

**Warning:** People with right-wing views are advised that this book may cause extreme irritation and might even be transformative of their stupid, nasty outlook on life. And if you cannot believe that I have been born with exceptional powers, best to look away now and pick up your Daily Express.

I wanted to call this tale **Persuasion**, and am annoyed that J Austen beat me to it. Had I a time machine at my disposal, I would go back and persuade her to change it.....

## THE HYPNOTIST

1.

One of my earliest memories is of kneeling, evenings, at the foot of my bed reciting a prayer which my mother had taught me.

“Say your prayers, Robert, and God will look after you.”

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild  
Look upon a alittle child  
Pity my simplicity  
Suffer me to come to thee.

Tucked up, warm and snug, I would drop off blissfully unaware of the real state of the world. Just when it began to dawn on me – it might have been when spiteful Spicer hit me in the park; or it might have been a radio report of a hanging; or the persistence of my mother’s sadness – just when and how it crept upon me that the world was a dangerous and uncomfortable place – and that there was death - I cannot pin down.

When I see infants playing joyfully I do not envy their parents having to puncture their illusions with warnings of strangers, traffic, bullies and all the rest. Is it the abandonment of the nursery, their certain and cosy Eden, which causes depression, distrust and moroseness in the young – a malaise which tracks us, shadowlike, all through life? That persistent feeling that beyond the veil of beauty, calm and content monsters always lurk. For most in the world, there never was much of a veil.....

I had reached the age of ten, not a very happy child, when I first discovered a special talent for making people do what I wanted. It began with my teacher, Mrs Clews. She was a horrid, bony, bespectacled woman in which any milk of human

kindness had long dried up. She had a strange habit of shouting “Fiddlesticks” if a childish comment annoyed her. I could not imagine what fiddlesticks were, let alone why they were tools or objects of ridicule. As young and small as I was, I knew she bullied poor little Stella who was a scruffy girl - many were in the Earlstone of the fifties - who particularly irritated the horrid woman because of her perpetual cold. Yet of course we would all sit in silence as Mrs Clews told her off for sneezing, sniffing and coughing, only pleased that we were not the target of her ire. More often than not, Stella was ordered outside to “compose herself” or get a drink of water or fetch paper from the toilet - the sort which was so shiny that it spread rather than absorbed snot and stuff - and which had the potential for causing dislocation of the elbow.....

Mrs Clews never took any notice of me. I kept my head down and did my work. She had a coterie of smarter girls, her classroom monitors and dogsbodies who sucked up to her. They took it in turn to feed Priscilla the hamster. One, a pretty girl I had secretly loved, took a particular dislike to me because of my sticky-out ears, and I might have retaliated had it not been for her popularity and my shyness. Having missed out my second year under the misguided Leicestershire policy of fast-tracking the clever-clogs, I had few allies in the class, most a year older than me apart from another clever-clogs called Tim, a vicar’s son who wore a crisp white shirt and garters to keep his socks up. His breath smelt like farts because he picked his nose and ate it on the quiet. He never said a word.

So it was with utter horror one afternoon that I found myself the target of Mrs Clews. And what had I done? Laughed out loud at a very funny passage in a book I had chosen from the “float” – float? - disturbing the intense silence which she insisted on to allow her to do her knitting.

“Was that you laughing, Robert Cook?”

A good teacher would have seen an opportunity for the literary joke to be shared with the class. She was from Tittensor near Stoke and pronounced my name and “book” as in Luke.

“*Was* that you, Cuke?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Why are you still smirking?”

Because it was funny.

“Well?”

“I don’t know, Miss.”

“I think you had better stand outside to compose yourself.”

My admired enemy smirked at this. I had been reduced to having to compose myself like poor Stella. Once outside, my shame turned to anger and hatred of Mrs Clews, particularly after I had been given a swipe by the Headmistress, Miss Tansey - anagrammatically nasty, but for the e, and so aptly fashioned for the cruel

post-war profession by a stern, bearded God - who stared down at us from a picture in the hall - and told to stand perfectly still. The cuff and kerfuffle brought Clews into the corridor in time to see her Superior's disappearing back.

"I'm surprised at you, Robert Cuke," said she, glancing in Tansey's direction and speaking loud enough for her to hear. "You are a clever boy and should know better than to disturb the reading hour. Bukes are *so* important..."

Tearfully, I fixed her eyes with mine and thought all the horrid thoughts I could. She took a backward step, opened the door, went back to her chair and picked up her knitting. The door remained open and everyone looked at me in amazement. "Get on with your bukes," she said quietly. "Rachel. Tell Cuke he can come back in now."

"You can come back in now," said my pretty enemy without leaving her chair by the open door. I fixed her with the same stare and she looked away after a few seconds and stared at her book. She never looked at me or spoke to me again. The next day, when Stella snuffled and sneezed, Mrs Clews kindly handed her a handkerchief.

## **2. The Lady Who Plays Songs On Her Teeth**

Playing songs on her teeth keeps my neighbour awake at night more regularly than thoughts that she is soon going to die. So she says. So I offer to help.

"How do you play songs on your teeth?"

She begins to show me how by bringing the top and bottom sets of her teeth into a rhythmical pattern of "clacking." I put speech marks around the word because I only had her sayso for that event, being hard of hearing - and bear in mind that sounds in one head do not transfer easily to another particularly in the noisy environment to which we are these days subject. Besides, I have raging tinnitus having been deafened by the soundtrack of a James Bond film in 2014 - so loud that I leapt out of my seat. When I complained I was helpfully told that I could go to reception in future and request that the sound be turned down. I use the subjunctive "be" to indicate how fucking useless and absurd such advice is - and increasingly is in our stupidised culture which is dominated by such august organs of philosophical subtlety as the Daily Express. Plato would hold and wobble his head.

"Surely you can hear it!" she exclaims "Can you not guess what I am playing?"

I watch her thin sallow face - she is probably in her fifties? - go through the motions and immediately guess that it is Una Paloma Blanca. The clacking does not betray her secret - only the rhythm and the fact that she is Spanish.

"I think you need help, Consuela. If I put you under, you will never need play your teeth again."

"Need *help*?" she replies. "Am I mad then?"

“We’re all mad, sort of, Consuela. When did you start to play your teeth?”

“After Martin left me. It began with playing our favourite song. I couldn’t stop.”

“Una Paloma Blanca?”

“No way! That was just a test for you! Martin was an organist at the United Reformed church and his piece de resistance was a work by Louis James Alfred Lefebure-Wely.”

“Ah, him...”

At this, she begins to clack her teeth rapidly in a rhythm which I immediately recognise as The Mexicans Dance On Their Hats. I tell her to relax and look into my eyes as if they are deep wells.

“From now on and forever,” I whisper, looking intently and kindly into her dark brown eyes, “you will only need to clack your teeth once and think of an X and the clacking will stop. Say so.”

“Clack once and think of an X.....”

“I’m going to count to five. On five you will wake up and not remember what I said. One, two....”

On five, she closes her eyes and sways a little on her chair. I steady her.

“What have you said to me?”

“Don’t worry. It is lodged in your subconscious and will kick in when you need it. You’re cured.”

“Not of my cancer,” she says tearfully.

“No. not even I can cure that.”

She asks me how much I owed her and I tell her nothing. Hypnosis brings a huge responsibility with it. I could have hypnotised her into bed as she was still attractive in spite of her fading, but what would have been the point if she did not give herself of her free will? It would have been like sex with a blow-up doll - not that I could speak from experience.

“You are very kind, Mr Cook.”

“To be told so is reward enough, Consuela.”

Of course, normally I have to charge, otherwise I would be destitute. I can cure smoking, addictions to chocolate, cakes and shopping, premature ejaculation, alcoholism, OCDs.....I once stared into the mirror and ordered myself to cheer up but it never worked.

### 3.

Consuela was one of my recent, more unusual consultations. I did not need to ask her if my fluence had worked. She smiled and waved at me a few days later and I never spoke to her again.

To return to my childhood, it did not really register with me at the time that I, particularly, had brought about these odd reactions from Mrs Clews and from that girl - whose name was Rachel (I have distrusted, Proust-like, all Rachels ever since.) Perhaps my obvious distress had made them both have a change of heart, especially after Miss Tansey had fetched me one. The change of heart in Rachel was confirmed when a few years later, at the secondary school Christmas party, she made plate eyes at me. But I was not captivated as her elfin prettiness had transmuted into a pudgy plainness, better retribution via her own genes than any I could have inflicted.

An incident the following year, my third at Fairley High School, transformed my view of myself. I realised that I had a special power but only when I was angry. Angry, you have to understand, I rarely was. I kept my head down and fell beneath the radar of most pupils, as well as bullies - until a new boy arrived from a place called Gooooole - his way of saying it with a slack mouth. He was a tall unshapely specimen with red cheeks who one day decided that he needed to impress people he deemed important by promoting me from obscurity to the role of figure of fun. Why he singled me out, I have no idea - he could have gone, like most bullies, for La-a-a-a-rter, a lanky wet fart of a boy who had indeed acquired the soubriquet Larter the Farter by those of an imaginative and poetic cast of mind. He did not help his own cause by playing chess and being a member of the slot-racing club. But I digress.

The boy from Goole had recruited a small gang of boys from the year below and one morning break he decided to head in my direction - into a corner of the tennis courts where I stood placidly watching other boys kicking balls and charging about. The moment I saw him - ruddy-cheeked and malevolent of tiny eye - I knew I would likely cop it.

“On your own, Cooky? No friends? Why? Do you smell?”

Giggles. He came closer and sniffed me. To my disgust, it was he who smelt bad, so I recoiled against the corner post. He took another step and hung his head over mine. What a head. It reminded me of those laughing mechanical clowns with bulging features that there used to be at funfairs. I doubt whether he ever passed on those revolting genes, at least to a willing recipient.

Now he had me by my blue tie and was yanking on it. I saw a master on duty in a duffel coat turn away. Terror gripped me of a sudden and, to their delight, I began to scramble up the chain-linked fence. The bully grabbed me by my spindle legs and hauled me down, removing a shoe. The sight of my holed sock filled me first with shame and then - with fury. I got to my feet, thrust my face into his and stared into his tiny eyes.

