

THE BROOK

Looking Back

We build a house to shelter us and protect us; it is our sacred domain and we loathe intruders. In drawers and cupboards we store what is most precious; behind its walls we do the most personal things, allow our faces to relax, make our least polished, least studied and most spontaneous statements, have our most serious disagreements and experience our most delightful reconciliations. The house was the beginning of privacy but spelt the end of community, becoming the place where deeds could be done unseen.

We decorate and furnish our houses with optimism and commitment, trying not to host thoughts of plans going adrift and hopes being unrealised. And yet, if things do go wrong, houses are wont to divulge our despair; paint peels, lawns go unmown, gardens lie untended, drives become seedy and weedy and plants in window boxes and urns shrivel. These external signs confess some inner discontent or malaise. There may be illness, loneliness or a failure of the will due to alcoholism, desertion, a failing marriage, poverty, unemployment or some other humiliation. In every street there is a house like this, and people cannot pass by without wondering about the condition of the rooms and of the inhabitants. (But stop and think. What about the other houses in the street? What illusions might their smart frontages be creating? What secrets might they be keeping?)

It never occurred to me that an early decline might be the fate of my elder brother, Robert, my half-brother, older by nearly six years. He was a nimble dodger and lived by his wits, you see. When I was five, I suppose I regarded him as a father figure. Mine, Jason Fulbright, had gone when I was a toddler. Beyond admitting his name, my mother would never speak of him. Robert would never speak of him either, and as I grew more worldly-wise, I decided that Jason must have done things to both which they wished to forget. If there had been screaming or pleading voices, I had either not heard them or I blotted them out. Perhaps the darkest of a house's secrets can be contained within the walls of one or two rooms. It only dawned on me much later - as you will see - that one of those secrets might pertain to me.

Before I return to Robert, I need to describe my childhood in more detail - a childhood which is all too commonplace these days. (Don't worry - this is not one of those self-pitying, tortured autobiographies). We lived above a Paki shop - which would prove, as you will see, a kind of godsend. The back "garden" was accessible by an aluminium stairway, which also provided sole access to the flat. The garden was full of rubbish which Raj, the shopkeeper, had accumulated over the years. Even so, it was my only escape from the goings-on upstairs. The brook at the end of the garden was almost choked with litter and staring into it is one of my earliest memories. There was no routine or security, men came and went and my mother Gina blew hot and cold in her affection, as the effect of alcohol or drugs came on or wore off. There were whispers at school that I smelt and children shunned me. Robert, once a good companion, began to go out and stay out when he was thirteen until one day he never came back. In the box where I put all my few treasures there was a Christmas card he sent to me - not to Gina - when I was nine. He wrote that he was well, living with good friends in the north, and hoped that he would come back and see me again when he had saved up the money. He told me to hide the card from Mum - but he was wasting ink; she had no idea it had come and was, I think, only vaguely aware it was Christmas.

Stories about kids doing heroic deeds and phoning 999 in the event of a parent's collapse grab headlines, but my effort was over a long period and unspectacular, so I got no credit. At the age of nine I had to take charge of the flat, doing errands, washing clothes and cooking simple stuff on toast. The thought of going into care terrified me - I knew about that from watching TV - so I did my best to keep up a front at school. And it worked. A kind neighbour collected Gina's benefits, sorted her bills and did bits of big shopping beyond the things Raj had in stock. He never saw Gina but took a liking to me, even charging me half price for stuff beyond its sell-by date. A nice man, he turned a blind eye to Gina's doings as long as the council paid our rent. The men who clanked up the steps paid for luxuries and Gina's needs. We somehow came through. If I was ill, I forged her signature on sickness notes. I returned parents evening forms convincingly signed. Only once was I asked why my mum had not turned up - and it was not a lie to say: because she was ill. Luckily, it was a school with a deprived intake so that I could hide the truth easily amongst others even more neglected than me.

But when I came home one afternoon and found her unconscious it could not be hidden. I did the heroic thing, phoned and she was taken to hospital. That night, as I sat in emergency foster care with the telly downstairs belting out the theme tune to *Only Fools and Horses*, she died of alcohol poisoning and an overdose. I was a month short of my tenth birthday and an orphan. I wept - not for her, because a voice told me she was well out of it - but for me. And in fear of the unknown.

But out of the unknown emerged Bill and Shirley Crane, godsend to a frightened and lonely boy of ten. They had a small tribe of fostered kids and the skills I had acquired and my early growing-up made me, not another burden for them to carry, but an asset. Shirley was a large lady whose health had just begun to turn so that I was able to help in many ways, particularly in attending to the exhausting needs of the smaller ones.

When I was fifteen the Cranes sat me down between them, with a mug of chocolate, on the old brown settee and told me that they loved me so much they wanted to adopt me. Adverts were placed in the Leicestershire papers for Jason Fulbright to get in touch but he never did. For a while, this whetted my blunted resentment of him. Anyway, at sixteen I became Mark Crane. I shall never forget the tears they cried to see me awarded with my degree in Sociology from Aston University.

I felt called to help needy children, and that could have been the subject of this narrative but it is not even a subsidiary theme; the subject of this account is not social deprivation, child neglect or family breakdown - worthy topics for an airing though they are. No, the ultimate subject of these pages is my loathing of Jason Fulbright and how I set about engineering his come-uppance.

Shirley, consigned to a wheelchair, putting on even more weight, was not long for this world. I was twenty-nine when she died. Bill had always enjoyed a drink and Mum's death triggered, I suppose, his latent or suppressed alcoholism, such that he careered into an unstoppable decline to which no brake could be applied. For the second time in my young life, I watched a person close to me enter on a path of self-destruction in spite of the death-bed promise he had made - I was there - to his wife not to go to pieces. But to pieces he went, resisting all attempts made by me and another ex-foster child, Nicola, to hold him together. He was pickling his liver with vodka and gin. I decided then and there to battle down those alcoholic demons which to me seemed to haunt the very streets of that mean north Leicestershire town which threatened to get into my bones too because I felt so depressed.

In order to plead with Bill, Nicola had come up from Allingworth in the south of Leicestershire where she had been reunited with her birth-mother. Bill threw a wobbly and told us both to piss off - we weren't his kids! She was a year younger than me and the last time I had seen her was at my graduation party. It's an ill wind, as they say; we were as brother and sister but that did not prevent me falling passionately in love with her all over again, and she, being semi-detached from a partner, responded hesitantly at first and then beautifully.

Within six months I had moved south to be with her in Allingworth and taken a job in Social Services. Moving there, to be within seven miles of Earlstone, a small town further west along the Watling Street, the town where I had grown up so prematurely, turned my thoughts to my half-brother Robert. What were the chances that he had also drifted back home?

And so, my introduction is explained. As soon as I rolled up outside his house in Bragwell, a drab satellite of Earlstone, I read with a heavy heart signs of despair with which I was too well familiar. It was a terraced house at total variance with its neighbours either side. How they must have resented him for allowing the grass to grow, windows to peel and weeds to fill the cracks of paving slabs, reducing in value their neat properties. Wondering what the stalk in the pot had been and how long it had been dead, I rapped the door. I had no photos of Robert - nor of anyone else - only a dingy memory of curly hair and darting, suspicious eyes. He would now be getting on for forty. Please forgive me if I fail to use words like trepidation, expectation and excitement. I sensed that this would be an awkward and not a joyous meeting and my principle feeling was anxiety.

A Kind Of Reunion

"I ain't interested," said a thin wheezy voice behind the door.

"Robert? It's me, Mark. Your brother."

Slowly the door opened and we stood staring at each other, each looking for some feature we could recognize. His face was bloated and blotchy, the lively eyes tiny and the curly hair turned sparse. He smelt of smoke. He was morbidly obese.

"How the bloody hell did you find me?"

"Electoral roll."

"I've never bloody voted."

"Well, you're on it."

"Can you prove you're Mark? Don't know you from Adam."

"What motive would I have to track you down and trick you....." (*- in a dump like this?*)

I handed him the envelope I had brought with me from my treasures box. Hands jittery, he pulled out that Christmas card.

"Bloody hell.....FIRE!.....Well...well...God help us.....I suppose you'd better come in."

The place stank and was untidy of course, but my professional nose was used to worse. He asked me if I had come for a special reason.

"Just to say hello. It's been twenty years. You said in your card you hoped to see me some time. So here I am. Keeping okay?"

He shrugged.

"Glass o' beer?"

I refused and told him I never touched it. He described himself as a bit of an alkie.

"In the blood, like Mam. Must have missed you out...mind you, Jason drank enough."

"I saw enough when I was little, Rob. And my stepfather is drinking himself to death...I missed you when you went. It was hard."

He told me how he had lied about his age and fallen in with a building gang on a travellers site. "Safest place if you wanna disappear...Police keep well away...and bloody council snoopers...had quite a nice living...me own little van...."

"So what went wrong?"

He smiled to himself for a while and shook his head.

"Site politics.....a woman. Had to do a runner, otherwise....." - he drew a finger across his throat and reached for his fags, offering me one. I shook my head again.

"Glad you turned out so clean-living, our kid.....Anyway...this were six year agoo - I came south. Bought this dump. Cash. Should have seen the old woman's face when I counted it out. I ain't what you might call popular. Kids shout "gyppo" in the street. Couldn't gie a shite. I'm a benefit scrounger. Well, how could I work now wi' this gut? Can hardly get me hand round to wipe me arse.....What about you?"

I held up my palm.

"No, you numpty!. What happened to you? How come you did so well for yoursen?"

"Mixture of good luck and hard work. I survived. You know Gina died? Overdose."

"No, I never knew. Just assumed she had...Be a gud un - get us a lager out the fridge."

The empty bean tins and spaghetti tins around the sink put me straight in mind of my culinary apprenticeship.

He flicked on the telly and flicked it off.

"Still the bloody antiques. All repeats. Why *should* I pay the licence? So. What do you do?"

"Social worker in Allingworth."

"A do-gooder! You must see some sights!"

"I do indeed.....Robert, what do you remember about my dad?"

"Him! He'd get drunk and knock Mam about. You were only about two...a blessing. I used to lie in bed listening to her cry. He interfered with me now and then, dirty bugger. But I daren't say - in case she had a go at him and got clobbered."

This revelation made me go cold. It was a while before I could reply.

"That's appalling, Rob....Did you...do you still...."

"Dwell on it? Nah. More things to worry over. But what made him bugger off was over you. I found him by your cot in his underpants with a lob on and so I shouted for Mam. Locked meself in the bog."

"Never!"

"True as I sit here. Mam threatened him wi' the police. Thought he'd bang her one... but he just packed and went. Best day o' my life."

"Did you tell her about.....him and you?"

"No. Never crossed me mind. He were gone and that were enough. Never saw him again. Don't you try and trace him! Lousy rotten bastard."

As I took my leave, feeling giddy with this shocking new knowledge, I felt no encouragement from him to show any affection. A tough life had parched him of all sentiment, leaving his soul as dry as his skin. But I risked patting him on the shoulder as I wished him well.

"You forgot your card," he said after I had taken a couple of steps toward the door.

"You keep it, Rob. My turn to send you one."

