen drinking coffee?

It was ten to seven when he turned out his courtesy light and locked the car. I sent my text, hoping Mark would do as agreed and wait hidden at the far end of the street where he would see the gentleman turn the corner and knock at or try a door. As I was following him, my phone jingled. *5th house along rh side, she's in the bedroom window at the back. Am in alley.*

As he approached the corner I stopped and squeezed behind a wheelie bin, sure that he would be bound to turn to check his back. Through a gap I saw him turn right and then I sprinted into the alleyway where Mark was waiting.

“Go and bang at the door and keep banging!”

“But he’s a big guy - can you handle him?”

“Go on!”

The back gate was locked so I dragged a wheelie bin over onto its side and used it to get up onto the six foot wall. The upstairs light was off, the downstairs curtains drawn to with a chink of light. I listened for Mark hammering and, hearing nothing, thought for a horrible moment he had gone to the wrong house. “Come on!” I screamed at the night.

An oblong of light appeared in the back wall, filled immediately by the bulky shape of a man. There were screams from within and from upstairs the cries of a child. The oblong of light vanished as the door slammed, and the screams diminished. Panicky breaths and footsteps approached me until he was almost underneath me, rattling the gate. He swore under his breath and crashed into the gate which did not give way. I was perched about a yard to his left. Reaching into my inside pocket I took out my powerful torch and shone it directly into his masked face. It appeared like a nightmare vision, screwing up its eyes and snarling in bewilderment. He staggered back and fell over some junk and old toys, unable to escape back into darkness.

The back door opened and Mark came out. The soft light from the house brought some relief to the gentleman and he picked up a brick to hurl at my torch, knocking it out of my hand.

“You a burglar, you black bastard?” he yelled, tearing off the balaclava.

“No. A reporter. I think you broke my finger.”

He changed tack and produced a shaking ID.

“DC Ghent. This woman’s been fiddling the Social.”

I shook my head and smiled.

“It won’t wash, Gentleman.”

Mark picked his way through the rubble and stood at my shoulder.

“You raped my partner Madeleine. You sent her a Christmas card, you sick bastard.”

The gentleman took a step backwards, laughing at Mark and, telling him he was insane, rattled the gate again.

“Well, let’s see how yo loik it, pal. Yo say you’re a policeman? Coppers’ arses are in big demand in jail.”

“Who fucking told you all this crap?” screamed the man.

“You did. You were famous for a few seconds on Match of the Day. Here’s the photo.”

“Shhh-IT!”

“Girl okay, Mark?”

“Half-naked when she let me in. Just in time. I phoned the cops.”

The gentleman drew a knife, pointing it first at me and then at Mark. Instinctively he put out a hand and grabbed the blade. Blood dripped down but he did not flinch.

“I loved Maddy. My loif is finished. Here!”

He ripped open his shirt and thrust out his chest. Ghent brought the knife overhand and debated whether to strike. In the distance sirens began to wail. I told him to put the knife down, there was no escape.

“Oh yes there is. Fucking lost again, didn’t they?”

So saying, he drew the blade across his neck and opened an artery. Smiling for a second, blood spurting, he staggered and toppled onto piles of rubbish. His eyes fixed on a limbless doll, he shuddered for a while and was then still.

“Now we’ll never know what made him do it, Mark.”

“No. Tell you what though, Dave. Oi couldn’t give a shit.”

*

In all the months since her death, Trish had never appeared in my sleep, which made me feel guilty. But that night, after driving back very late from Birmingham, I had such a vivid dream of her that it woke me. She had been laughing as heartily as she used to do in Moss Side and said so clearly that I really thought she was in the room – *Dave, get a ring on that girl’s finger before somebody else!*

No doubt it was my own voice disguised as hers - but I didn’t care. That morning, over toast, I told Adeline I loved her and wanted her to marry me. She wept.

That evening, I phoned the boys at the usual time and told them that in July we were going on a special trip to a very wonderful place.