“You will never speak to me again. Ever,” I whispered.

His mouth - I shall never forget it - fell open as if to reply but no sound came out.

His eyes rolled and closed. Then he turned and saying “Come on lads” he walked away like an automaton.

The master sauntered over and asked me if I was alright. The vast scrimmage of chasing boys had stopped to look.

“What was the problem?”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Look at me.”

I gazed past his ear.

“What did you say to him?”

“I just told him to stop speaking to me.”

“And he did? Just like that?”

I nodded.

“Very sensible. Good lad.”

That evening, I looked into my bedroom mirror, wanting to know how I looked when angry. After several poor attempts, it dawned on me what to do. I relived the tennis court incident and instantly my eyes charged up. I recoiled. Without anybody mentioning hypnotism, I knew then that I had a special gift, and, more importantly, knew how to use it. Somehow it got around that I would be best left in peace - which suited me, a budding misanthrope.

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My teachers tried to persuade me, the headmaster tried to persuade me but I only shook my head. University would have made me unhappy. My parents refused to be drawn and left it to me. Read English? Why, I did read English - at home - and German, and some French. There was no pressure on me to get a job as I was the only one and my needs were cheap. I looked after the long garden which virtually fed us and gradually took over completely from Dad when his lungs got worse. It was our neighbours who finally put me onto my career path. Their son, at sixteen, was turning out wild and his mum was often round to be consoled by mine due to his scrapes through drink.

“I wish he was more like your Robert,” I heard her say tearfully in the kitchen.

Trevor had been given his final warning at work due to his poor timekeeping. He was an apprentice car mechanic. I had not long passed my test (and it might have been touch-and-go had I not turned to the examiner and said quietly, with a steady gaze “Please tell me that I’ve passed.” - - “You have passed Mr Cook congratulations.” (like a Dalek))

My car, an old banger, was making a funny noise and so one late afternoon when I spotted the boy Trevor walking up the hill from work I got out and invited him to take a spin with me and listen.

Reluctantly, he got in and I gripped his shoulder tight so that he had no choice but to look into my eyes. Instantly, I thought of the Ghoul and said

“Trevor, if you ever touch alcohol again you’ll be as sick as a dog. Understand?”

Slowly he nodded.

“You can go in for your tea now.”

“What about the noise?”

“Not bothered.”

A few days later, his mum came round, eyes glistening and joyful. Trevor had stopped drinking.

“Makes him sick as a dog now.”

I saw in the local paper an advertisement for hypnotherapy. A handsome man with glaring eyes was saying in a speech bubble what he could cure - and there were quite a few things - though sexual difficulties were euphemistically referred to as “marital problems”. I thought of my success with Trevor - and the driving examiner - so decided to give him a ring. I was told that a course of ten sessions would cost *from* £100 - ah, that fraudulent preposition!

“From?”

“It depends on the complexity and history of the problem,” said he in a silky, seductive voice.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“You want testimonials?”

“No, I just wondered how you do it.”

“I’m trained. I have certificates.”

“Do you have many clients?”

“Twenty or so...”

“A year?”

“Goodness no. Getting on for a hundred a year. Is your problem smoking related?”

“No. I keep dreaming I’m trapped in the fridge.”

I put the phone down and did a quick sum. A hundred hundreds - ten thousand a year. A fortune in 1969. But I did not want to be greedy. I had an advert put in the next week, claiming that a home visit of about half-an-hour would cure any mental problem. Cost: £50.

Among the many calls I received was one I recognised as the hypnotherapist.

“You!” he stormed as soon as he heard my soft voice. “I thought you were canvassing, you bastard. You are a bloody fraud! Hypnotherapy is a serious skill which -”

“Be quiet. I’ll make an appointment via an intermediary, hypnotise you and make you walk up Castle Street cackling like a hen.”

Just to make absolutely sure that my successes with Clews, Rachel, the Ghoul and

Trevor were not flukes, I parked my jalopy on double yellows and waited. Within half-an-hour the meaty traffic warden was there. She was about to write out a ticket when I stepped up and said "I'm back now."

"Sorry, Sir," said she, smiling without a hint of sorrow "but I've started writing it...."

"Look at me. Your poor hand is so weak that you can't write one more word." She dropped the pen. I told her to go and sit down for ten minutes on a nearby bench. I picked up her pen, gave it to her, got in and drove off. In my rear view mirror I saw her looking skyward, big legs outstretched.

#### **4. The Sad Case Of The Cuckold**

In response to my first advert, the man on the other end did not wish to discuss his problem over the phone; it was "delicate". Could I not just come round? I drove to his address. It was a large house in the well-to-do area of Earlstone, my not-so-well-to-do home town. I had not liked the sound of his voice - haughty - and I reserved to myself the right to walk away. He had sounded very full of himself, aggressive even. I rang the bell and almost walked off when there was no reaction. Voices conjure up visions of their owners, do they not? Mostly they are way off target, but this one was spot-on. He was well-built, had a large fleshy face, prominent nose, cavernous nostrils and he looked down on me from a great height through scornful blue eyes. Was I selling something? I told him who I was and he glanced with hatred at my Ford Anglia.

"So young? This a hoax?"

"No. I'm good. Why would I waste my time as well as yours?"

"Hell. I'm not so sure I wish to confide in one so callow."

"Callow?"

"Young, inexperienced..."

"I know what it means."

I turned and began to crunch my way back up his pebbled drive. Feebly, he begged me to come back. *From* £50, I decided. Within two minutes I was standing in his plush lounge looking out on woods and his beautiful back garden. How strange that, in the midst of such splendour, he was unhappy. He sat, great head in trembling hands, bluster busted, in a white leather armchair, with cream buttons, like chocolate - probably worth more than all my parents' rickety furniture.

"Tell me all that's troubling you and leave nothing out."

"Swear you'll keep all this confidential. I'm an important man."

"I only keep a diary and use initials not names, Mr?"

"W. Will you destroy your notes later?"

"No. I need them for later reference. I swear this goes no further."

I wrote W in my notebook and circled it.



“What do you do?”

“I run a company. I sit on the county council too.”

“For which party?”

Daft question. I tell him in his own time to tell me his troubles...

His wife had had an affair. He had had his suspicions for a while and had almost employed a private detective to follow her. Wednesdays, she went to her WI meetings but had started having showers beforehand and taking ages over her hair and face. The meetings took place in the Fairley Parva village hall which was about three miles away. Suspicion gnawed away at him until he could stand it no longer and he had the ingenious idea of checking her mileage to see if more than six miles were registered. To turn up in his own car and find that her car missing was more than he could face.

Sure enough, one Thursday morning he saw that twelve miles had been covered since he had checked the previous night. At breakfast, shaking with anxiety, he had confronted her with this undeniable evidence, but she, cucumber-cool, told him that she had had to give Fiona a lift back to Stapleford as her husband, who normally picked her up, had rushed in to say that he had to go out to his elderly mother who had fallen over. Did he think, she added vehemently, that she was having an affair? He was not sure.

“Things were not as they used to be in bed.”

“In what way?”

“Oh please. Mr Cook! Use your imagination.”

I shrugged and said it was difficult for me, one so callow. He glowered but I insisted that he tell me. After some reflection, he mumbled that she could no longer reach a “conclusion” but had refused his offers to do so “by other means”. Following his advice, I used my imagination but was perplexed. I decided to move on.

“So, how did you find out the truth?”

“By subterfuge. While she was in the bathroom I got her address book and looked up Fiona’s number. Was her mum okay? *Fine* - came back the reply - *why?* When my wife came out I told her what I’d done - and she blushed and gasped for words.”

Cornered and interrogated, the lady - whose love of her home and family exceeded her lust for her boyfriend - began to beg for forgiveness. The price of this was to be absolute candidness. The guarantee of the truth was her being required to swear on the lives of her grandchildren - whose photo was duly thrust into her sweaty palms. “Do you really need to know chapter and verse?” he pleaded, breaking off his narrative.

“Yes, because I need a key word or image to lock onto for you if you are to be relieved of whatever it is which is particularly troubling you.”

“My wife had a fucking affair - that’s what’s.....”

He looked down at his hushpuppies (in vogue those days) and flexed his long feet. Perhaps the episode had rendered him impotent, alcoholic or murderously vengeful. It began to dawn on callow me how horrific might be the scenes he was imagining rather than had witnessed. How old was he? Fifty? Past his prime? Here was a chap who probably played rugger (his nose was a funny shape) who was used to getting his own way, king of his castle - and some intruder had snook in the back way and shagged his queen. More than the once.

“She said it happened out of the blue. She had gone to a WI meeting in June and a historian was giving a talk on Earlstone’s stocking industry’s origins and development. Not the most erotic of subjects, but this chap had held the audience spellbound with his slick delivery and slide show - gestures, voice, eyes *jokes.*”

(I interrupt the narrative to observe that some ladies, I have since been reliably informed, overlook ungainliness and ugliness in a man if he has a sense of humour. I have the two aforementioned attributes but not, alas, the latter. And anyway, looking deep into a maiden’s eyes, as with Rachel, and with one other I fancied, Astrid, whom I met at Woolworth’s working behind the sweet counter (her, not me), produced only a mild concussion. Later, after the pictures, where we had watched evil mobile legumes whipping helpless extras to death by a thousand welts, she told me she liked me but I frightened her. Perhaps we should have gone to see Mary Poppins. I could not bear to go anywhere near Woollies again. And I hate leaks.)

Back to Mr W.

“After the talk there was coffee and she attracted his attention - for 46 she was very lovely - and she admitted she was mesmerised.”

A rival?

“The guy talked about welts and gussets with a certain twinkle in his eye and he invited her back for a nightcap. They embraced in the lounge and fell onto the sofa and.....I keep seeing it happen.....the actions, the noises and.....it’s driving me mad.”

As he sobbed I told him to take a deep breath and, noticing a decanter, I got up and poured him a drink.

It had happened four more times, each time nicer than the last. She claimed she had been feeling neglected, taken for granted and this had been her revenge. She had never forgotten a thing he had had for his raven-haired secretary the previous year, even though he had assured that that nothing had happened.