I sent the card, enclosing my address and telephone number, but I did not hear from him. The boy I had looked up to had turned into a man I found repulsive. Leave him there for the time being.....

A Relaunch

Two years passed and only a chance perusal of the Earlstone paper, the Gazette, which someone had left in our office, would turn this from a very short futile kind of story into its final form of twenty thousand words. The Tories had come to power and I was seeing at first hand the results of their cuts on the most hard-pressed of people, in terms of their anxieties and living standards, low as they already were. The letter I read in the Gazette set me thinking.

Dear Sir,

As a newcomer to the town I am shocked to find no viable Labour Party here - only the scattered remnants of one, putting up candidates for the sake of appearances at local level, with no attempt to campaign or leaflet. Earlstone is not exactly an idyll, and it is astonishing to me that the council benches are packed half and half with Tories and Lib Dems. Yet my researches reveal that up till 1976 Labour controlled the council! What on earth went wrong? Earlstone needs a strong radical voice to challenge the worst depredations of the Tories and the mealy-mouthed whining of their Lib allies, whose hypocrisy is truly gut-wrenching.

The writer, signed Partisan, invited those of like mind to email him with a view to reinvigorating the “old beast”. So I did - and received the following reply.

Hello Mark!

Another recruit! That makes twelve in all. I could draw a comparison here with another man on a mission, but let such an odious one pass. We are having a get-together in the back room of The Lurcher in New Precincts - quite the least modern area of the town! - next Tuesday at 7:30.

Hoping to see you,

John Mitchell - a.k.a Partisan!!

I could have missed Mitchell’s letter or done nothing about it – as I almost did. But I didn’t. It is at such junctions in life, seemingly of little importance, that momentous turns for good or ill, for better or worse, are made. I turned left.

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Leaving our little Lizzie with her grandma, Nicola came to the meeting too. She was concerned that the Tory axe might fall on her special interest, the local library where she worked part-time. “Ah! Oh no, that makes *thirteen!*” exclaimed the thin, bearded man at the top table as we walked in. He pulled a mock-worried face, laughing out so loud that many attendees looked at each other in wonder. He jumped up and pumped our hands, inviting us to take a seat. He took out a watch with only one strap from his check shirt pocket and cleared his throat. He *rather* thought *we ought to make a start.*

John Mitchell was a fidget, hardly able to keep his hands still - tapping with his pen, shuffling papers, stroking his grey chin beard, examining his glasses for smudges - and when the hands were under some sort of control, his energy transferred itself to his knee which, on top of the

other, jiggled up and down. Nicola smiled and nudged me. I could tell she liked him. He turned out to be a history teacher who had moved down from Derby. And he could talk! The rest of us - a motley crew of mainly males, young and old, fat and thin - listened with expressions ranging from grimaces to smug *I've-heard-it-all-before* smiles as he shared his thoughts with us, without one single *um* or an *er*. What he said was dazzling and thought-provoking - but I shall not go into detail - if you are a Tory or Lib Dem and are *still* reading, you won't want to know anyway....and if you've gone, so what?

His tour d'horizon complete, we discussed subscriptions, printing, adverts, a membership drive, and most important of all, with May elections just six months away, the focus of our effort in the one Earlstone ward where we usually came second to the Libs, in Stoneybrook.

"If we can win in Stoneybrook," said John, flapping a Lib leaflet around with contempt "We can put to the sword this stale Lib jibe that Labour cannot win in the town!"

(The three seats Labour held were made up of two in Bragwell and one in the old mining village of Deepford.)

"So, Mr Mitchell," interjected one of the obvious sceptics and old-hands, a large man with a paunch and black glasses, "No candidates in other wards?"

"Oh, there are no hard and fast rules here! What do we think, Comrades?"

One or two wincers winced worse to hear this throwback to Old Labour, but John did not appear to notice and kept beaming. Anyway, we agreed to put up candidates everywhere but only to campaign with vigour in the one. Most seemed to leave the meeting well pleased and charged up with John's dynamic enthusiasm, even if he was a nutty professor.

This turned out to be the first of many stepping stones that would lead me to an unexpected re-acquaintance with Jason Fulbright.

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"Been doing a bit of homework on Councillor Hubbard," said Nicola, one evening not many weeks afterwards. "He's on the Lib website."

Hubbard was the representative of that Stoneybrook ward which we had driven around on our way back from the meeting, discovering two aspects; one area, on the right hand side of the main Leicester road was very well-to-do, consisting of large, pre-war houses; to the left, after a street of 1960s bungalows, came a large estate which had been council owned, now mostly private.

One enclave of it, we found out later, had a *reputation*.

Nicola pointed out how low the turn-out had been.

"Look. Thirty-two percent last time. Shocking. Bet you it's mostly our voters who stay at home. Believe what the Libs say and can't be bothered."

Nicola stared at the photo of Colin Hubbard with undisguised dislike.

"Says here he's thirty-seven. Looks much older with that double chin. Face like a buttock. God! What must the losers look like if he gets in?"

Frowning, I put on my best politically correct expression. I asked her - vehemently - how she could be so superficial when the voters clearly ignored looks - the piggy eyes, the chins - and voted on the qualities of the man and his policies. But I could not suppress a snigger, seeing her look so abashed, and I got a playful slap.

"Well, I wouldn't trust him. He looks evasive. That smile is forced."

"Oh come on. Lots of people take bad photos. Nerves."

“Well, you should stand. You’d wipe the floor with him.”

“Me? Why not you? You’re blonde and gorgeous. And you can talk. You’re confident.”

“And too busy with Lizzie. No way.”

(I should have said earlier that we had decided to move to the village of Fairleigh which was joined to Earlstone, partly due to an incident outside our flat in Allingworth where the drunken partner of client had turned up yelling abuse, convincing us that it was not wise to live where I worked.)

It was a pleasant December day and I fetched our coats. In half-an-hour we could walk to Stoneybrook to have a closer look at it. On the website, Hubbard was boasting of his special interest in a pathway called simply Brook - a “jitty” - which ran from Joseph Street through the cemetery into Stoneybrook Avenue, the road of the aforementioned bungalows. Surely, there and not far away, lived the sleeping Labour voters in need of of a handsome prince, as Nicola too generously called me, to stir them from their slumber.

Of course, we were expecting the Brook to be a perfect example of Liberal Party municipal endeavour and had to pinch ourselves when we encountered so much litter, graffiti and dog dirt.

Little Lizzie kept pointing and squeaking “wozzat?” as I steered her pushchair around turds, squelches, squashed chips and mini-novas of vomit. The brook itself turned out to be - or had been turned into a ditch, full of gaudy tins and wrappers from the mini-supermarket (absurdly claiming to be cheap) which had taken over a parade of shops on Joseph Street. Along a high wall ran a display of stupid, ugly and offensive graffiti, and it faced the cemetery to our left, beyond railings which bordered the ditch. We came upon a section with windmills and soft toys, where small children lay buried, just a few yards further on from the end of that horrible wall.

“Bloody hell, Mark. Hubbard’s special interest? He’s having a laugh. Get the camera out.”

For a while I did not move. Two small buildings in the far distance had attracted my attention, and triggered a memory I had buried.

Of that, later.

“Get the camera! Are you deaf?”

“No. Here.”

We made a record of every revolting thing in sight and, while Lizzie snoozed, walked home in the chill, in a contemplative silence, composing, as it turned out, my first election address which would be illustrated with the best of those photos.

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“But I’ve been standing against Hubbard for the last two elections!” protested Eliot, the ginger-haired young man who had sat, arms tight folded and judgmental, at our first pub meeting. “Not fair! Put me ‘ands in me own pocket....and now *you* say - a snooty newcomer, with a plum in his gob - we need a fresh face? Yours, I suppose!”

He looked around for support from the twenty-odd of us, and encountering mainly stony stares, just the odd grunt, a weak hear-hear and a nod, he stood up. John Mitchell was lost for words for once and embarrassed. Nicola stood up too and tried to say something about compromise, but Eliot, surrounded by such a lack of support, made for the door. Nicola grabbed her bag and went after him.

“Well, really, I - I never intended to cause an upset.” said an abashed Mitchell.

“John, you mean well and you’re a good organizer and pump-primer, but about as diplomatic as a steam roller. Eliot feels hurt. Can’t you see that?”

These words had been spoken by the man in the black specs, Ron Kinder, who, apart from being Eliot's uncle, was quite disinterested in the selection process.

"I only opined that we needed a new face.....not *my* craggy face, I hasten to add. If it had been *my* face that was old, which it patently is, Comrades, I would have said precisely the same."

Chastened, John sat down and sought escape in his shuffled papers. Ron got to his feet and felt his back. He had a fallen face on which many years of disappointment and pain were registered.

"Well and good," he retorted, leaning backwards for relief. "I'll opine an' all - and speak plain. You're the last one who should stand here. Too posh! Folk here are inward-looking.

Multicultural and cosmopolitan for them means having a pizza. If it's you in the frame, I'm out of here."

Others growled their agreement and nodded.

"Well, Comrades, I unconditionally withdraw my candidature - even before - ho, ho - I submit it - which I never intended to do anyway!"

We sat rigid in an uncomfortable silence, wondering which of us might fit the bill as candidate, fearing that we would be finished before we started. The door opened and Nicola returned, followed by a red-faced Eliot.

"Sorry, folks," said he. "Me temper again. Course we need a new face. Nicola just showed me some photos she took of the Brook. Dynamite. I never thought o' that. Not been down there for years. That lyin' Hubbard...I know for a fact he neglects his mam.....but we can't use that. These are different though."

He invited Nicola to put our photos on a table and most gathered round to gasp and tut.

"I'd like to propose Nicola as candidate," said Eliot.

"Seconded!"

She shook her head. She could not *commit*.

"I know someone who can, though. Local man, loves people and has been through the mangle. Knows what it's like."

And so I became the challenger to Hubbard.

In January, John Mitchell rang.

"It seems we have a spy in our ranks. Take a look at the Brook if you're passing."

I did. It was sparkling in the bright frosty light. The graffiti was gone. The litter too, and the choking mud and debris in the ditch stood by the railing in neat piles. The brook, unhampered, was running along and gurgling like a toddler.

In the Friday edition of the Gazette, a photo featured a hideously smiling Hubbard with a scrubbing brush by the wall, under the headline **Councillor Gets Stuck In**. I threw Nicola the paper in disgust.

"Nicky, forget what I said about Hubbard. He's a bastard."

"Somebody at work told me the Gazette is owned by one of the Earlstone Liberal mafia."

I phoned Ron Kinder and told him of John Mitchell's suspicion, asking if there were faces at our meetings, besides ours, which were unfamiliar. He doubted the spy-theory but confirmed what Nicola had said about the Gazette.

"He was at school with the editor. He usually gets his mush in there before the run-up to elections when the paper bans politics. It's his New Year Resolution. I can't stick the guy, but to be fair, he can't be there 24/7 to keep tabs on the Brook and kids dropping Coke tins. There's more to worry about in Earlstone than a bit o' litter and dog shit."

He put the phone down abruptly, which told me what he really thought of me and my campaign.