“And it never did.....but not for want of trying.”

“Aha!”

This admission would prove crucial to his cure. It had been a constant theme of our RE teacher, a small man who never allowed a smile to pass over his red and blue-shaven cheeks, and who took a delight in terrifying us about our guilty secrets, that a sin in thought was as bad as a sin in deed. I have no idea whether there is any scriptural basis for this or whether he made it up to keep us in his power, but his perpetual expression of misery could be taken as a sign that he himself was struggling to keep naughty thoughts at bay. (I might be able to help him if I could track him down and put him under.) At the time, he certainly made me - and probably many of the other boys, but not Larter - very conscious of the temptation to stare at the budding - and some cases blooming - breasts under the pale blue blouses of the prettiest girls. Come to think of it, perhaps the RE teacher was tempted too. Is looking admiringly at such natural erotica a sin? Debatable. Anyway, I decided to share those thoughts with Mr W. Had such guilt been drilled into him?

“I never went to Sunday school. Our RE teacher was a thug who gave lads the slipper on the flimsiest grounds. It probably turned him on.”

“Well, it could be argued that an immoral intention is tantamount to the deed, particularly in the case of your secretary, if you made, as you implied, a pass at her.”

He looked up at me in surprise.

“A deep insight for such a .....

“Callow youth? Not really. I’m just paraphrasing what my RE teacher used to say over and over. One could argue that your designs on your secretary, your hints and your fantasies that went with them were eighty or ninety percent of the event, lacking only the physical accomplishment to cap it off.”

“Fantasies?”

I raised an eyebrow and he blushed, acknowledging, it seemed to me, that I had a point.

“So, Mr W, what do you want exactly to come of this?”

“I want to stop thinking about her with HIM Oh God. Please help me to blot it out!”

“Okay. Let’s start with your secretary’s name.”

“Rosemary.”

“Please put your drink down.”

I went to sit on the ample arm of his armchair - buttoned-up adjunct to his Chesterfield, so fashionable then - and looked down into his tear-rimmed eyes. I took his great hand with its sausage fingers and gripped it tight.

“Keep looking into my eyes until you see pools. Keep staring and think about nothing else.”

“You’re staring me out! Nobody -”

“Hush. Stop fighting me and breathe deep and relax.”

I watched the pupils of his eyes grow like a cat’s grow in the dark - as Trevor’s had - and knew I had him under. I told him to picture a grey sofa with no-one on it.

“When you think next of your wife with her lover, put them on it and whisper to yourself *Rosemary*. They will disappear and you will see her naked and feel deep shame so painful that it burns you here - on your temple - and then you will think of the nicest thing you ever did with your wife. Your wedding day. What’s the picture?”

“A sofa.”

“And the word?”

“Rose mary.”

“And the feeling?”

“Shame. It’s burning my head!”

“I’m counting to five and then you’ll remember nothing...”

On five he shook himself like a wet dog. He asked what I had done to him.

“You’ll see. Did your wife have an affair?”

“God, yes. I feel terrible. Oh it hurts here - I’m to blame. Rosemary.”

“Forgive your wife and forgive yourself - it never happened - you imagined it all.”

He looked at me and his heavy features - so long formed by sternness and hostility? - raised a smile.

“I feel relieved.”

“Where is your wife?”

“She died six months ago. Cancer of the cervix.”

I left my address on a table. Not long after, I received an envelope enclosing five crisp twenty pound notes and a brief letter of thanks. He said he would recommend me. I was in business.

My subsequent encounters with many and various patients - of which I shall report a number later - provided me with a serious education in that hackneyed institution - the University of Life, possibly more valuable than that one on which I missed out. It dawned on me that many - most? - people were suffering in silence behind their stoical outward show of composure. Having been, as I said earlier, a misanthropic people-avoider in my early years, I began to take pity on the Suffering. Even as a child, I could see there was a discrepancy between the jolly, uncomplicated world of the adverts and the real world - my world at home where a stubborn silence was too often the prevailing climate. The cold comforts of home were displaced in my discontented mind by the horrors of Vietnam, and later Central America and Yugoslavia. The villainy made me wish that I could be in the faces of the villains. I took a sudden interest in history in my thirties and focused

particularly on the Plantagenets. I soon saw through the nationalistic hype of Crecy, for example, and realised that these people were basically a mafia in armour, blessed by a corrupt church, who despised the very people from whom they drew their wealth and prestige for two hundred years. Did they not see how far from the Ten Commandments they fell short? Was their divinely justified evil - ironically - rooted in a church based on confession and which sold remission of sins for money? Had Christ's Rock become the Chyrabdis on which Christianity had been shipwrecked?? Luther obviously thought so.

Sure, these bullies had built some magnificent castles - or rather had them built by commoners who had real talent and skill. So what? A flat, peaceful, productive, neighbourly, architecturally uninteresting landscape would have been the preference of the peasants, had they had a vote in a referendum. CASTLES or FARMLAND? I doubt if they would appreciate the euphoric shite on the National Trust website. Their superb kings were extortionists and tyrants whose only true talent - developed by separation from their mothers at an early age to become wielders of swords, lances and shields - was a ruthless inclination to lay waste, rob, besiege and domineer.

Their extravagance, psychopathy, stupidity and arrogance made me feel ill and I wondered how many lovely people and children had fallen victim to the rampages of which they were so enamoured, those restless, hyperactive incorporations of evil, Henry II, Richard, John, Edward I and III, - like Alexander, Ghengis Kahn, Napoleon, Hitler. (Curiously, there was no single, great conqueror within the British Empire - Robert Clive? - no - empire was just a gradual conglomeration of "possessions" via mediocre like-minded nasty people - kings, politicians, officials, merchants - who thought, for example, that it was justifiable to tear men, women and children from their homes in Africa into slavery.)

There is a wide streak of amorality in our genome and I loathe it.

Those who wreak misery in (Syria) now are the reincarnations of those villains. How can we stop them?

## **5 An Eventful Day**

I have a horror of litter. This is linked to my misanthropic streak - because, I ask myself, what kind of mentality causes hands to despoil a place which as far as we know is uniquely special and beautiful in the Cosmos? Answer - a blank one. It is this very thoughtlessness which drives me into a fury - a rare event as I have said. This mental void appears in many other guises, some of which I shall explore further down. I reckon that there are two kinds of evil, one deliberate and one due

to apathy.

I have become a secret volunteer on the estate where I live, picking up litter on a path which, bordering an old quarry, joins my road to the main one. At the far end there is a round concrete litter bin and I have become rather obsessed about gathering up beer cans, bottles, food trays etc etc so inexplicably thrown down, some only feet away from said bin.

A few days ago, I was walking along the path, pleased to see the first daffodil shoots peeping through the tawdry February grass. In front there was a youth of about seventeen draining a blue beer can. He belched and threw it down. So I picked it up, overtook him and said

“I think you just dropped this by accident.”

He favoured me with a look of scorn, glanced at his meaty girlfriend and belched again. I told him not to worry and dropped the can into the bin. He did no more than reach in, grab it and throw it down again, causing his girlfriend to titter.

They might grow up to be fine, respectable members of the community, do charity work and become active in Neighbourhood Watch; but at this - callow - stage of their development they were clearly in need of a gentle nudge in the direction of virtue. As bleary-eyed and pale as the foggy day, the round-faced lout looked at me with a smirk to see what I might do next. My anger was rising like magma but I controlled it. I told him to look at me and listen.

“This is what you’re going to do....”

As soon as I had hypnotised him, I strode off in the direction of the supermarket, leaving him under the supervision of his stupefied girl.

I had a browse of the newspapers, put several copies of the Daily Express on top of the toilet rolls, dropped a Daily Mail on the cistern in the Gents, bought some mussels, garlic, shallots plus a nice Sauvignon Blanc, and was about to leave the store when an extraordinary idea occurred to me. I returned to the newspaper stand where an elderly man was gazing at and fingering the Express which had its usual moaning headline about immigrants. Anyone could see in his face how stupidized he had become over the years due to reading such nasty rubbish. I leant over him and whispered “You don’t want to read that.”

Then I noticed another story on the front page which claimed that eating mushrooms could stave off dementia.

“If you want to stave off dementia, stop reading the Express.”

“Eh? Wot’s it gorra do wi’ yo?” he growled.

“Look at me! Listen! From now on, read the Guardian okay?”

“Okay.”

He shuffled round and shuffled off with a copy in his trolley. I hung about and persuaded three others to improve their reading habits - including a muscular young man who dropped the Sun like a hot stone and strolled off with the FT under

his bulging biceps. Satisfied, I left the shop. The recalcitrant youth had completely slipped my mind as I walked across the car park, laughing inwardly at the thought of the old gentleman staring in incomprehension at a Steve Bell cartoon.

A shout - or more accurately a scream - brought me back into focus. It was the fat girl imploring her young man to stop emptying and refilling the bin. I was about to step off the kerb as an idiot doing 40+ mph came down that residential road. I waved an arm and he stopped and reversed.

“Please mate” shouted the girl “Whatever you done, can you stop doing it?”

“Hoy you, you old fart - what you waving at me for?”

“Listen, I’ll sort your boyfriend out when I’ve dealt with this moron who thinks he can drive at whatever speed he likes where kids and old people are about.”

“Who you calling a moron?”

He leaps out and comes over to me. Another lout, slightly older.

“Get back in your car and drive around from now on at twenty miles an hour. Your right foot is very weak and you must look after it.”

“Okay.”

He regains his car and dawdles off - to be immediately tailgated by another twat.

“Right. Let me see.”

A man with dog has stopped to watch the lout as he once again begins to empty the bin. He wants to put his poop bag in the bin but can’t decide whether just to throw it on the floor. The youth is impervious to the hysterical shrieks of his girlfriend, so I take him by the shoulder and am treated to a blast of his lovely beery breath.

“Right. Now put it all back and then leave it be. In future, never drop any more litter and if you see anyone else do it, ask them - politely - to bin it. What must you do?”

Slowly he tells me and once I have counted him to five he goes slowly on his way, girlfriend sobbing in his wake. The dog owner peers at me and asks if I live at number 21 - and I nod.