What apathy! Earlstone was a dingy town and no-one seemed to care much. Quite a well-to-do cul-de-sac terminated at the Brook pathway; residents walked their dogs along it, took their kids to school, and used it to get to the shop and as a short-cut to the town centre and the cemetery. Did the squalor not bother them? Did they look skyward and ignore it? Eliot had been quite adamant that the only issue liable to animate Earlstoners was the Council Tax; that they would shut the schools if they could to save money. I had asked him forlornly why, in that case, he and others had bothered standing.

“On principle!” he had replied. “We take votes of the Libs here and there.”

“So in some seats you keep the Tories *in*?”

“Oh God. You sound like Mason, the Libs’ whining chairman. In my book, there’s no difference. Look at Trident - they said in their manifesto they’d cancel it - but support a party in coalition who are for it.”

“But so is Labour!” I exclaimed.

“Not really! We’re only *saying* we are. Once in power....”

I almost threw in the towel then and there, but Nicola persuaded me not to.

I felt angry and depressed walking along that cleanly-scrubbed jitty. A passing dog-walker, a man in late middle age, nodded in greeting and I stopped to chat. What he said enlightened me further. Scrawl, muck and litter were normally bad, he said.

“It’s only okay now because of the May elections. He’s a bloody hypocrite, that Hubbard. There was a time before when this here wall got really awful. Vile stuff and abuse. In the end I phoned the council and within two days it got painted out. Nowt to do with Hubbard. Any road, a couple o’ days after his newsletter dropped through the door, I had a brainwave. I phoned his number and made out I was some old codger with a wheezy voice, said I were pleased about the graffiti being gone and asked if it were him who’d sorted it out, like. And guess what!”

“He said it was?”

“He did! I called him a bloody liar - said it were me what sorted it - and the phone went down quicker than a tart’s britches.”

“So what did you do?”

“Wrote a letter to the editor o’ the Gazette. Might as well have thrown it in this here ditch.”

“He didn’t print it?”

“No! Liberal rag, ain’t it? Though it never admits it.”

“Can I use your story? I’m standing against him in May.”

“Can if you like. You a Green? Surely not a Tory???”

“No. Labour.”

“Labour? What’s happened to young Eliot?”

I told him briefly and he shook his head. *I was wasting my time.* He picked up the turd his dog had just pooped and went to walk on. I asked him his name and where he lived but he appeared not to hear. I held back then sauntered after him, making a note of his house number. It was a large house with a beautiful front garden.

It turned out that he was Dave Osmond, an old party stalwart and union leftie, ex British Leyland, who had quitted the party in disgust over Blair.

“Told my uncle he’d had enough,” said Eliot. “Couldn’t get a sheet o’ paper between any on ‘em, he reckoned. He used to be a councillor in the good old days, before Thatcher.”

Oh dear. Permit me a few more reflections on the rotten State of Earlstone. How typical of small

town Britain was it? There was no community, no solidarity, no optimism. These people lived in their bricked-up little worlds and looked on the surrounding streets as evil necessities to negotiate. On such apathy men like Hubbard thrived, maybe for some other reason than those published in their newsletters and election addresses. To beat Hubbard I would need not only to expose him as a sham but also to promise something new and exciting. As I walked further along the Brook and around the dismal, bare streets of the estate I began to see what it might be.

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“Flowers and *trees*? If it means spending money, they’ll crucify you. The Earlstone ratepayers are so mean -”

“- They’d close the schools.....I know.”

John Mitchell laughed to hear this interchange between Ron Kinder and me. Kinder seemed determined to be negative and I needed to persuade the meeting that my scheme was worth a try. I had practised my speech with Nicola but now it was entirely up to me.

“Look, there’s the junior school. Maybe we could get the kids involved planting out flowers - they could grow the seeds themselves. A real community project - ground-breaking, literally. There’s nothing but scrub there.”

My brainwave centred on the grass verge which separated the pathway from the brook. Why could it not be planted with bulbs, foxgloves, delphiniums, gladioli and a host of other beautiful perennials to bloom in succession from March until the autumn?

“The seed could be grown in classroom windowsills -we’re talking about a few quid.... with a rich harvest.”

For a moment, Ron looked stuck for words, but then returned to the nitty-gritty, the bottom line, enemy of all idealism, innovation and hope.

“And the trees. What about them? They don’t grow on trees.”

He blushed to realise what nonsense he had come out with, but I did not take advantage.

Walking along Stoneybrook and nearby roads it had struck me how bare and unattractive the grass verges looked. The area would be entirely different with blossom trees, cherry, horse chestnut and hawthorn. Stoneybrook could become an example for the rest of the town.

“The whole of Earlstone needs sprucing up. Square buildings need the edges taking off ‘em with leaves and branches. Can’t you imagine what a difference trees would make?”

Ron growled and cleared his throat. It sounded like the *bloody Green Party* to him.

“And then there’s the vandals. They’d snap ‘em in two soon as look at ‘em.”

“Ron, look,” I said. “Give it a chance. We need a new angle to get people’s attention.”

“New face, new angle,” said Eliot with a nod. “Worth a try.”

The intervention of his nephew seemed to take the wind out of Ron’s sails. He muttered something about how deep in some places the ditch was, and dangerous for school kids to be involved in planting - but, sensing I had nearly won the day, I reminded the meeting that teachers - even if the school could be persuaded to participate - would do their own risk assessment.

“Supervision wouldn’t be that difficult. We could help. Come on!”

“Come on? We’d all need to be CRB cleared – bloody ridiculous!”

John Mitchell intervened. “Let’s not get irate, Comrades. It’s by debate we get to see the creases which need to be ironed out.”

The election address looked impressive. Underneath the title SPOT THE DIFFERENCE, Eliot’s

partner, a wizzard with ICT, had created a view of the verge with stands of beautiful flowers, alongside one of the most litter-strewn and drab pictures we had taken. Two more photographs were used to illustrate what we called Hubbard's normal neglect of the pathway. Nicola had been the chief author and had not stinted on scathing adjectives to describe the mess. The text had been set around an unflattering and hilarious caricature of Hubbard, drawn by John Mitchell, based on his press photo, showing him scattering all sorts of rubbish. It was gutter politics, but no less than Hubbard deserved. If it raised his hackles and prompted him to have a go, I had Dave Osmond's tale up my sleeve. I would challenge him to a debate at The Lurcher!

*

Nicola had taken a call at the library. Bill Crane had been admitted to a hospice in Leicester and we ought to waste no time in getting over to see him. After much debate, we decided to take little Lizzie with us, with the proviso that if the circumstances proved distressing, one of us could withdraw with her.

Bill was a tawny colour - deceptively putting us in mind of someone who had benefited from an exotic holiday - because his liver was, as he himself put it, going rotten. Advanced heart disease meant that a transplant would not be possible, even if a healthy liver was available.

"They wouldn't want to waste one on an alcoholic like me, anyway!"

He was cheerful, serene and resigned to his imminent death. He cried to see our Lizzie and gave her and us his blessing.

"I don't have long. I'll soon be with Shirl. I really believe. Last week I was baptized here in bed. I'm ready now and just wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

Nicky began to weep and of course Lizzie soon joined in.

"Best you take her out, Nicky," he whispered. "Come back in a bit. There's summat I want to discuss with Mark."

As soon as they had gone, he clasped my hand and looked me earnestly in the eye.

"Years ago, when you were a teenager, we told you a white lie. Your dad, Jason Fulbright *did* get in touch. He phoned. Said he'd seen the advert in the Gazette."

"Why didn't you tell me??"

"Because it wasn't nice and it wasn't necessary. He'd been drinking and told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted nowt to do wi' you. Shan't quote you chapter and verse, but he said enough to leave us in no doubt what a swine he was..."

"Come on...give me something. I have a right."

He winced and asked if I was sure. I nodded.

"Alright. He said, leaving out all the effing and jeffing, that he didn't believe you were his. Called your mum a right tart."

I sat back and contemplated this new horror.

"If I were you, I'd be inclined to believe him. How could you have got your brains from a twerp like that? I've only told you this for one reason. I've been worrying that you might do the same as Nicky did wi' her mum - and track him down. Now you know he ain't worth it - and he might not even be your dad!"

After we had said our tearful goodbyes, and after we had driven home and left our fish and chips from the shop half-eaten, I sat in silence and gloom while Nicola read a story to Lizzie upstairs. Did Jason Fulbright have no redeeming features? I imagined talking to him, trying to get him to accept his shortcomings - almost began to write it all down to get it out of my system. I began to

think of excuses - putting the blame on his relative youth, his stupidity, his mind-altering addictions, his lack of education and his upbringing. I was so used to viewing people as victims of circumstances and as products of their social context, helpless and captive - indeed, it was part of my discipline, my training and my accrued wisdom so to do. But a base instinct and emotion was taking charge of me - hatred - and no appeasement or dilution was possible. Wherever, whatever he was now, years later, that selfish man still lurked beneath the persona he might be projecting to deceive the world. The thought of *where* returned to mind, jolting me out of my trance. Dad had said that Jason had seen the advert in the Gazette. The *Earlstone Gazette*! What were the chances he was still in the town or in the vicinity?

Within a fortnight Dad was dead. Not long after his cremation a phone call from a Coalville solicitor informed me that I was the sole beneficiary of his will and would receive the house and almost one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. This huge windfall would prove very useful in view of another family matter about to arise.

The Old House

The caller wanted to know what I would do, if elected, about the derelict house next to his. It had stood empty for years.

“And it’s getting worse. Damned eyesore.”

I told him I had never seen it - which allowed him to make the fair retort that I ought to know the ward properly if I was standing for the council. I apologized and went round.

The house stood in Farstock Rd at the very edge of the Stoneybrook ward. The door and frames had next to no paint on them and many generations of weeds and plants had grown up and withered away to sticks. But the house contained no Sleeping Beauty. Through the dingy glass I could make out bare floorboards and peeling wallpaper. The windows stared out, as if with glaucoma, through the wilderness at the road. The elderly man asked me, quite reasonably, how he could ever sell his own property when the time came.

“My wife has early Alzheimers. I have arthritis bad. We need sheltered accommodation. How would I get a fair price? I’ve written to that Hubbard and the council *times* but I get told it has nowt to do with them. It’s an empty property and the tax gets paid, as it should be by the owner. All legal - but what about my rights?”

Of course, I had no idea what the legal position was and promised to get back to the gentleman as soon as I could.

Ron Kinder knew about the house.

“If a place is empty and unfurnished it has six months tax relief. After that, the owner pays in full. The house has stood rotting away for years and nobody has a clue who owns it. I know somebody who works at the council. I could try and find out. It used to belong to an old lady. When she died it never went up for sale and it must have been one of her relative’s legacy - but God knows who. My wife’s friend worked for social services and used to call in and see to her. She had no children and no relatives went round to visit. Whoever inherited it left it to rot.”

“That makes no sense. Why not sell or rent it out?”

He shrugged. The solution, however, of the mystery was just around the corner and it brought me one step nearer to Jason Fulbright, genuine dad or not.

One morning in early April the Brook path was fenced off half way down and an alternative way through the cemetery - a railing had been removed - had been opened up. The reason was

immediately obvious and quite shocking. Further along, beyond the hedge which skirted the cemetery, the gravel pit behind a row of houses on Farstock Rd had been drained and the path bordering it had collapsed. As I stood staring in disbelief at the muddy mess in which dead fish were visible, a familiar voice behind me said "Bloody disgrace isn't it? The Joy brothers own it. The other morning they just went and pumped it out."

"Why?"

"Rumour is, they want to fill it in and build on it."

"Would they get permission?"

Dave Osmond rubbed his fingertips together and, winking, smiled his wry smile. Then he laughed. They had, he declared, dropped themselves *right in it*. The council would be chasing them for compensation for the damage to the footpath.

I peered more closely at the row of houses beyond the pit and realised that the one on which I was fixing particular attention - the tall monkey puzzle tree in that disgruntled neighbour's garden gave me the bearing - was the derelict house. Dave saw me looking hard and seemed to read my thoughts.

"Yep. They own the old house. The Joys. They brought the generator into the back garden, lifted a drain cover and pumped the water out of the pit. I wouldn't be surprised if some of those back gardens start slipping now. What morons!"

But, he added, it was a risk worth taking because there were millions at stake. The Joys owned the strips of land either side of the gravel pit as well. But I could not get my head around it. How could they build houses there without access? Dave shook his head in mock pity at my density.

"Why do you think they bought that dump of a house in the first place?"

"Ron Kinder told me it was inherited by relatives of the old lady."

"*Was*. Ron Kinder knows nowt. Big bag o' wind! I know Bill Joy from way back. Fancies himself as a great entrepreneur. Bought the pit from the anglers, charged 'em rent, promised they could stay there for as long as, then threw 'em off. He'd already bought the house. Been sitting on it all, waiting for a new housing boom. Well - boom! - the Tories are up to their old tricks again."

I still did not get it and my puzzlement made Dave burst out laughing. His dog did one and he got out a plastic bag. Still shaking his head at my naivety, he walked away in the other direction. Once home, I told Nicola the story. Stirring the stew she was making, deep in thought, and leaning back slightly in that captivating way of hers, she soon solved the riddle. I had already mentioned the eyesore which so annoyed the residents of Farstock Rd.

"Can't you see? How relieved would they all be if somebody moved in and put it straight? They must give the council hell complaining and asking for council tax reductions."

"And?"

"Well, years and years go by, nobody ever moves in - so what would be the second best solution - relief all round - council as well?"

Still I did not get it.

"Begins with D?...D...E?"

"Demolition?"

"Of course! House gone, everybody's happy - and - wait for it - the brothers have their access."

"But...that would mean...tearing up the pavement - interfering with the road. They would need council consent and all that..."

Instantly I saw Dave Osmond's fingers rubbing together - and then, as the scales completely fell from my eyes - I saw Colin Hubbard's fat face with a big smirk.

*

Cunning was not a card in my pack and I hesitated to follow in Osmond's sly footsteps. So it was with a rapidly beating heart that I dialled the number on the Liberal election leaflet, putting a hanky to my mouth.

"H-hello" I said with quavery voice. "Is that Mr Hubbard, the Stoneybrook councillor?"

"The very same. How can I help?"

The voice - suave and assured - did not really fit the head and body. I told him I was a local resident and was perturbed about the draining of the pit.

"It might make me rockery drop into the pit. It's our pride and joy. Our aubrietias."

He assured me that *appropriate* steps were being taken to inspect the *peripheral properties* and that those responsible were *subject to an investigation as to their responsibilities and liabilities*. He sounded very pleased with himself. He could not go into details, due to the matter being *sub rosa*.

"I had a quick look for myself," he continued "and it seemed to me that only the footpath was affected."

"But how can they just go ahead and drain a pit - without bothering about the fish and other creatures in it?"

Now he paused and I heard him sniff. He told me there was nothing to stop them - it was their property to dispose of as they saw fit. They might be subject to a civil action re *contingent disruption to property* but had done nothing illegal *per se*.

"So...only unethical?"

The word made him pause again and I had the impression he was reforming his image of me.

"True, the ethics are debatable, Mr?...."

"Crane."

".....But it is not a matter for me as a councillor to comment on over the phone, though I do have a view...."

"I suppose you've heard the rumour about a housing development?"

"Again, I cannot comment on that -"

I took the hanky away. "Supposing the rumour is true, are you broadly in favour or not?"

"It is not a personal matter. Any planning application would have to be judged strictly against objective planning criteria. Morality and opinion - personal and public - are not key factors."

"Are you on the planning committee, Mr Hubbard?"

He hesitated.

"Maybe a nice fat bribe might be a factor, eh?"

"That is a scandalous assertion. Is this you again, Osmond?"

"No. But you're quite warm."

I ended the call in a state of euphoria - which took less than a minute to evaporate. Powerful local forces were at work and a few flapping fish, plants and insects were of no consequence.

He had called me *Osmond*, which, the more I thought about it did strike me - I'll explain why in a minute - as odd. In the end, braving Dave Osmond's gruff cynicism, I went round to see him.

"Of course Hubbard's on Planning. The Libs have a majority at present - and his voice carries a lot of weight - like he does, haw haw! There's talk of him being the next candidate for the General. He knows the right backs to scratch, does his homework - and he knows which strings

to pull when it comes to getting his own way. He's a formidable opponent - he'll wipe the floor wi' you in May! Though I rather liked your election address. Different. Different from Eliot Kinder's usual tripe...and it doesn't help wi' him being gay...."

I thanked him for his compliment - luke warm though it was - but told him that the Brook and the pit were not the reasons for my visit. He laughed when I told him of my trick on the telephone.

"You're learning! Thought you were too wet behind the ears. Maybe I'm wrong."

Now I did blush. He offered me some whiskey to put in my tea - and though part of me resisted, I decided not to offend him. Soon my spine was pleasantly tingling. He insisted I called him Dave. I had decided he might prove a valuable ally. I asked him if he had given Hubbard his name when he had played his graffiti trick on him. He stroked his grey stubble and patted the dog at his feet.

"No. Why should I? I've not been involved in politics - as a candidate - since around 84, Thatcher's landslide. Hubbard would have been at junior school. Wouldn't have heard of me."

"So, how come he thought I was you? He called me Osmond."

He knitted his brows and shook his head. Then his eyes lit up.

"The damned letter! The letter I wrote to the Earlstone Gazette - I mean the Lib Rag! Well, blow me! Proof positive what a slimy man the editor is. He went and passed it on to our fat friend!"

*

"That...is...DISGUSTING!"

Nicky threw the paper - the rag in question - on the floor.

"He gets his ugly mug in the paper again."

Hubbard was pictured in a sharp suit handing over a cheque for money raised in a sponsored slim for the Air Ambulance appeal. He had lost a stone and more.

"Well, he's got enough left on him to fund another two ambulances, the fat bastard! I suppose Earlstone folk don't care about voting for an obese bloke, judging by the look of 'em. This is just more propaganda for him."

Nicola really lost it when she lost it. I said nothing.

The editor was unavailable to hear my complaint of favouritism. I was promised a call back but, of course, I never heard from him. Frustrated, I told John Mitchell of my concern. He sighed and said he was beginning to realise what a challenge Earlstone was for left-wingers. The Liberal taunt that Labour could not win there was ringing in his ears.

"Apathy and press partiality - lethal combination, Comrade."

I decided to look on the council website for planning applications but found nothing relating to the pit. In the end, I took a photo of the drained wasteland in order to make an issue of it in our final election leaflet, under the title *What is Going On?* - mentioning the rumour of housing development and challenging Hubbard to comment. I made our position clear - that brown field land should be built on first and that speculators should be penalised for sitting on derelict sites for years - to the detriment of residents who lived nearby, seeing their properties decline in value - while those anti-social owners lived at a leafy distance, biding their time until they could make a killing.

I was out with Eliot delivering those leaflets when the phone at home began to ring. Nicola took the calls.

"Mainly people worried about traffic congestion on the Farstock Rd. About construction and

lorries and such. Oh, one old-sounding lady rang, saying there are foxes and some rare amphibians at the pit.”

“Toads?”

“No. Newts. Said they’re a protected species.”

She had taken her number and I gave her a ring. What she told me had me dancing in the hallway. It was the great crested newt and it would be surviving - just about - in the shallow pools the Joys had left. She had contacted the Leicestershire Wildlife Trust and the Gazette. Wheels were in motion to slap an injunction on further disruption to the site. She said that whoever had drained the pit would have to fill it again. This time when I phoned the editor of the Gazette, saying that I had contacted the LWT, and demanded that he run the story in the next edition, he condescended - though he sounded disgruntled - to take my call. Sure enough, that Friday, the last before the election the impending injunction made the headlines - and the following Monday it was served.

That evening, a less assured version of Hubbard phoned me.

“I call that a low-down trick, if it was you who started the newt scare - as a little bird is telling me.”

“The newt scare!”

I laughed, he snorted.

“Why the hell couldn’t you and Mitchell keep your noses out? Labour is dead and buried in Earlstone. Like Lazarus. Haven’t you got better things to do? Eliot Kinder always fought fair...”

“And always lost.”

“Ha! You really think you can beat me? With a few crappy photos of graffiti and an insulting caricature? Think planting a few flowers will change the way Stoneybrookers vote? They trust us to do a good job. What planet are you on?”

He had worked himself into such a lather that he was spluttering. What had really made him so angry? The newts? He rambled on and on, repeating himself until he ran out of steam. I took a deep breath and asked him why he had lost his cool if we were no threat to him.

“Someone more cynical than me might conclude you have an ulterior motive to see the gravel pit developed.”

“Don’t you even dare think it! I’d sue you for every penny.”

Hubbard was basically a stupid man. Inadvertently he had revealed the truth to me, even though there was no proof and no way of finding any.

The Result

If, during that fateful Thursday, I encountered Hubbard at the polling station I studiously ignored him, but glancing in his direction odd times I noticed a repellant smirk which seemed designed for me. I am not at all a violent man - violence appalls me - but how pleased would I have been to see it wiped off his fat face? He seemed to be making sure that I saw how popular he was, loudly greeting and glad-handing his supporters, mainly the middle-aged and elderly, many clutching the Mail and the Express, as they came to make their marks. I sensed the election would be a walkover and told Eliot so. He reassured me - I had not reckoned with the late vote. Working people would come out after tea.

Nicola had been feeling very sick - she was pregnant with Alexander - and by evening felt so weak that that I could not go to the count in case Lizzie woke up. Just before eleven I had a call from Eliot who was unable to contain his excitement.

“We’ve demanded a recount. You should see his face! Like a wet Sunday.”

Half-an-hour later he phoned again. We had lost by seventeen votes, with the Tories nowhere. "Closest we've come for years. Well done."

At one in the morning the phone rang again. I stumbled downstairs.

"If you know what's good for you and your family, you'll keep your nose out of matters that don't concern you." Click.

The caller had of course withheld his number. The voice made me shudder. It was so cold and unfeeling that I felt sick. When Nicky drowsily asked me who it had been, I lied that it was a drunk congratulating me.

"God, you look as if you've seen a ghost."