“I know Consuela - she told me you helped her to stop clacking her teeth. Lucky here won’t stop gnawing his paw...”

“Sorry. I don’t do dogs.”

## **6 Graffiti**

My other (local) bugbear is graffiti. Earlstone is not a pretty town and needs all the help it can get. There is another pleasant footpath which continues alongside the supermarket I mentioned and on through the cemetery. The dogshit situation there has improved dramatically, but not, alas, the litter blown by the wind from the supermarket and dropped by those little apathetic monsters. I think the provision of litter bins with a frequency of two yards would not solve it due to the frequency of the local Moronacy. ( Listen, look, I don’t want to sound like a fascist Elitist, but

the evidence for my pessimistic view is overwhelming. Right? I already told you – if you don't agree with me, read something else.)

Okay, I've overdone litter and you are probably thinking that on the A-Z scale of horrors it comes in at around X, but never forget that psychopaths start by tearing off the wings of butterflies before they turn their attention to people.

I pick up as much litter as my little arms can hold, but the graffiti on the tall brick wall is of a different order. It extends for at least twenty yards and is a council matter. Every so often, a bulletin from the local Tories, who obviously control the council in picturesque and prosperous Earlstone, drops onto my doormat. Normally it goes straight into the recycling, but in the last one something caught my eye.

**Report a local concern to your Councillor Jan Kilby.** She said that she lived in the ward which led me to wonder why she had never seen that horrid graffiti. It had been there and expanding for at least two years. It was of no artistic merit and as such could have been a serious contender for the Turner Prize. If Jan Kilby lived in the ward, did she never take a tour to spot problems?

She gave a number so I decided to text her. As a result, she inspected it, deprecated it - it was an *affront to the cemetery* - and promised to have it painted out with graffiti-resistant paint. ? The last text she sent me I kept - *Paint on order, job done soon.* (Did the council have no paint in stock? There were plenty of scrawled walls in the town - but no paint?? Was my complaint a new phenomenon?)

Job done soon? That was in September. In March the graffiti was still there and increasing. In an idle moment, I decided to text her again - *Graffiti? Still there and worse. A lot you care, lying Tory hypocrite.*

A few minutes later my phone rang. It was her blustering husband threatening all sorts of retaliation on various features dear to my person. He told me that I was a coward to have a go at a lady and that if I was any sort of man I would give him my address so that he could come round and sort me out.

“If you're that bloody bothered about a bit of scrawl, why don't you get off your idle arse and paint it out yourself?”

I did not have his eyes but his ears would do.

“I'm at Twenty-One Forest Road.”

“Right - you lefty bastard. On me way.”

I sauntered out onto my drive to wait and looked to see if my tulips were poking through yet. I was just about to go in home from the drizzle thinking he had sobered up enough to realize what an arsehole he had made of himself, when a black limousine slowly approached and stopped. I had a flashback to the Ghoul when a large man with piggy eyes and fat cheeks flushed with anger and alcohol marched towards me. I instantly gave him “full beam” and held out my hands. I told him to stop, calm down and listen.



\*

“You’ve missed a bit, look.”

He steadied himself and reached up with the brush. The stepladder wobbled a bit but he did not fall. The wall is an immaculate red again.

“You’ve made a great job of that, Mr Kilby. If the wall gets more appalling scrawl, I’ll give you a call, alright?”

“Yes fine.”

“Right be careful how you come down now.”

I am about to write up another example of my craft but I have forgotten how late it is. The warder has just come past saying lights out in five minutes. I’d better clean my teeth. The book will have to wait till tomorrow. You know, I think it is time to skip the bits and pieces and get to the meat of the story. I hope I haven’t bored you too much - it gets better and some important people do get involved, albeit not entirely willingly.

### **7. On How I Got Into Politics Proper And Why.**

It all started really with an article in our wonderfully local and trivial Earlstone Gazette. Normally, its reporters’ searchlights stray no farther than grimy Bragwell village to the north and pretty Fairley Parva to the south, picking out the various newsy features such as charity functions, traffic accidents and minor crimes. Once in a blue moon there is a murder but by the time the weekly Gazette gets to splash it on the front page, it is old news and people are moving on. Occasionally, a minor celebrity will turn up to open a shoppe or give an award to somebody for shaving their head for charity. The letters page concentrates mainly on dog dirt, speed bumps and traffic congestion due to road works.

Earlstone also has a community website which deletes any post not considered parochial enough. A nuclear war might break out but comments on a yarn bomb - whatever one of those is - would take precedence.

Buying the Gazette is a bit like a habit you would rather give up, like clacking your teeth. You do it without thinking and afterwards swear this is the last time. But the temptation to see who might have died is too strong and, as usual, on a Friday, having covered up the pile of Daily Expresses with the Racing Post and having hung around to watch the Expressos surveying and fingering the stand with a savage look of despair and confusion, I pay my pound and carry the Gazette home. I am not a little astonished to find a report on the inside page of an ex-Cabinet minister coming to speak to the Earlstone Chamber of Commerce about the implications of Brexit. I never knew we had a Chamber of Commerce. There is a

picture of this ex-minister and her face rings a bell. It is not an intelligent face - but Tory faces rarely are clever or attractive - a sign from God? - although she had been to Cambridge. (Just over 50% of Oxbridge students come from private schools. I googled it. What percentage of our children attend private schools? 6%. How that elite must despise us, the hoy-poloi. Equality of opportunity, social mobility? How equal is a child born in a rented slum or a B & B and a child born in the leafy lanes of the South?) But before I take that argument further, I need to say something about our minds which has been rumbling about in my head for the last few days and which I need to put down on paper before it drives me mad, like Monsieur Lefebure-Wely and Consuela.

The phenomena, if that is the right word, of suggestion and persuasion are all around us like air - or better, a fog. We are subject to propaganda at every turn, unless we leave people, towns and media behind and escape into the forest. The constructed world assaults our senses with stimuli which demand responses. To persuade someone to accept a point of view or to engage in a course of action may take time, or no time at all, be it as minor as buying a certain product, or as major as executing a dastardly deed. What we believe and why we believe it are interesting questions. Our basic beliefs are an accretion of impressions from an early age. As small children we do not challenge authority - though maybe we can be awkward for a bit - which answers the second question. Authority underpins suggestion and persuasion. If a belief is deep-seated and long-lived - such as a racial prejudice - it is extremely difficult to excise it, for it is probably held for sentimental reasons. Factual arguments against such an attitude are shrugged off because the believer wishes to cling to his belief, even in the face of all the evidence.

To return to the role of authority, consider the likelihood of our believing a speaker on a soap-box. His words are mere air and he lacks authority. Now imagine those same words appearing in large black capitals on the front page of a favourite newspaper. Why we favour the paper boils down to respect for its principles, in other words its proximity to our own belief-world. Whatever it prints is likely to reinforce those beliefs. A headline in a contrary newspaper would be dismissed with a laugh of scorn. We are particularly susceptible to persuasion when the suggestion resonates with the idea we already hold dear. Conviction bias. The messages which do not "fit" we suspect and reject because we do not wish to flounder in a swamp of scepticism, a state only attractive to certain philosophers. Keep an open mind? This smacks of vacancy and insecurity. We *need* to believe. What we believe defines who we are.

People who come to me for help need to regain normality and stability and so are prepared - for once - to surrender control of their will, because it has failed them.

They cannot give up smoking or alcohol by willpower, and so need a powerful impact from outside to disturb their mentality, and so disrupt their stubborn addiction / obsession / compulsion. Since they come to me voluntarily, they are easy. My gift is to surprise those individuals who do not have chance to erect defences. If a conman were well-known, he would fail. If they knew - like the litter-lout - that I was coming, they would close their eyes and sing a song to drown me out.

We often speak of people of “conviction”. What does it mean? It is seen as a laudable trait. But to be “opinionated” is not good (because the opinions are not grafted on facts??) The accretion I mentioned earlier of layers of beliefs reinforcing each other generally becomes a shell impervious to argument. The two areas which spring immediately to mind are religion and politics. It would be a huge challenge to my gift to penetrate the defences of a person of conviction and subvert their mentality.

The photograph of that ex-minister was looking at me as I watched the dismal news on tv - not because I wanted to but because I felt obliged - when a wild and stupid idea flashed into my head.

My father had died two years previously (pre-deceased by my mother after a heart attack) due to a cancer for which a life-extending drug had been denied by N.I.C.E. , anything but nice - how dare they? He was too old and too unimportant. Being quite resigned to this deplorable state of affairs, he never complained. A quietist, he went gentle into that good night while I inwardly seethed. When I thought of all the revenue not collected from greedy tax evaders, of all the money wasted on prestige projects such as HS2 and Trident, I almost erupted. There lay a dying man who had worked quietly at his lathe, never taking a penny more than was his due, who had paid his way until he retired at sixty-six and had enjoyed only eleven years of retirement. A very neat and tidy solution for the State in dire need of cutbacks due to the greed and corruption of bankers. What a hero John Cook was! To give up the ghost and his pension so prematurely and uncomplainingly, understanding that the nation for which he laboured so long could not afford to keep him alive a little bit longer - until the daffodils, his last spring. We had never been close - he was an undemonstrative and buttoned-up man - but I cried tears at his graveside as he was lowered into obscurity - and out of the fucking way. I swore then and there to get my own back somehow.

I found my old double-breasted suit at the back of the wardrobe. It was a tight fit but I looked convincing. I turned up at the Earlstone’s council house about a half-hour before the meeting and saw that the security - for an *ex*-minister - was as lax

as I had expected, consisting of a large bespectacled man in a navy suit. I kept out of the way and watched from a bench as he inspected lapel badges. As the large clock above the council chamber door showed almost seven-thirty I came out of the shadows and smiled.

“What am I like? I’ve lost my lapel badge.”

“Oh dear. Can you give me your name?”

I gave him the name of an old gentleman whose badge I had read. He looked down his clipboard and shook his head. He had already ticked that name off.

“I know - I had to double back to the loo - and when I came out my badge was missing, Sod’s Law.”

He took a breath and told me he was sorry, but he could not allow me in. To which I responded with my best stare and gripped his wrist.

“Can you *really* not let me in?”

He looked at the wall opposite and said it would be okay. I squeezed past him and stood at the back, hands crossed over my belly, shoulders square and looking as officious as I could.

The room was, like a lecture theatre, on an incline and the benches were pretty full. A door in the left hand corner, front, opened and a grey gentleman on a mobility scooter led in a young woman carrying a briefcase. She gazed around at the audience with large eyes and I instantly remembered a blustering interview she had given on Newsnight. There was warm applause as she was introduced. She gripped the podium and as soon as the last clap was clapped, she began.

It quickly became evident why she was an ex-minister because it was poor speech. She managed to find a number of ways to convey the same message - that the government would negotiate hard to open up new markets, and so businesses the length and breadth of Britain had to respond by looking for opportunities to sell, had to cut costs, had to use the Web, had to increase productivity....had to “sell their socks off.” At that point, a bearded man in the audience raised his hand and declared that he was a sock manufacturer - which produced guffaws, while I seethed. It seemed to occur to no-one that the (Chinese) did not go around bare-foot and did not need socks from Earlstone, being quite capable of making their own. How could said socks, with higher labour costs and with the cost of shipping, possibly compete with local socks? I am no economist, but if I could hypnotise those billion people, two billion bare feet would surely follow minds.

At last, the silly young woman shut up and we broke for coffee and cake. She began to do a gladhanding tour of the room. As she came past me, I smiled, full beam.

“Here is my card. There is something I would like you to arrange for me.”

About a week later, I received an invitation to the Tory Conference in Blackpool.

## **8 Blackpool - And Out Of The Blue**

Blackpool, on a rainy, wind-harried day, takes some beating for bleakness. Behind a façade of promenade glitz, teem streets of drowning terraces and boarding houses boarded up. In spite of its Bamforth cheeriness, it sees more prescriptions issued for anti-depressants per head than anywhere else in Britain, more even than Earlstone. As I wonder round, trying to keep control of my umbrella, I imagine going door-to-door to conjure up a mass hurrah.

Returning to the sea-front, I watch gulls, driven in close by the storm, hesitate as if reconsidering their approach. The jolly pier is launching a sally against the elements but ambushed halfway by rain, spray and mist, vanishes. The green trams pass each other nearly empty. To my right, at the funfair, where not much fun is being had, empty chariots charge down the slopes of the big dipper against a sky bruised black and grey, splattered with a milky, sickly white.

So here, at the Winter Gardens, this wintery September are arrived the Grandees of Britain, those who dictate what we think and do, to mingle with the minnows who scrimmage in their wake. Have they toured the town to take account of the Blackpool they have created, a town that epitomises the broken Britain they have helped to break? Or have they driven straight here, eyes straight-on, behind tinted windows to keep out the glare of reality? And rushed into the conference hall under the great umbrellas held by their Myrmidons?

There are wet protesters crying slogans uselessly into the wind, their placards about refugees and the NHS soaked and bent as if the storm is an affiliate of the Enemy. The few police officers stand wet and watchful thinking dark thoughts. It feels like February or March but it *is* September. Having passed many arcades, bingo halls, chippies and bars in different sequences, as if the DNA code for junk-culture Britain, and having peered into the miserable faces of men women and children, steaming and damp, I let down and shake my brolly and enter the foyer. I show my invitation and passport and am sent through a security screen. I am in. There is a smell so overpowering in the foyer that I have to retreat. It is the smell I have noticed at the supermarket which lingers particularly in the chocolate and pet food aisles. It is the acrid fusty smell of old women. From which part of their unwashed anatomy it issues, I do not wish to speculate. Can the delegates milling around and shedding raincoats like dark skins not smell it? Put on the extractors and blast it out onto the prom to confront the gale! Does the PM exude this unpleasant odour? I soon hope to find out.

Venturing back into the foyer, I am accosted by a beautiful dark-haired woman of about thirty with a lovely smile and beguiling green eyes. She is trying to sell me a biography of Margaret Thatcher. She speaks and it is a delightful Irish brogue which produces an instant spinal tingle. I am tempted to ask her - yes I will - what,

if she does not mind me asking, ever persuaded such a lovely woman to become a Conservative?

“Oh you flatterer! I just am - so were my mum and dad - it’s our party.”

“Listen to me...you’ve been brainwashed...drop the book and go and join the protesters.”

I hated to send her out into the rain but it was ultimately with her own good in mind.

I wander into the auditorium and take note of the security guards at the back. I decide to approach a callow-looking one and tell him I need to know the number of the PM’s room. Off he trots and I listen to a speech by a nervous woman stressing the importance of maintaining Foreign Aid (buoyed up by their Brexit victory, the Daily Mail is baying for the blood of another sacred cow.)

Her speech is weakly applauded or not at all. The speaker gathers up her papers and leaves the rostrum pursued by a malignant silence. This body is the crucible of compassion. Now speeches against the motion; Mails and Expresses begin to flap like sails in a vehement wind of stupidity blowing from the stage, earning cheers and claps. How could I hypnotize this chamber of horrors into being nice people? Years of reading cynicism and nastiness have set like minds and faces like concrete.

An ugly woman wearing glasses with a transparent frame is at the rostrum. Child refugees from France had been denied entry on the grounds that such might encourage trafficking - and this she reaffirms, to generous applause, so implying that this measure is ethically sound, presented as a claim to be acting in the interest of vulnerable children - who will suffer by it. Such pretence of caring via not caring is on a level below hypocrisy - and there is no word for it. How can that vile woman and her ilk live with themselves and sleep at night?

“Why dultn’t the French tek um?” shouts an elderly lady nearby, arousing cheers. Had they never heard of the Good Samaritan? I can hardly contain my fury and have a strong urge to go rushing round staring them all out.

The young security guard returns, whispers a number in my ear and I head for the lift. I am surprised to find no-one outside her door. I knock and am invited in.

The great lady is sitting on a sofa in a purple bath-robe with a laptop on her knobbly knees. Her long legs thrust into leopard skin slippers inspire a kind of appalled wonder. She must assume I am one of her staff and does not look up. I am behind her - when the thought of my father and his unnecessary suffering make me focus on her scraggy neck. She does not smell of old woman but of bath salts.

“Have you fetched the Telegraph, Emily?” she murmurs.

I come round and plonk myself down on the chair opposite. She is alarmed and so shocked that she freezes.

“Just keep looking at my eyes and listen.”

She slowly closes the lid of her laptop and sits back. After I have spoken to her for a few minutes I ask her to get on her phone to summon the Defence Secretary. I have to admit, it took a long time for me to convince her colleague while she sat contemplating the wall. That bespectacled old man was quite stubborn and displayed more intelligence than I had given him credit for. As I fixed him with glare upon glare, he kept murmuring no...no...before going into one of the deepest trances I had ever induced. The effort so exhausted me that when I had left them both I had to slip into a corner of the bar one floor below and sip a G and T to recover. People of conviction really are a challenge, I remark to myself, trying to get comfortable on the narrow bed in my cell.

You see, I was on my way downstairs when I was jumped on by four security guards and bundled into a room. Had just one of them stayed with me, all would have been fine. I'd be back in my boarding house now.

"We've had our eye on you since when you first came in," said one fat man.

"We nearly sounded the alarm when you went off our radar," said the other fat man. "Where you get to?"

"Just to the toilet."

"For half-an-hour? You constipated?"

"Then into the bar for a gin. Why you so interested in me?"

"On your own.."

"...don't look Tory..."

"What? Unintelligent?"

"..suspicious. Who wears a suit like that anymore?"

"I'm so hurt!"

"See your card."

I pass the invitation into his pudgy hand.

"Nah, your membership card."

"Ah. Not a member yet. Was going to join."

"No, pal. Won't wash. Where were you really before the bar?"

"Just a wander round. No law against that?"

The desire to believe in something noble and spiritual once tempted me to join a church except that I could not believe that a loving God would create so many fat, ugly, stupid, nasty, credulous, selfish and ignorant human beings. Maybe He thought that apart from that, they were redeemable.

It was decided that it would be best to hold me for a few days which I thought was probably illegal, but I didn't really mind, because I had a chance to write down the foregoing. I had persuaded the policeman who opened the slot in my cell door

every so often - to ensure that I had not killed myself - to bring me pen and paper. During one interview with two very dull people I was asked if I was patriotic. When I did not answer promptly the pudgy WPC who had asked swung backwards on her chair with a triumphant smirk meant to secure a sign of approval from her fat male colleague. When I decided that it was futile to reply to such an irrelevant question, she swung back dramatically into my face and asked "What's not to understand in my question, Mr Cook? Should I write it down for yoooo?" I gave her a brief stare and looked glumly at the floor, despondent at meeting yet another horrid soapwashed, brainwashed, unoriginal human being. I had refused to disclose who had sent me my invitation, not wishing the ex-minister to get into more bother.

My silence irritated the pair beyond measure as there was nothing they could act on against me in a criminal respect. In the end I got fed up with the cell, the smell, the police and the lousy food and decided to leave. I asked for a cup of tea and the pimply WPC went off leaving me alone with the stupid DI.

Five minutes later he was leading me to the Sergeant's desk to collect my things. I did not hang around long enough to witness him expose himself to the WPC.

By the way, "**out of the blue**" was a key phrase I implanted in the minds of those two ministers, and which I will refer to again at a later date.

## **9. Am I Patriotic?**

Before I answer that, let me propose that right-wingers lack empathy, and tend towards, like Thatcher, the sociopathic. Left-wingers have compassion and wish to improve the lot of the poor and needy, whom the Right suspect of fecklessness and fraud. Left-wingers can be duped. That, I think, is politics in a nutshell.

Right, patriotism. As I drove south from that rainy, benighted town I decided to deconstruct the concept. Love of country. Samuel Johnson described it as the last refuge of a scoundrel. I would go one stage further and say that an unqualified patriotism is for morons. Yes, I want to see England win at football, but couldn't care less when it comes to that organized brawl, rugby. But the football is tainted by those racist yobs who go abroad to cause mayhem in peaceful towns. Am I unpatriotic not to like Blackpool, Birmingham, Tittensor and Stoke-on-Trent? Yet I love Cumbria, Northumberland and Cornwall, though not St Austell. Am I proud of our imperial history? No. Am I proud of our fight against Hitler? Of course. Is Britain still a force for good in the world? Yes and no. Do I like English ale and pubs? Yes. Do I like our cinemas? NO.