Not many days later, just over two years after our "reunion", my brother Robert phoned me. He was ill and hard pushed to take care of himself any more. He was so heavy that he could hardly get upstairs and, unable to stand in the kitchen, was entirely reliant on pizza and curry deliveries. He turned out to have a serious chest infection and was admitted to hospital while sheltered accommodation was arranged. His house would realise some of the necessary capital and I decided to make up the shortfall and invest in the purchase of a flat for him. I lied about his age to the owners of the complex; after all, he did look more fifty than forty. I was left with the responsibility of clearing his house - a none too pleasant task as you might well imagine. Having collected a few things into cases and boxes, he gave me a free hand in disposing of everything else. I hired a skip to do it, not wishing to hire a firm, in case there was money secreted around the place which he had forgotten. It was a good job that I did, because this narrative would have ended many pages ago otherwise.

In a drawer which would hardly close for junk I found a black book, a lot longer than it was wide, which seemed to be no more mysterious than an accounts ledger, and in fact the first half of it turned out to be just that - a series of entries of addresses, dates, jobs and estimates. They mainly concerned drives, porches and extensions, and when those pages abruptly stopped - at the point where I assumed he had been obliged to make himself scarce - I laid the book flat on the table. It was a sultry June afternoon and the heat was encouraging all kinds of aromas to emerge from carpets and fabrics, so I had the window wide open. I was about to throw the ledger with other rubbish into a black bag when a maverick draught caught its pages and flicked them open to what looked like a journal. The date was much more recent and coincided more or less with my first visit. I saw immediately that the entry concerned me. The handwriting was neat and there were no misspellings; I soon realised that my half-brother was far more literate than could be inferred from his bluff vernacular and incomplete education.

Out of the blue you've been here. I didn't recognize you and I could see you found me pretty disappointing. I often thought I'd look you up one day, but in the end I decided too many years had passed. I feel guilty now for telling you about that bastard Jason. I could see it upset you more than you let on. I thank God you were too little to remember just how bad it was and I pray he never interfered with you like he did me. I wish I could go back and tell a teacher as they do these days. But I suppose I was scared nobody would believe me and scared of Jason. I still dream of that dog's head tattooed on his forearm, watching as his hand grabs me and makes me toss him off, the dirty pervert. What excuse could he have? He knew I'd never forget. You think I left for a better life, bro, but I never said that I'd seen him in the town. He never recognized me but how could I stay knowing he was around? He walked straight past me as if I was a total

stranger. For a second I thought I might be wrong but then I saw the tattoo. He was swigging ale from a can and laughing with his mate, effing an blinding dead loud; fatter than he used to be but with a new tattoo, a spider's web on his neck, with an ugly black spider in the middle, just like himself. How could a good God make such people? I'm glad you weren't so scarred by your childhood that you ended up a wreck like me. What might I made of myself in a proper home? If we were all loved as children, what might the world be like? Maybe we should start from scratch. But we can't. Thank God for beer and sleep.

That was the last sentence. I flicked through the rest of the pages and a yellowed press cutting fell out. It was dated 1981, from the Earlstone Gazette. **Earlstone Man Escapes Jail - Just** was the headline. It read - *Jason Paul Fulbright (23) was given a sentence of 18 months suspended for two years in the Magistrates Court after pleading guilty to breaking and entering factory premises. In spite of previous convictions, his assurances to "sort his life out" and get help for alcohol and drug addiction were accepted by the Bench. Presiding magistrate H.E. Hubbard said "Your guilty plea and willingness to give police a catalogue of your other offences is an encouraging start. We can only hope that the birth of your son will be, as you have told the court, the spur to mend your ways."*

The page was dated two months after my birth. There was no photo of him. I cursed the leniency and gullibility of the magistrate whose name suddenly leapt out at me. Hubbard. Was he related to Matthew? A call on Dave Osmond confirmed that he had been Hubbard's uncle and a leading light in the local Liberal party.

*

I tried to rationalise my resentment, but something more gripping and darker than reason had started to work on me. Nicola soon noticed I was brooding. I made something up about feeling a little low after the election and being more disappointed than I expected to be.

"Hubbard will have his way now for four years," I muttered "and can do as he pleases."

"No. We'll breathe down his podgy neck and keep -"

"Oh God! Who cares, Nicola? They're as happy as pigs in shit here. They make me sick, with their pointy little bungalows and narrow lives. They want the town to stay as it is and deserve to have it that way..... and I've got Robert to worry about."

It upset her to hear me speak like that. I reminded her of a cynic at work, she said.

"Look, Nicky. We've got money now. We'll move somewhere nice. I'm fed up of living in depressing places. Lizzie and the new baby deserve better. And so do you."

We left it hanging in the air and I tried to put on a more cheerful front, having gone too far in my attempt to delude her. The anger I was feeling had seeped out without warning. It was no good to keep telling myself that Fulbright did not matter and that he belonged to a landscape left long behind - for a new life with my lovely wife and child. To my astonishment, it dawned on me that I *was* scarred and was furious with Jason for using me as an excuse for escaping jail. And there were guilty feelings in me too - because by using me in court he had been allowed back home to abuse Robert and beat up Gina. He had lied to the court that I was dear to him when in fact he did not want to know me. His hypocrisy and callous indifference suddenly became an emblem for all the stupid cruelties of the world and all the degrading and nauseating selfishness I encountered in my professional life. Earlier on, I stated that this was not an account about social

work and family breakdown, but one case I was dealing with at that time had become so poignant and disgusting to me that it will serve not only to explain further my depression at that time, but to demonstrate how mean some parents can be towards their children.

The Sad Case Of Duane

Duane had been brought to our attention by his secondary school. He lived on a tough street in Allingworth and was apparently being neglected. His clothes were old and scruffy and he smelt. Other children avoided him. Sounds familiar? I asked for the case notes and made an appointment to speak to him, inviting Sadie Pook, the school nurse, to be present. Tearful and resentful for being called down, he was reluctant to answer our questions. He was, to be frank, not a handsome boy - round-headed, stubble-haired and fat in the cheeks. His skin was grey, his nose snub, his eyes tiny. Sadie was kind and skilled in coaxing stubborn children to speak, so eventually the following tale emerged from Duane's trembling lips. It was not a case of vicious child abuse - one of those shockers which grabs headlines - but a story of routine and systematic mental cruelty.

Duane was the first son of Mrs Chapman - not her real name - and her first partner. Their relationship had soon broken down and Partner One was replaced by Partner Two - the younger brother of Partner One. Convinced that Duane was the fruit of the affair which had already begun between Duane's mother and his brother, Partner One refused to pay a penny towards Duane's upkeep - which caused a rift between the brothers. Partner Two soon took out his resentment on Duane, his own nephew, unbelievably with the connivance of the mother. She went on to have another son and two daughters with Partner Two. These were treated entirely differently to Duane. He had to make do with fewer, cheaper clothes; he was given second-hand toys at Christmas while they had bikes; Duane went to Skegness with his auntie in the summer to a caravan while the others went to Spain. This discrimination was so thoroughgoing and so petty that it even extended into Duane's lunchbox; he was sent to school only with tiny sandwiches while they had cakes and chocolate biscuits as well.

When he had finished telling and was sobbing, I was trying very hard to keep a professional distance but when I glanced at Sadie and saw the tears welling up in her eyes it broke the dam in me. She hurried off Duane to his lesson and we just sat together with heads in hands.

"Well?" she managed at last to whisper. I shook my head. Compared to some on my files, Duane was being treated fairly well. Compared to me.

"So nothing can be done?"

I pulled myself together. I told her I would advise the Head to write a letter home to ask the mother to wash Duane's clothes regularly and to provide him with more substantial lunches.

"That much can be presented as a matter of objective observation, not coming from Duane. The rest.....I cannot advise the school to mention."

"Why?"

"That info could only come from him! The likelihood then would be that he would be made to pay for it. He wouldn't want it to get back home and make matters worse. I'm sorry. All we can hope is," I added as I pushed open the door "because he's nearly fourteen now, and because he can leave home soon, he might begin, with counselling, to put it behind him."

I went to go and stopped. "And the other thing we can hope is - and please don't repeat this as it is unprofessional - all we can hope is that Duane gets his own back somehow on those utter bastards."

That will more or less do, apart from saying that for every horrendous case there are a thousand more too trivially cruel for the papers to mention. The next time you hear a vulgar, tattooed mother scream threats at her infant in the supermarket, ask yourself: is she just a large child herself giving vent to her suppressed despair?

I'm sure you must have had similar thoughts.

I drove back to the office, front doors flashing past me, each one inviting me in, to envisage what damage might be being done behind them, by individuals whose neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances - even relatives - defined them as nice.

In my professional life I had heard of so many cases where children had survived shocking treatment, apparently unscathed, and had gone on to become well-adjusted adults. I counted myself amongst their ranks, due in no small part, beyond my natural resilience, to the loving care of Bill and Shirley. Perversely, lots of children "go wrong" after seeming to undergo a fraction of the traumas which others have shaken off. I began to wonder if I needed to requite in some way my natural resentment of Jason Fulbright, even on a small scale, as a child might draw satisfaction from seeing a bully suffer some humiliating event, such as a fall from a bike. Why had I expected to be unscarred? Robert, in spite of his protests, still suffered. How much of what he had become was the result of that? If I left these matters within me unresolved, what might be the repercussions? I had started wanting a drink.....what else might follow? I hate that American expression closure, but it kept speaking itself in my ear like an obsession.

After work one afternoon, I went to see Robert and found him crammed into an armchair drinking coffee and watching a quiz. He pointed into his mug and wryly told me he had turned over a new leaf.

"No fags for a month now - and only two tinnies a day. Only after six. You should see the bog. Grab-bars - and a thing which comes out and cleans your crease up. Paradise this."

I dared to lay a hand on his great arm and for a while he studied it before looking at me with watery eyes.

"Never had much of a childhood, did we, our kid?"

"No, Robert. Time to make up for it, I reckon." I glanced at my watch. "Quarter to six. You got a beer to spare? I can pop to the off-licence for you later."

His eyes lit up. He had a four-pack.

The lager tasted good. It had been years since I had had one. The second one removed the doubt I had about the ledger. I took it out of my briefcase and put it on his lap.

"Bloody hell. I forgot all about that. Did you read it? Course you did."

"It upset me but I'm glad I read it. I want to get back at him, Rob. Tell me all you know."

"What's the point?"

"The point is - he's out there. What's he up to now? He shouldn't get away unpunished. He used me as an excuse to escape jail. And then did all that to us all."

"Revenge.."

"No! Justice."

"Revenge! It'll eat into you like it did me."

"You said you weren't affected."

He did not reply, just stared at the wall as if scenes he had suppressed were alive again and flickering there.

"D'you know what gets me most, our kid? It's their lack of imagination. They can't feel what it feels like when we hurt. Take the Bulger killers. It never crossed their minds how the parents'd

grieve.”

“Classic psychopathic behaviour....”

“Suppose you did all that at college.....There’s some wine in the cupboard I was keeping for summat and nowt.”

I felt tempted but refused and, when he asked me to fetch it down, I reminded him off his resolution. His face looked so glum that it gave me an idea.

“Tell you what. I’ll pour you one half-glass when I go - as long as you tell me what I want to know. I do have a right to know. He’s my dad. And I have a funny feeling he’s not far away.”