There is no right or simple answer to the question and anyone who responds categorically yes or no is not thinking straight.



I was proud to hear on the radio the next morning that, “after receiving assurances from security sources”, all three thousand children in the Pas-de-Calais would be allowed in to Britain. An opposition spokeswoman declared herself surprised and delighted that the PM had been “persuaded to do the moral thing.” I smiled and put the kettle on. Decency was not, after all, in decline. If people were not as kind as they might or used to be, a little persuasion could do the trick.

### **10. A Major Statement**

I had never been in the House of Commons. It was great to sit in the visitors’ gallery at the front directly opposite the dispatch box. This had been arranged without much effort. The nice officer had made room for me. The Minister of Defence was due to make an important statement and both government and opposition benches were full. As he rose I nodded at him and for a few seconds he stared back before beginning. He sounded a bit like a Dalek but so what?

“After much consideration and consultation, it has been decided to abandon Britain’s nuclear deterrent - the Trident system.”

Gasps and shouts of “NO” and “*Someone’s* had a good lunch.” Some sat in shocked silence, some stood in uproar - soon silenced by the Speaker.

“It is a waste of money, a needless and gratuitous provocation and an artefact of prestige and anxiety about the loss of it. It increases tension and causes those we target to target us in an absurd cycle of tit for tat, cause and effect. Countries far closer to Moscow and Putin, our putative enemy, are not nuclear weapons states and are therefore obviously not strategic targets for the Russians. Threat begets threat. Trident is a symptom of our post-war decline - when Ernest Bevin and Clement Atlee, egged on by Churchill, were desperate to maintain our Great Power status. Britain intervened in the arms race needlessly like the French, also desperate for status, like a pigmy in a trial between giants, and increased paranoia in Russia. I ask the House to consider, how likely is it that the Russians would threaten to blow us to smithereens when there is nothing we have that they lack, for instance gas and oil, or for material resources which could be far more easily obtained by trade? Would they welcome their own fall-out cloud blowing back across the Urals? The nuclear blackmail scenario is less convincing than an episode of Thunderbirds. Is it right that we should squander many, many billions of pounds in fear of a threat as probable as a meteor strike when our public services are in dire need of investment? Is it credible that we would launch a suicidal nuclear strike in response to threat, provocation or even invasion? As someone - whose name escapes me - recently said to me in Blackpool - how did Trident deter General Galtieri from invading the Falkland Islands?”

“Hear, hear!” cried a shrill voice. The PM.

There were more gasps, well-I-nevers and laughter from the opposition benches while the government supporters sat like exhibits at Tussaud's.

The white-haired old gentleman sat down with a glance at me. The Leader of the Opposition rose - and began to applaud, soon joined by many of his colleagues and even some MPs opposite. Around me, people were clapping too, as the chamber quickly emptied of men and women heading for the bars. What a victory for persuasion and commonsense.

During my session with the PM, I had placed a "cookie" in her subconscious which was timed to initiate itself at the beginning of December like an alarm. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> I received a very nice letter from her.

*Dear Mr Cook,*

*I found our recent meeting very instructive and learned so much from you. You only have to show the enclosed ID card at the security gate of Downing St to gain admission, but I do request that you give me at least a week's notice of calling as my schedule is quite full. I would appreciate your wise advice by letter, email or 'phone, and of course, when it can be arranged, face-to face - so much better for getting one's message across. You appreciate that I am a busy lady and cannot guarantee an immediate reply. Your advice on Trident was illuminating and compelling, and I am glad to report that the NHS is already reaping the benefit.*

I decided to bide my time in hope and expectation that she would be planning to meet a person who could do a lot of ill or good in the world. In the meantime, as Christmas approaches - where commonsense freezes for a month - I am finding time to report on a very strange case from the summer - a mystery which took me a while to unravel. It centres on a married couple - a very strange one - and it had me baffled and ultimately disgusted.

## **11 A Strange Case**

Mrs X was at her wits' end with her husband. He was convinced that they had a stalker, what used to be known as a Peeping Tom. Mr X had phoned the police on numerous occasions until they had finally lost all patience, having never discovered anyone front or back, and having even sat outside in an unmarked car for most of an evening. They eventually threatened him with a charge of wasting their time. Mr X could not be persuaded by his wife that he was being paranoid. He installed a tall security gate and horrid fence - disgruntling ? his neighbours - plus security lights and cameras at the front and rear of the house. He refused to go on holiday (convinced that the stalker would break in) and began to keep a constant

look-out during the hours of darkness, insisting that his wife took her turn at the windows too. Once he had roused her from her bed at two in the morning and ordered her to follow a lone stranger while he looked for his camera. He turned out to be a drunk who had got lost on the housing estate.

In despair, she had persuaded him - Mr X, not the drunk - to see a doctor, purportedly to get tablets for his anxiety - when in fact she had privately put the doctor fully in the picture. A referral to a psychiatrist had not helped with this strange OCD and now she had asked me for help - on the GP's recommendation (I had cured a patient of his from exposing himself in his back garden - his own, not the doctor's).

Before I speak about our failed consultation I ought to mention that Mrs X was a very attractive woman in her thirties with eyes like Cleopatra and her husband tubby, considerably older and the embodiment of dullness.

Whatever I tried, dear Reader, I could not put him under! At first, I thought that it could be his medication because he seemed remote, but Mrs X who sat next to me on the sofa shook her head.

"You see how strange he is?" she murmurs. "As if he's dreaming."

"Has he ever bumped his head?" I ask as Mr X's eyes follow the swirls on my old carpet.

"No."

"Has he been scanned for a brain tumour?"

"No?"

"Dementia?"

"No. He has his moods. But he can be very sharp, believe me. He does the hard Sudoku in five minutes. The doctors are baffled."

"What? They can't do it?"

She sneers. She is well gorgeous. Our eyes meet and a kind of fire passes. She looks away in disgust. Those bloody ears of mine?

"Reginald? Look at me!!"

I give him a full glare but he returns it with a glassy eye and looks down again at an old tea stain which I have been meaning for thirty years to get rid of. I sense Mrs X flinch with vexation and disappointment.

"I was told you were irresistible, Mr Cook."

"Only to men."

The joke falls as flat as a witch's tit.

"Shan't charge you, Lydia."

"Should think not! Come on Reggie."

He got obediently to his feet and shuffled after her. The door slammed. I lay on the

floor and stared at the ceiling for two hours, thinking I had lost my powers; thinking of that pretty, horrid girl - Rachel - in Mrs Clew's class.

A week later, I received a text from her telling me that after our failed consultation she had persuaded the GP to have him sectioned and she was getting power of attorney.

Two months later, I received an email.

*Ha fkn ha, fooled you! Cleaned out his bank account - miserable old bugger wouldn't go joint. Lovely hot island - wish you were here, Big Ears?*

It was not signed and the address gave no clue as to identity. Their house (they were local) had been sold when I walked by later that day. I was eating a second chocolate éclair when the truth dawned on me. Of course! What a fool!! The cunning minx had hypnotised him!!!

Revenge is savoured best as a dish served cold.....Who said that?

## **12 My Ears**

This is the last time I shall mention them. I admit now that I did get bullied once at school over them - not by a boy but by the pervert of a PE teacher, a round-faced fellow with crooked teeth. His name was spelled Onions but he favoured the less pungent and marginally less ridiculous O'Nions. He found my ears irresistible and made up excuses - blaming me for noise, swearing, farting, spitting, belching etc in the changing room when he knew perfectly well I was innocent - so that he could give them a little tweak. It did not really hurt and he made a little joke about them, calling me Dumbo. It came to a head when I returned to school after an ear infection and he gave the offending one a twist. I ought to have told my parents but they would have shrugged - as they did about most things. ("There's going to be a nuclear war, Dad." - "Ah well, we'll get over it.")

I waited till all the boys had gone and stood in the corner waiting for Onions to come out of his little room where he gave kids the slipper, probably with an erection in his shorts....

The next time he raised his hand to my ear, he let out a yell and shook his hand, as if scalded.

This is – honestly – the last mention I shall make of my ears...I just refer to them once more in order to discuss the “halo effect” and to demonstrate that people are nowhere near in full control of their thoughts and feelings. A handsome politician is more likely to be popular than an ugly one – think of clean-shaven Kennedy (a bastard) and swarthy Nixon (another bastard). My ears are examples of the

opposite - which I shall call the “horns and tail” effect. An ill-tempered D’Arcy makes a bad first impression on Elizabeth causing her to believe absolutely the lies which the polite and friendly (but unscrupulous) George Wickham tells her about D’Arcy’s meanness. Ironically, her sister Jane, normally far less discerning than Liz and predisposed to like everybody - and who has not fallen under Wickham’s spell - cannot believe his story.

My ears have created a subconscious negative impression which many people cannot resist. They have then looked for “evidence” in my look, speech and demeanour to support this impression. Intelligent people are more likely to question such intuitive impulses but most people are too stupid and lazy. I would have to rescue a child from an onrushing train that I’m not that bad – and even then they might say – What a hero! Pity about his ears.....

### 13 Power

“Give me a lever long enough and I shall raise the Earth.” So declared Archimedes. There is so much for virtue to do against an overwhelming tide of evil, and so little opportunity to oppose it. Those of goodwill outnumber, I am sure, the opposite but the latter have the run of the world because the former are too busy. I have the power to improve people’s behaviour and mentality but not the reach. They would, I concede, be Zombies but good ones. *Only until their offspring came of age*, I hear some cynic sneer. Yet imagine a Brave New World of good children and good adults. Would there be any difference between such creatures and Adam and Eve, pre-reptile? *They would not however be moral beings, choosing right over wrong.* They would be obedient to instruction and I would be God-like. Imagine an evil person with my powers. Hitler was supposed to have had a mesmeric fluence. To have persuaded so many, he probably did. But are there not evil persuaders now at work in our media? Should they not be opposed? Does that oblong in the corner of the room condition us to be shallow by its overwhelmingly escapist agenda, the apotheosis of the Trivial? Have not our attention span and capacity for empathy been short-circuited by its fleeting images and its urge to move on, move on, just as the front pages of the nasty papers steer us away from serious issues - or onto those which are of particular interest to their owners? For days now, the crisis in the NHS has been in the tv news. Yet, today the Daily Express was on about yet another wonder-cure for arthritis. I have put it with the medicines, near the Senokot.

If we are adamant that free will is paramount - we might argue that to stifle it would endanger innovation, with unforeseen, cataclysmic consequences - then should we not concede that the Law, a constraint on free will, should also be subject to abolition, since it deters us from choosing what we privately desire? Yet a world without Law would be unbearable and dangerous - and *is* in many regions.

If the Law is of necessity - a means of mind-control - then why not **more** control if the result is **less** evil?

And do not other species we abuse and kill in warfare have per se rights? *Per se*? Yes! If I and a beautiful tree are the only two beings in a space, do I have the right to chop it down? If not, then it must have a right to stand. The denuded, blackened landscapes of WWI and the horrors endured by horses testify to our contempt for our fellow fauna - and flora. If, endowed with free will, our species cannot make rational use of it - and all the evidence says we cannot - then, by the same logic we use to justify the restraint of criminals - should we not \*be put wholesale under more constraint for the benefit of all, born and unborn, and the health of the planet we inhabit - or infest? I use the \*passive voice with resignation because those with power and influence - the most active, the most determined and most driven - are the least suitable people to act unselfishly, wisely and morally.

Those who volunteer for my help are prepared to suspend their free will as it has failed in a respect detrimental to their wellbeing. If Homo Sapiens faces a future of war, famine, boiling heat, floods, storms, desertification - and ultimately extinction - then free will will have failed. *But we need free will to make the right decisions.* Draw your own conclusion.

#### **14 That Woman!**

I knew that I would have to take her by surprise to get my own back. It so happened that Mr X's GP was mine too. I pretended to have a poorly eye and as he bent down to look into it I opened it wide and fixed him. I only wanted to know to which mental facility Mr X had been taken and not many minutes later I was on my way there. I went into reception and announced that I wished to see him. *Oh, he had been discharged weeks ago.* Could she give me details? *Was I a relative?* No. *Then I'm afraid.....* Look here .....*Oh!.....Discharged to his daughter's care in Coventry.* Thank you - just write down the address please. Ta.

Mrs Biddle was furious. Perhaps it is the default setting of people who live in Coventry.....

“What a life for me! That slag Lydia cleaned Dad out and buggered off God-knows-where and left him to me. A bloody Zombie. What chance have I got? Husband's an alcoholic and Dad just sits and stares.”

After I had cured her husband as he lay slumped in a chair, she allowed me upstairs to Mr X. He lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. Whatever Lydia had said to him to keep him under, it was worth trying the simplest antidote.

“After a count of five, you will ignore everything Lydia told you and wake up.”

On five, his eyes flickered and he yawned. Seeing me, he sat bolt upright and said “Who the Charlie Fuck are you - and where am I?”

I stuffed his few poor things in the boot and we drove off in the pouring rain. Coventry is one of the worst places to drive in - it has an inner ring road on stilts and cars criss-cross as they enter and leave it. There ought to be a smash every five seconds. The road markings have vanished and leaving by the correct exit is a challenge - especially with nil visibility. Coventry City, as a punishment, should go down perpetually as far as down goes and play Earlstone United.

Bloody hell - all the time, in spite of my need to concentrate on us not being killed, Reg wanted to keep talking. Five months of his life were a blank and all his money had been stolen! He went through all the things he would do to Lydia when he caught up with her, so unpleasant that I almost put him under again as we waited at the lights. I thought about the architect of that abortion of a city centre behind me and wondered what would be a just punishment for *him*, while Reginald took it in turns to weep, wail and rail against Lydia. Part of me did not blame her for hoodwinking so vile a man, tubby, fat-faced and piggy-eyed. Had he been a nicer man, I might have charged him far less. He fixed his weasel eyes on me as we approached the motorway.

“Hey, hold on! What happened about Brexit?”

“You won.”

“Great.”

Of course, he had nowhere to go so I offered to put him up for a while, as long as he promised to calm down.

“Losing your rag will get you nowhere. She’s a clever, devious woman and I need you to clear your mind of all that anger so that I can track her down. She mentioned a hot island in an email. Where might that be?”

“She was always looking at brochures. She fancied the Caribbean but it wasn’t my cup of tea. Too hot and too many blacks.”

“How many would be not too many?”

“Hey?”

“Blacks. We British put ‘em there.”

“Did we?”

I found a map online and slowly went through the islands in the hope that a name would ring a bell in that dull dome. But all he could recall was an image of her reading a posh brochure with palm trees and a white beach on the cover.

“She must have mentioned a resort or even a hotel. What if I hypnotise you? There’s a fair chance I can retrieve it.”

“You promise you won’t leave me in a trance?”

“Not a chance.”

“Goo on then.”

He was soon asleep.

“Now, Reg, She’s looking at the brochure. Where are you?”

“In the lounge.”

“She’s loving what she sees. She’s getting excited. A luxury hotel.”

“But I say I’m not going. Prefer Majorca.”

“Not going where?”

“Saint Lucia. Sugar Sands.”

“Well done Reg. When you wake up, whenever you see or hear Nigel Farage you will feel sick....”

I could not believe how expensive that exclusive resort was. Thousands for one week - room only! Reg agreed to refund me - and quite a lot more besides - when I had restored his fortune to him.

It was a beautiful hotel. Smart elegant waiters quietly placed drinks and amuses-gueule next to beautiful people stretched on sunbeds while a breeze carried the soft music of the ocean to their ears. Not an ugly fat blurter in sight, not one tattoo. The white sand with tiny granules of silicone did indeed resemble sugar.

I had grown a beard and put on dark glasses to disguise myself. By the third day, without a sign of Lydia, I began to worry that she had gone elsewhere. There was no way that the receptionist would disclose confidential information and I saw no opportunity of “persuading” her in the busy lobby. The solution was obvious.

There was a letter rack with room numbers behind the counter. While the lady was busy, I put a red note on the counter with Lydia’s name on it - because she was bound to go by the name in her passport. I stood back a little and watched until the note was found and put in the rack. Number 39.

When I knocked the door I got a real shock. Instead of lissom Lydia, there stood a tall, handsome black man in a lime bathrobe.

“Ah, I’m so sorry,” I spluttered. “Thought this was Mrs Murphy’s room. Do apologize!”

For extra effect, I staggered back a little while he favoured me with a look of utter scorn. I toddled off and heard the door slam. There was a nook in the corridor with table and chairs and there I made myself comfortable behind a snooty magazine. Scurillous thoughts as to why Lydia had been in camera for three days began to run through my mind. I decided to stay put until she or her lover left the room.

Finally, as midday approached, they both came out hand-in-hand and walked away from me towards the lift. Bronzed and long-legged, with her crimped copper hair, Lydia looked entirely at one with her surroundings and it was impossible to believe that she and Reginald had been an “item”.

The soft hum of the air-conditioning had me dozing when the lift opened and returned the couple about an hour later. She was giggling and a little unsteady. Perfect. Even more perfect when he pecked her on the cheek at the door and left. The dark glasses might be a problem. Hoping she would have taken them off, I



tapped the door. She still had them on. I raised mine and gave her my hardest, widest stare.

“Lydia go and sit down.”

Yelling no, she thrust out her hands, brushed my face, knocking off my glasses and staggered backwards until a chair scooped her up. I whipped off her glasses and the sudden glare worked to my advantage. Her eyes were big and receptive.

“What?” she murmured, with a burp, loaded with the smell you get when you tear back the lid of a tin of sardines, a horrid reminder of the tainted nature and of the illusion of beauty. Did Lydia have a soul?

“What do I want, Lydia? You just relax and listen very carefully. All your muscles are numb. You cannot move them. You should never have called me Big Ears.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Not as sorry as she was going to be.

I went downstairs clutching my notepad and her mobile phone. At the computer table, I went online to her bank and entered her security details. I set up a large standing order to be paid every week to Reg’s account, confirmed by the code which the bank sent to her phone. I had persuaded her not to check her account for as long as I had calculated it would take to drain it. I dumped her phone in a bin.

#### **14 Knowing What But Not Why**

Who controls the media controls the mind.

It was a long flight back and I found myself in the window seat hemmed in by an obese man whose wife had insisted sitting next to the aisle for the *loo* - to which she entrusted her large bottom quite often. My neighbour was quite loquacious and my feigned slumbers did not put him off. It is a certainty that people with racist opinions assume that no-one exceeds them in worldly wisdom and that every stranger upon whom they condescend to vent their spleen will readily share in its bitterness. They believe that everyone looks through their tiny porthole on the world.

“You said you’re from Leicester?”

“Near.”

“Aren’t there lots of immigrants there?”

“Yes, but we’re Premier League champions.”

“Hey?”

His fat mouth made the word immigrants sound like an infestation. He swigged his brandy and looked round at me with a tiny, smug eye.

“They’re all immigrants.” I whispered.

“What?”

“All of them. Romano-British, Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans, Commonwealth, Poles, Romanians.....”

“But we were here first!”

For half-an-hour he fell silent. He ordered another drink. I pretended again to be asleep. His wife heaved herself up to go to the toilet and he nudged me. He was well on his way to insobriety.

“You a left-winger?”

“Somewhat.”

He sneered and made some nasty comment I forget about the leader of the opposition. I had in fact been just about going to sleep and this made me mad.

“Why do you dislike him?”

“He’s useless.”

“In what way?”

“In every way.”

“Name one.”

“He doesn’t look like a leader.”

“How should a leader look?”

He shrugged.

“He looks - well - not like a leader. He has a beard and he’s scruffy.”

“Well the PM is as grey as he is and she keeps her grey beard well out of sight.”

“She ain’t got a beard.”