He shook his head, but, eventually, as his lager tin was nearing emptiness, he decided to confess that he had not left the traveller site over a woman after all. (That story, might I add, had not in retrospect seemed very plausible, considering his physique). There had, in fact, been a fall-out between his friends and another gang of jobbing builders over a contract to build a brick stable block on a farm near Melton Mowbray. One member of the rival gang had drunk one too many and mentioned the job in a pub where Robert’s mate, propping up the bar, had pricked up his ears. Their gang, being short of work, had gone to the farmer the next morning and offered to do the job for a thousand less than he had been quoted.

“We were already digging the frigging foundations when they turned up. You can imagine the slanging match. In the end, Farmer Giles called the police and they bugged off. We thought that would be that.”

But it had not been that. A night or two later, as everybody was settling down to sleep, two cars had raced onto their site.

“All hell broke loose. Cars and vans smashed, men - and women - dragged out and beaten up. I was lucky - taking a piss in the bushes, so I hid. They had powerful torches to blind everybody - and one lit up the face of a bod I recognized. Guess who.”

“Jason....”

“The same. As soon as it quietened down, I loaded up me car and bugged off. No windscreen and it was freezing. But better than staying cos we were finished. Equipment nicked or trashed and the transit torched. No insurance, o’ course! I stayed with a mate in Deepford and then came to Bragwell. Jason Fulbright is basically a heavy for hire. He’d break your fingers for a pint. Now, see, it’s best to keep well out of his way. Yes?”

“Yes. Alright. Do you think he’s around?”

“Who knows?”

The next morning, the first thing I thought about was not Jason, not Robert, not my increasingly wearisome job, but - to my dismay - a drink. The second thing was the matter-of-fact voice which had casually threatened me in the night. Nicky had asked me at the time if I had seen a ghost. I began to have the feeling that I might have heard one

Turning Back A Leaf

“I just can’t believe you’ve started drinking - after everything you’ve seen!”

“Only with a meal. It relaxes me. Job’s hard at the minute.”

She picked up my half-eaten plate and scraped it clean. I told her I was going through a sticky patch with a particular case.

“Booze won’t solve it.”

“Please don’t nag, Nicky.”

“That’s what Shirley used to say to Bill in the kitchen when she thought I wasn’t listening.”

I screwed the cap back onto the wine but while she was upstairs bathing Lizzie, I splashed a little more into the glass. When things were right again, I would be okay, I told myself. And there was a lot to sort out.

After much thought, I decided to phone Colin Hubbard. His voice was all cold triumph when he realised it was me but I went straight to the point. I called him by his first name and told him to forget politics. There was a serious matter I wanted to discuss with him and asked if we could meet. It was not practical to go to his place as he lived with his mother. So we agreed to meet in a nearby pub that night.

While I waited for him, I examined the old photos of Earlstone framed on the wall. A primitive open car full of Tommies was turning a corner past jubilant flag-waving crowds. Another photo showed the busy High St at the turn of the last century, with crowds of thin people looking frightened and enchanted by the camera. What would those excited eyes, long extinct, make of the half-boarded up town centre now?

Hubbard came in, bought a drink and we sat down in a corner. He looked at me and opened his palms in invitation for me to begin. I went straight to the point.

“Who did you tell that I was involved with that newt business?”

“Newts? Nobody.”

“Well, who told you I was? Not the old lady. Come on. I need to know.”

Her studied his orange juice and tried to think of a way out.

“Matthew, this is serious. I had a very nasty phone call the day after you started ranting and raving. I should have gone to the police. I still might.”

“Are you threatening me?”

I sensed he was looking for an excuse to get up and walk out.

“Look...I’m old enough to realise that backs get scratched in politics. As long as people don’t get too greedy. It’s oil for the works.”

“You’re accusing me of bribery again.”

He stood up and drained his glass. I took his arm and said I knew he was the editor’s school chum.

“Fair enough. We all need friends nicely placed. I’ll beat you next time - but that’s another story.

How friendly are you with the Joy brothers?”

Looking around at the other drinkers he sat back down. No-one appeared to have heard my question, but now he whispered.

“Friendly? Not at all. The one called Bill is a Stoneybrook resident and asked me for advice on putting in a planning application. Full stop.”

“So, are you saying they jumped the gun?”

“It could be put that way.”

“So, your only role was to give advice?”

“As I would to any Stoneybrook resident,” he replied, assuming the saintliest of airs. “It’s part of being a councillor...not that you would know.”

“All honest and above board.”

“Ab-so-lutely.”

“And have you ever heard the name - or come across Jason Fulbright?”

He wrinkled his forehead and looked mystified, convincing me this time he was telling the truth. He asked me in what capacity he might be involved.

“He might have an interest in the development of the pit.”

“There is no development...”

“If there is...you might call him a security provider. He smoothes the way and makes things happen.”

“A facilitator?”

“Spot on.”

“Well, what’s he got to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing - yet. Did you mention my name to the Joys? Did you give them my number?”

He laughed. He pointed out that my number was printed on a thousand election leaflets.

“Well someone told someone else I was behind the newts.”

“You were!”

“Only partly. There probably aren’t any - unless Mrs Price put them there. But she’s more bothered about the foxes.”

“Foxes? What are you talking about? I’ve got better things to do -”

“Whoever the Joys contacted threatened my wife and child. And I won’t have that... Hubbard.”

“You must be drunk!”

My temper had got the better of me. But at least he knew now I knew of his involvement. He got up and sneered at me.

“This is all bullshit. You’re a bad loser.”

He turned to go. I could not prevent myself saying the next thing.

“The man I mentioned. Years ago, your uncle let him off prison and he went on to abuse his partner’s son.”

“What? How dare you!”

“Oh, I dare! Just tell your friends to tell their friend that I might know who he is!”

It was just a wild guess, of course, based on nothing more than intuition. I realised when I got home to a cold, dark house that I had gone too far. I had had a warning and should have heeded it.

Nicola was becoming more and more concerned by my withdrawal into my own thoughts - and my increasing alcohol consumption. The temptation to explain everything was strong but I did not wish to alarm her. She knew something of my early childhood but little of Jason’s role in it. I caught myself almost wishing that we had not been re-united - at least under present circumstances. After Robert’s revelation about the traveller site I had to take seriously the threat to my family - if my intuition was correct - and could not now dismiss it, as I had done at the time, as a gangster movie-style piece of bluff.

I was tempted to follow my rational inclination to abandon any interest in the pit. If the locals did not bother about the despoiling of an area of wilderness within such a derelict town, why should I bother? And corruption? How many councillors nationwide had a little finger in the honey pot? And I would have turned a blind eye, had it not been for a chance event after a visit to my mother’s grave, a visit long overdue.

I knew that Gina was buried in Earlstone cemetery, the very one which the brook trickled by. Those two identical buildings I mentioned earlier - like tiny cottages - at the entrance on Farstock Rd were part of my dreamscape. One foggy morning in early January, my foster carers had taken me, at my insistence, to the short funeral service in the left-hand cottage, the chapel. From there I had gone to stand shivering and weeping with only Aunt Gail - Gina’s elder sister - and Gail’s impatient and pinched partner at the graveside. In a moment of weakness, as we walked away, I

almost asked her to take me in, but the grim, blood-drained face of that man stopped the words. I never saw Gail again and have no interest in her - as she had - and has - none in me.

Anyway, back to the present. I took a day's leave owing to me and strolled along the cemetery path which joins Brook and wondered in which plot Gina might be buried. I could only remember walking a short distance behind the pall-bearers from the chapel. I had never been to her grave since that day. The building opposite the chapel, its twin, was the record office. I pushed open the creaking door and greeted the elderly volunteer who was only too pleased to help me. He studied me quizzically.

"Aren't you the chap who stood here for Labour in May?"

"Yes. Mark Crane. I'm looking for Gina Bedford. My birth mother."

He tapped in the name and the date I gave him, and eventually printed out a map on which he made a mark with a highlighter pen.

"Area D, row M, grave 31"

He passed the paper over, saying shyly he had voted for me on the strength of my project to plant flowers and trees.

"I'm a Communist, would you believe, but I liked the idea. Too many things just happen here without public involvement....in fact, I've never known a place where people are so uninvolved. You know, I left a black bag of rubbish in the jitty once on purpose. It was still sitting there a week later."

He sounded like a Southerner.

"And take the pit-draining lark. I tried to get a petition up when I found out - by accident - what it was all about. You'd have thought I was pedalling poison."

"Well, the newts have put a stop to it."

"Not for much longer, I reckon. Saw two blokes with nets from our window earlier - I live just along from here. They were looking mystified ...I reckon the newts are a bit of a red herring. But a few amphibians aren't going to stand in the way of certain reptilians filling their big boots. Corruption in Britain is pretty discrete. It's something we're too polite to discuss."

"You live near the derelict house?"

"A few doors away. Take a look later. Interesting developments."

I thanked him and left to begin my search of the graveyard. It took a while to find her. There was no stone - just a dull metallic urn and I had to get on my knees to read the faint inscription. Gina Bedford - 18.03.57 - 19.12.93 R.I.P.

A depressing short-hand for a wasted life. There were no withered stems in the urn. Her death, like her life had never seen flowers. It was strange, but until that moment, I had never given any thought about what factors and experiences had created Gina. Once upon a time, she must have been, like Lizzie, a happy little girl.....

And she and Jason must have felt something for each other in order to make me. What had made everything turn so sour? Just alcohol and drugs? A client - a very intelligent young woman who had unexpectedly become an alcoholic at university - had once told me that beyond the illness, the guilt and the squalor she endured, it was the lack of hope and purpose in her life which made her the most depressed.

"Did you feel the same way.....Mum?" I whispered.

I put in the few poppies I had picked from the grass verge and stood up, my eyes burning with angry tears. I took photographs of the grave to show Nicola. Looking around, I was struck by how well the cemetery reflected our unequal existence; the graves ranged from the grandiose, topped with praying angels, to the bare oblongs of grass covering those so poor that they were

denied even a vase. I wondered how many of their occupants, had they still a voice, would claim to have had a good life, and imagined the army of demons with which they had had to do battle. Here were thousands of stories, like Gina's, forever beyond the telling.

There was a high laurel hedge away to my left and from that direction I could hear thuds echoing - as noises do for some reason on still, sunny days. Through the branches I caught sight of two men in waders leaving the squelchy pit bottom, and move with difficulty towards the back gardens. A row of trees and bushes obscured my view of the houses. The thudding had grown louder and I realised that it was coming from two hammers, swung a second or two apart from each other and just occasionally in unison.

It suddenly struck me, surveying the depth of the near-empty pit, what a time-consuming task it would be to fill it in, and that the disruption to the local roads and residents as lorries came and went would be enormous. Surely that alone would be enough to make councillors, worried about their electoral support, consider refusing permission? But there was the potential for twenty to thirty good houses, valuing the land at many millions. The scope for kickbacks might well be worth the loss of a few votes - and even a seat.

I thanked the man in the records office and made my way down the hill. The old house had been imprisoned in scaffolding and two men were throwing slates and bricks down a chute and another was loading them into skips. Stacked next to them, by the fallen front garden fence were sections of metal fencing awaiting erection and a red sign declared that demolition was in progress - KEEP OUT. A large white van had parked half on the pavement and two other men were carrying out more sections to erect. Passing the van, I read on the side BULLDOG BUILDING SECURITY & DEMOL. There was a picture of a snarling dog and the name Jay Paul.

I had turned the corner at the bottom of the hill and was walking towards the entrance of Brook when three words I had read in the press cutting from Robert's ledger lit up in my head like neon and brought me to an abrupt halt. Jason Paul Fulbright. Jay Paul??

I hurried back to the junction with Farstock Road just in time to see the white van drive past. I kept repeating the landline number I had managed to see until it glowed like a brand in my mind.

When I returned home Lizzie was playing with her shapes on the carpet while Nicola sat in an armchair staring oddly at nothing. She was so pale I thought she was ill. In a faint voice she told me to look in the kitchen. On the table was a brown box and next to it a naked pink dolly with a knife stuck into the crotch up to the hilt. On the belly was written BACK OFF in red felt tip pen. My first impulse was to take it to the police but Nicola did not want me to.

"Back off from what, Mark?"

"It's the pit. Somebody thinks I'm behind the newt story."

"Well, you did phone the Gazette. Are you going to do anything else - *now* - to put us all in danger?"

"I've done nothing! It's that fat creep behind this."

Telling her to lock up, I went round to Hubbard's house and was told by his mother that he had gone out to County Hall for the day.

The silences Nicola span, and her occasional calm and wry observations, were always far worse than her temper. Eventually she put down her book, looked at me and said very slowly.

"I'm going to Allingworth to stay with Mum tomorrow morning."

“I’ll get my stuff together.”

“I don’t want you to. You’re making Lizzie upset. She keeps saying - Daddy poorly. Even she can see you’re not right. Sort yourself out, get whatever is bugging you out of your system and then we’ll see.”

“See what?”

“Whether you can put us and our safety before this pointless campaign of yours. Whether we can get back to where we were. When you’ve finished your bottle can you put it in the recycling? I’m going up to read now.”

She clicked the door very quietly to and left me staring at the wine bottle which was half full. I sat paralysed for an age before going into the kitchen to look at the doll again. Unscrewing the cap on the bottle, I poured the rest of the wine down the sink and went upstairs. Half-way up, the bar of light under her door turned black.

The lounge door let in the sun from the kitchen and woke me. She said she was going. Before I could roll off the settee the front door had closed. I hopped outside trying to put on my jeans – just in time to see her car reversing onto the road. Lizzie was a blur in the back and Nicola was concentrating so hard that she could wave only the briefest of goodbyes as she drove away. And they were gone, just another element in the queue for the lights. She blinked and turned the corner.

Under the bottle I had left by the sink she had slid a note.

When you want us more than this, give me a call x

Cursing myself for such a stupid error, I grabbed the bottle and threw it in the bin.

I took a photo of the doll, put it in the box and found some brown paper. I called in sick and made a pot of tea. The number on the side of the van was stored on my phone. At gone nine, putting on my wheezy old voice I rang it and was answered by a cheery female.

“Bulldog Demol - Joanne speaking. If you want Jay, I can give you his mobile number.”

“It’s okay. I’m planning to demolish an old workshop on my property and I’d like to come out to discuss price. I’m a bit deaf and I’d rather not do business over the phone.”

“We could come out to you.”

“No. I’d rather come to you, if you don’t mind.”

I wrote the address she gave me on the parcel and took it to the sub-post office. If I was wrong, a baffled Jay Paul would have something very bizarre to talk about in the pub. If I was right, I had better move out. We had already given our landlord notice to quit, having had a bid accepted on a house in a village near Allingworth. I took a snap decision and phoned him to say we were having so much trouble with local youths that we were leaving earlier than planned.

“You can have vacant possession by tonight. We’ve had enough.”

“Phone the police!”

“No point. We’ll leave the keys under the slab. You’ve had your rent in full.”

The van hire firm in Fairley had one to spare and Eliot helped me to load our stuff and put it in store. By the late afternoon the house was empty. I phoned Nicky to tell her what I had done.

“I’ll be safe. Moving in with Rob for a few days till things are sorted.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“I’m going to take that smirk of Hubbard’s face and sort out the guy who threatened us. Don’t

worry. There will be no violence, no danger to me. I guarantee it.”

“Why can’t you just…….leave it?” she sobbed.

“It’s been eating away at me. That’s what’s been wrong. It goes back a long, long way.”

Now she was crying softly. It was a good sign. I told her that I had poured the wine away and not drunk it.

“In a few days time we can get on with our lives again. Then I’ll tell you all about it. I promise.”

I knocked on my brother’s door and he agreed I could have his sofa, as long as I cooked him his favourite.

“Mixed grill. The works. Steak, liver, pork chop, gammon, sausage, eggs and all the trimmings.”

“Part of your calorie-controlled diet?”

“Bollocks. Starving to death on the healthy meals I get delivered here.”

I drove around to the supermarket and bought all we needed, plus a bottle of red wine - and orange juice.

The next morning my irate ex-landlord phoned me to say that the downstairs windows had been broken in the house.

“You should have told the police about the harassment.”

“I told *you*! Why didn’t *you* phone the police? It’s your house!”

“I’ll take it out of your bond.”

“I’ll see you in court!”

Having photographed the damage to the windows, I phoned Colin Hubbard.

“I’m giving you one last chance.”

“To do what?”

“To get your fat chops out of the Joys’ trough. They are crooks. Have you heard of Jay Paul?”

He forced a laugh and told me I was delusional. His forced laugh gave him away.

“Well, this will be the end of your political career, Matthew, inconsequential though it is. Don’t say you haven’t been warned.”

Jason’s men were chiselling away bricks from an exposed upper window frame when I rolled up. I took photos of the van and of the half-demolished house. One man stopped to look, pulled down his face mask and asked me what my business was.

“I want to have a word with your boss, Jason Fulbright.”

“Who?”

”You mean Jay,” said the other. “He’s round the back.”

He leant around the corner of the building and shouted him. My heart was racing. The last time I had seen him I was a toddler without a memory.

Finally he appeared. He had a sweat-stained red vest on and his round head was bald. I could see dark tattoos on his neck and meaty right forearm. His mate muttered something in his ear which startled him. I assumed he had been told his real name. He slid down the ladder like a circus performer, puffed out his chest and strode towards me. He was exactly my height.

“You’re trespassing, pal.”

“Not here I’m not, on the pavement……*Jason*.”

“I’m Jay Paul.”

“Maybe. You *were* Jason Paul Fulbright.”

“Are you a fucking reporter? Police??”

His eyes flashed with anger, his temples pulsed with blood. Of course, he was very tempted to hit

me, but with the cards I was holding, I was not afraid. Besides, there were witnesses, passers-by. I smiled and looked straight into his very pale, ice blue eyes. My eyes.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Can’t you guess?”

His eyes studied me and then looked up to the right as he consulted, no doubt, a picture gallery of the victims of his skullduggery. He rubbed the grey stubble on his chin with his dusty fingers and his callous eyes fell on me again.

“Never clapped eyes on you, pal.”

“Sure?”

I showed him the picture of the doll on my phone. He blushed just a little while a faint smile flickered around those eyes. He shrugged and shook his head.

“No? What about this one then?”

I flicked the screen across and the broken windows appeared. He thought about maintaining his display of innocence, but could not help smirking at his cleverness. He laid a friendly paw on my shoulder, as if encouraging me to appreciate the joke. He came close and whispered that he was glad I’d got the message.

“Loud and clear. What about this one?”

I waved my finger like a wand across the screen and the funeral urn with the poppies appeared.

“Hey? You got me there, pal. Can I phone a friend?”

“Spot the difference, Jason.”

The next photo showed the bare urn, in close-up, with the name GINA BEDFORD distinctly visible. He bent forward to read it, made a strange noise and staggered backwards, falling over one of the fencing poles. Those eyes, so confident, had filled with terror.

“No more guesses?”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Life is full of surprises...isn’t it.....Dad?”

He tried to move but some invisible force had him in its grip. I took a photo of him, turned and jogged away. Fear of the next moment had put me to flight. I did not stop until I was by the brook. A while later, my mobile rang with a number I did not recognize. Assuming it was him, I blocked the number.

I showed the photo to Rob and he shrank back in fear too. After a while of staring, he asked if I had hit him, and seemed disappointed when I shook my head.

“There was no need to. The shock was enough.”

He said he liked my style, and wanted to know, what next. I decided to tell him the whole story about the pit and how Jason fitted in. When I mentioned the stabbed doll he became angrier than I had ever seen him. Robert had seen Lizzie and Nicola a few times since his move and they had done his frazzled old soul a power of good, even though he would rather die than admit it. If I knew the address - he said - we could burn him out like he had him and his mates. I winced.

“Well, at least do his van! We could get our own back.”

The naked hatred in his face was repulsive. It has always struck me as odd that the fury and desire for retribution I felt after some disgusting crime appalled me when it spewed from the mouths of other people. It was drilled into us in social care to beware of nurturing judgmental attitudes. Now, to my dismay, after the triumph of the morning, an irritating part of me felt almost sorry for Jason Fulbright in his downfall..... I became aware that Robert was looking at me very darkly.

“But we *could!* What’s the bloody matter with you?”

I looked at his heaving belly and his eyes followed my eyes down.

“Well, *you* could. And *one* phone call from me to a certain nutcase who lost out to the bastard -”

“Robert, Robert..... we descend to his level. You could go to the police and report him for abusing you. They would be bound to investigate after Savile and all that.”

“Not a chance!” He gazed at his gut and shook it with both hands. “His word against mine - and after all this time? I’d be laughed out of court, fat git.”

He refilled his wine glass and this time did not pause to offer me any.

“So, what’s to be done then? What’s the plan?”

“It’s a completely legal one - if not entirely ethical.”

*

I phoned Eliot and asked him if he fancied doing a little leafleting. But he could not see the point if Hubbard’s rule had four years to run.

“I don’t think so, Eliot. I reckon you’ll be councillor within a month or two.”

“Me? What about you?”

“I’ve decided to retire from politics - to spend more time with my family. Can I come round and show you the leaflet I’ve drafted?”

“This is slander! I mean libel,” he exclaimed in a fizz of excitement.

“Maybe, maybe not. But who does he sue?”

There was no publisher, no names, only a series of photos, beginning with Hubbard and ending with the gravel pit, stitched together with text.

WHAT’S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HIM (*Hubbard*) HIM (*Jason + van*) THE JOY BROTHERS, THIS THREAT (*the doll*) THIS DAMAGE (*the broken windows*) THIS HOUSE (*the derelict one*) AND THIS GRAVEL PIT?

COUNCILLOR HUBBARD ADMITS GIVING PLANNING ADVICE TO THE OWNERS OF THE LAND, THE JOYS, ABOUT BUILDING HOUSES THERE. WHAT WERE HIS MOTIVES?

When we had finished leafleting the houses we handed the rest out in the High St, keeping one back to stick into the letter box of the Gazette.

Within days, work stopped on the demolition site and the fences were removed. Concerned about hazards to children, the council fenced it off and sent the bill to the Joys. (Not many months afterwards, the whole area would be compulsorily purchased, the pit refilled and the garden grassed over.) Hubbard, citing personal reasons, tendered his resignation, but Dave Osmond had it on good authority that the Liberal group had cut him loose as an electoral liability. After an intense bye-election campaign, Eliot managed to squeeze in by fifty odd votes - the first Labour councillor in Earlstone in a generation.

Remember John Mitchell? I never saw him again, and only had two more contacts with him - by phone. The first time, he was so excited by the result that he actually gabbled as he congratulated me on a thoroughly dastardly piece of work. Oh, and the foxy newt lady phoned too. When I plucked up the nerve to ask if there really had been any great crested newts in the pit, she cleared

her throat and put the phone down.

But far and away most delighted were Nicky and Lizzie when I walked down the drive with a bunch of flowers, a new teddy bear - and best of all - a huge smile. That evening I decided to tell Nicola all about my problems in Earlstone with Jason and how I had resolved them.

But what of Jason? And what of my resentment? To thwart his plans had brought me and Robert a grim satisfaction. Revenge *does* require a basic need and there is no point in getting all preachy about "being above that sort of thing."

Well, I assumed I had seen the back of him. Being in no doubt that he had at some point served time, I concluded that he would think it wise to steer well clear of that area of the county in case a persistent officer on the local force wanted to delve a little deeper into those events. With these and other consoling thoughts, I drew a line over the past, for I had no inclination to seek any kind of reconciliation. Moving to Allingworth where - so far I knew - he had no interests, eased my worries that he would be able to get his revenge. I meant to keep a low profile for the sake of the family. My one niggling worry was that my profession had been mentioned in that election address. But only a determined and resourceful effort would trace me to Allingworth. As time ticked on and that summer faded, the conviction grew in me that I had escaped that mucky past of mine for ever.

Our New Life

A year went by and I realised I had never been happier. Lizzie at three was a beautiful clever little girl whose laughter and curly blonde hair turned heads. I was promoted to be head of department and we were rated excellent by inspectors. The house we had bought was our Eden and I found a new passion in turning the derelict garden bequeathed to us by the old lady owner into a rich and tidy provider of all kinds of vegetables. At the bottom of the garden, beyond a hedge of hawthorn and brambles, there ran a brook, a proper one, with reeds like green flowing hair, with copper stones where tiny fish hid and darted. One day, to my amazement, I spotted fresh water prawns in there and I showed them to Lizzie. She squatted down and studied them saying *oh* beneath her breath as she did with any new discovery, causing me to delete any thought of frying them in garlic and butter. In the hedges there were immense blackberries and she took delight and pride in carrying them to her mum. She helped to make delicious puddings with them, adding raspberries planted the autumn before to the mix.

Apart from the odd glass of wine on Sundays, alcohol had vanished from my life and thoughts. I felt truly free. Politics? Joining the local Labour party seemed the right thing to do but I was not active. Sometimes Eliot phoned to update me on the progress made with our planting ideas. The local school had grown flowers and Brook was slowly being transformed by volunteers. Saplings planted as a trial on the verges of one road had not been snapped as his uncle had predicted.

"And the gravel pit looks great," he said. "We've had benches put in and a proper access. My partner swears he saw a kingfisher there the other day."

I promised him I would come over and look, but never seemed to find the time.

Nicola's mother was only too pleased to look after little Alexander, allowing her to continue working part time at the library, while Lizzie attended nursery. We had sworn a solemn oath to dedicate ourselves to providing for our kids an experience which had been denied to us. Nicola's childhood had been less harrowing than mine; she had been taken into care at five when her mother, unexpectedly deserted, and already suffering from depressive illness, had become too despairing to care for anybody. She had been one of Shirley and Bill's first foster children.

One spring morning, John Mitchell phoned me for the second - and final - time to tell me that his instincts had been right.

“I was spot on about a leaker. Remember? A fellow defected from the Libs to join us and named one of our recruits as a mole - sorry to sound like Le Carré. Is there no gutter too low for some people to crawl into? Remember that quiet fellow called Wainde - sat at the back and didn't say much? Well, we produced our new member and as soon as he saw him, Wainde got up and left.” This put my thoughts into turmoil. He had obviously fed Hubbard key information. Would he now exact some kind of revenge and supply other personal details about me to his more unscrupulous associates?

It seemed like a terrible prophecy fulfilled when, one Saturday in April, I happened to see Jason's van parked outside a news agent's in Allingworth High St. The sign-writer had done a fresh job on it and I was shocked to read the wordsof **Kildingthorpe**. This was a village not ten miles distant from our own paradise.

The passenger seat was occupied by a young man in a baseball cap studying a mobile phone. I stood behind a tree until Jason emerged, throwing the cellophane from a pack of fags onto the pavement, jumped into the van and roared away. I made a note of a website which had been added to the side of the van and considered my options. Perhaps this was a one-off visit to the town. What were the chances our paths would cross again? Would he recognize me after such a brief encounter that day in Farstock Rd? Maybe I should trust to good luck and forget him.

But I couldn't. Nicola saw straightaway when I came home that I was troubled. There was no point pretending - I told her what had happened. At first, she tried to downplay it. I was his own flesh and blood, when all said and done. And would he really risk everything for revenge? I reminded her - gently - that he had doubted I was his son, and had rejected me - and that my intervention in Earlstone had cost him thousands of pounds.

“And do you imagine the doll was the work of a reasonable, compassionate man?”

She began to show signs of anger and despair. This had all come about because I could not let matters rest.

“If you hadn't stuck your nose in - the noble crusader for justice and....and righteousness..... he would not have a clue about you! He would have passed you in the street and never blinked an eye.”

“Please understand Nicky...I only meant to throw a spanner in his works. It was just.....”

“It was immature and risky! Now look what's happened! We'll have to move. And I love it here.”

“I was somehow drawn to him. A force I couldn't resist.”

“Bullshit!”

I reminded her that she had not been able to rest until she had found and been reconciled with her mother but she bridled at this. She had been motivated by love and forgiveness - me by hatred. I retorted she had no right to sit in judgment of me.

“My mother killed herself more or less - and my dad is a brute. How does that make me feel?”

“Terrible - but you can't keep brooding on it. We are the future.”

“I'm not brooding. It keeps following me. Don't you think I want to shake it off?”

She was silent for a while, thinking the situation over. Finally she made her surprise proposal.

“He is bound to have a good side. You have to arrange to meet him and set matters straight. You

have his mobile number and email address.”

“Only when hell freezes over! He’s a paedophile and a thug. Have you completely forgotten the windows and the doll?”

“Sooner or later there has to be reconciliation - think of Ireland and South Africa. Does there really *have* to be a bloody good war first?? Do the men fighting in Syria stop to ask the women and kids what they want? This is primitive and pathetic. You of all people - whose job it is to mediate between warring relatives! I could have gone on resenting my mum for ever – but now look at how well we get on – and how she and Lizzie love each other.”

“But your mum was ill with depression. It was easy to forgive!”

“But Jason was ill too – an alcoholic and junkie.”

“He was an abuser.”

“How was he treated by his own dad?”

“Oh come on! You’ll be excusing Hitler next because his stepfather beat him up. And no doubt he got abused as well. How far back do you want to go?”

“Whatever Jason did, whatever he threatened, you have to remember something much more important. The rest of our lives. Do you want to seal the past – or keep letting it run on like a sewer into the present?”

And she was gone - upstairs, leaving me more miserable than I had felt for a long time. But part of me knew she was right.

When I woke up in the spare room the house was silent. I looked on the drive. Her car was gone. My spirits, already low, sank. Thinking that she had gone off to her mother’s, I drove over to Allingworth after breakfast but she had not been there. Her phone was switched off. Her mother Allison, who had grown to like me after an uncertain start, could not think where she might be - unless she had gone shopping. She studied my face and smiled.

“That temper of hers! You want to be careful what you say.”

I drove home expecting to cross her path at every moment. A blue car had finished up in a hedge that rainy morning and for an instant I thought it was hers. Since the birth of Lizzie I had developed a morbid fear of disaster, persuaded that Fate, having not meddled with us for so long, would impose a tax sooner or later on our good fortune. And Jason had come to personify that fate.

It was nearly midday when she struggled out of the car with Alex and Lizzie. I ran through the rain to help her. To my relief she was smiling, in fact she seemed pretty pleased with herself.

“It’s all sorted,” she declared. Lizzie came trotting behind her with twenty pounds in her hand. I asked her if Grandma had given her that, and she said - *no, Granddad*. In bewilderment I stared at Nicola as she hotched little Alex higher to get a better hold of him.

“Jason gave it to her.”

She had memorised the email address which I had copied down, and sent him a message the previous evening. She had told him who she was and suggested a meeting.

“At first he was hostile - but when I asked if he wanted to see his grandchildren he softened.”

“But he wouldn’t accept me as his son!”

“No, you’re wrong. He told me he could see you were his - even before you told him and he hit the deck. He tried to phone you but you blocked his number. He’s a scary looking man but when he saw Lizzie he melted. I told him you were scared of him and he couldn’t help it - he cried. His partner, Joanne, is lovely - fat and jolly. In the end we all finished up in tears. If you look, he

should have sent you an email by now.”

Dear Mark,

This is bloody hard for me. I tried to phone you last year to say sorry, but you blocked me. I admit, I've done some very bad things in my life and I'm ashamed. I was young and stupid and we lived like pigs. My own dad knocked me about and that was all I knew. I swear to you that the doll was just a threat - I would never have hurt a child. I'm sorry about that and the phone call - it was business and you were giving us grief. And I didn't know who you were.

I left Gina because I found out she was seeing somebody else - and that's why I doubted you were mine. But your eyes that morning told me you had to be. Can you believe that was one of the biggest reliefs of my life? That's why I fell over.

I'm no angel - in fact I've been a bastard most of my life - but since I met Joanne I've changed. Meeting Nicola and your kids - my family - was just brilliant.

If you freeze me out, I'll understand. But maybe in time we can put a few things right.

Dad.

Instantly I replied

Did you hit Gina and sexually abuse Robert? Did you abuse me?

It took a long time but eventually he came back.

*Gina hit me - I hit her. We were junkies. To talk about Robert is too painful for me here. I did **not** abuse you. Can we meet to talk things over in private? There are things I need to tell you about my childhood. In Kildingthorpe there's a family pub. Can we get together tomorrow for lunch? There's a river where me and you can walk on our own afterwards. I promise to be honest. Say 12 30?*

Nicola was peering over my shoulder, following our conversation. While I hesitated, quick as a flash she tapped in OK and pressed SEND.

Lizzie interrupted us, saying she wanted to show us something.

“Quick before it's gone.”

We followed her out into the garden and down to the brook. The rain had stopped and the warm sun was turning all the drops in the hedgerow into jewels.

“Look, Daddy. Wozzat?”

I knelt down to her level and kissed her.

“It's a butterfly, Lizzie. It's just hatched out and drying its wings. It's called a peacock.”

“A peacock! P e a - cock....Oh, it's so....*beautiful*.”