“She has - she has a lady-shave. Trust me, I’ve met her. Why else don’t you like him, apart from his beard?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

Is it reasonable to think something but not know why? Herein lies again the conundrum of opinion. Take the role of the right-wing press in the Brexit result. Its influence has since been challenged. *People made their own minds up. Seventeen million people voted NO but only a few million read the papers.* But hold on, hold on.... People “see” the headlines at filling stations, shops etc and those slogans get trotted out until the propaganda drifts on the very air like a bad fart. If the press had **praised** the EU as an instrument of peace, progress and cooperation all those years, would the result have been the same? Has the press no influence? Why then did Blair suck up to Murdoch? Why did Cameron try to have Dacre of the Mail sacked?

“How can you not like a man and yet not explain why? I hate coffee because it’s bitter.”

He shrugged again.

“Is he too left wing?”

“YES!”

“In what respects?”

“Oh, I dunno.”

“So you’re ignorant.”

“No I ain’t. Not that interested in politics.”

“What if I told you that I could persuade you to like him?”

“Impossible!”

“Wanna bet?”

“Bottle of champers?”

“You’re on.”

By the time his wife waddled back we were sharing a nice bottle of Bollinger at his expense.

“Blimey,” she said. “Ain’t you already had enough?”

“We’re just toasting the Labour leader.” said he.

“Him? Thought you hated him. Scruffy sod.”

“A very shallow view, dearest. Let me give you chapter and verse.....”

I closed my eyes well satisfied while he leant away from me and bored his wife stiff with facts and figures for ages until she shouted at him - “He’s a terrorist sympathizer – it said so in the paper! .....Oops.....I need to goo toilet again.”

“Cor! I hope they douln’t all think that were ME done that, Mildred.”

Allow that outburst to provide another digression.....

One of the more perverse effects of a past characterized by tyranny is its poisoning of politics in the modern era. I have discussed how delusions of “greatness” create a costly “need” for weapons of mass destruction to deter an imagined enemy – of whom the (Swiss) are blissfully unaware. They are not filling their pants over the Russians, the Iranians and the N Koreans as they eat their (fondues). No, such paranoia is peculiar to us and distorts our spending priorities and deprives genuine areas - health, housing, infrastructure and education – of resources. My father was a silent victim of such neglect. How many more?

Similarly, those residual outposts of empire and tyranny are potential sources of conflict. The Falklands War, in spite of all the grandiloquent talk of freedom and – oh irony! – resistance of tyranny, was an anachronistic, expensive and lethal folly. Please do not say – *we could never have discussed sovereignty with a dictator like Galtieri* – when we sit down for tea with the murderous Saudis!

Gibraltar could be another flashpoint. Ulster has been and remains a political volcano. Left-wingers – and this is the point of the digression – are able to empathize with those who oppose British occupation of their territory, but are idiotically labelled “terrorist sympathizers” by the rotten press and their brainwashed readers. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. The ability to see a situation from another’s point of view – he may be an opponent or even an enemy – is not a defect but an invaluable asset. If I can understand why another thinks the

way he does, there is more chance of defeating him in debate or even on the battlefield. In a difficult negotiation, does mutual empathy make a just settlement more or less likely? An unwillingness to stand at another's vantage point is a weakness, not a strength. Misguided patriotism over stale leftovers of empire creates a mental fog. In order to clear such fogs from conflicted political landscapes, in the great cause of peace, illumination via *analogy* is essential. Imagine Yorkshire had been occupied by the Germans and German settlers brought over. A resistance organization – a British equivalent of the I.R.A. – would inevitably take up the armed struggle if all other means of liberation failed. In such a struggle the lives of innocents would be lost and the Germans would label the resisters terrorists. Germans in Berlin who opposed their continuing occupation of Yorkshire would no doubt be called terrorist sympathizers by the German press. I have no idea how many innocent French citizens became casualties in the resistance to the Nazi occupation, but I would imagine that its leaders were determined to keep the numbers as low as possible, not merely on patriotic and humanitarian, but on logical and political grounds – they did not wish to lose support. Those who *deliberately* target civilians – from the Provos to Isis – are not only despicable but also politically inept.

Any gardener will tell you that in order to eradicate a pernicious and evil weed, the roots and not just the stems have to be identified. If the roots have spread from my garden to infect a neighbour's, then the process has to begin with me. If I am a good neighbour, then I will recognize and accept my responsibility. If I can imagine how *I* would feel if my garden was invaded by *his* weeds, I have empathy....

It would have taken ages to tell my new ally's wife all of that, leaning across him as he snored. Besides she was soon asleep too and they did not wake until we landed.

I got home to Reginald and gave him the good news. The next morning he packed and left to find a nice flat. And he sent me a fat cheque as soon as he saw his first payment arrive. He would get back his three quarters of a million before Lydia would be asked politely to settle her bill - because the debit arrangement she had made with the hotel would have failed.

Despite the rich rewards, the ethical uncertainty of that case unsettled me - Lydia and Reginald were both shits - and it kept me awake - so I was pleased to be distracted soon afterwards by a case where there was moral certainty - at least as far as the ends were concerned, and it had a lot to do with roots of the non-metaphorical variety.

## **15 The Bad Neighbour**

The universe originated in a state of turmoil, we are told, whereas the world around us appears largely settled. Granted, volcanoes and earthquakes remind us that below us, it is not. The rocky planets are, to some extent, exceptions to the rule that the cosmos still fizzles with energy. It is an irony indeed that the sublunary conception of the ancients is the reverse of the truth. The illusion of stability - for in view of sub-atomic turbulence, that is precisely what it is - might convince us that the anthropomorphic idea of God creating a planet more than less ideally suited for mankind is correct. It is undeniable that with Time the universe has become more complex in its elemental substance - from the original strings ? to helium and hydrogen and on and on and beyond - and this could be interpreted as Purpose, (although recent computer research demonstrates that the development of mathematical complexity in a model is a natural tendency) - to which one of a teleological persuasion might ask the question *why* it does. But is there an ultimate Why? At what point - and why - does a child learn to ask the question why? Is why an invention or a discovery? If mankind were wiped out tomorrow, would the **reason** for a source of heat causing water to turn to steam disappear with us? Surely we have *discovered* causality. All such speculation about the *creative* impact of Man's intellect on reality is a bit like walking a maze without exit points. Frustrating but absorbing.

Anyway, my point is that if - IF - the universe began with purpose, then maybe the point and the culmination of it is the development - like a beautiful flower - of love. The roots are the strings post Big Bang, the stars and the planets the leaves, life forming via evolution the stalk, the bud humanity - a very mixed bloom. What if I could become an agent, deputy of Christ, whereby Evil is confronted - like canker and aphids - and nullified? Mad? You bet. But it is a nice madness to be gripped by - and it does no harm, only good. Take my neighbours who for years had suffered due to the cantankerous and cankerous selfishness of one of their number. And I had no idea that such misery existed on my doorstep until one came round - in tears - and knocked on my door....

“Come into the kitchen and I'll make you a cup of tea.”

She was lovely, about forty, face like an apple with large, intelligent blue eyes. Intelligent *eyes*? You know what I mean. Some eyes just sparkle with cleverness. Consuela had told her about me. She lived in a house beyond Consuela's at the end of a short footpath which led into a close, marked out by tall evergreen trees, of which, until that day, I had taken no particular notice.

“He won't budge, won't answer the door, won't respond to letters. We can't sell and move away and my husband is so depressed, he can't work. We're all desperate.”

“All” were the neighbours whose properties adjoining the back garden of the man

whose Leylandii were the bane of their lives. They sucked the moisture and life out of the soil and caused their sheds and greenhouses to tilt. Nothing would thrive in their borders and their lawns were straw. Scattered under the trees were piles and piles of bottles. The man was a recluse and alcoholic.

“Fred got onto a ladder and looked over - he was going to try and poison the bloody trees. Wine bottles, gin, whiskey. He’s a monster.”

They had come together and taken advice. The council was suffering from its usual municipal apathy; legal action would be costly and uncertain - and even if successful, enforcing a court order difficult.

“He won’t come to the door - just shouts abuse. He’s miserable and wants everybody else to be.”

She sobs again and I venture to put a comforting hand on her arm. How could I persuade the man to do the right thing if he refused to answer the door?

“He must go out sometimes?” At this she shrugs.

It was my self-appointed role in life to address the weaknesses of my patients, voluntary and otherwise. I decided, without much debate, that it was ethically proper to address this man’s weakness because, even if it did him no “good” to have his behaviour altered, its alteration would benefit those around him. I had therefore no scruples at all about discovering an underhand means to alter him. (Doubtless, there would be many idealistic critics of this pragmatic view who would argue that the perpetrator of misery had primary rights too - the due process of law was the paramount argument. To that one might respond by saying that the law is a slow, stubborn and silly ass, or a lumbering sacred cow; that the sufferers might well have gone mad or died before justice were done. (Think of Bleak House.)) Clearly, this man was an alcoholic but I was not much interested in the causes. Perhaps drink had ruined his life; perhaps a life ruined by disappointment had driven him to drink. His contempt for his neighbours might be incidental or a consequence of it. I had been offered a thousand pounds to “sort him out” and get the trees cut down. After much thought, the obvious solution to his intransigence was to use his own weakness against him.

I bought some whiskey and wine and parked between his house and his immediate neighbour’s. What a terrible mess his front garden was; grass a foot high, dandelions and litter. In contrast, his neighbour’s lawn and borders were neat and pretty. How many lives are ruined by bad neighbours? I sat there watching for signs of life behind the brown curtains. After twenty minutes, I papped my hooter. A few minutes later, I papped again. The curtains twitched. I got out and unloaded two bags, as well as the wine carrier. Leaving the bottles on the pavement, I walked, as prearranged down the drive of the old lady who lived next door, as if philanthropically delivering her shopping. I waited for five minutes and then went back to the car and drove away, leaving the bait, as if by oversight, on the

pavement. Out of view, just around the bend I stopped, got out, nipped back and crept past the front window of the lady - to crouch behind a shrub. The sun came out and made the bottles glint. Could he resist? Maybe he was deciding that he had a moral duty to take care of the bottles in case they were stolen; maybe he thought a child might take them. He would need an alibi, in case I came back for them - and if I never came back for them, then more fool me.....

The door creaked open. A profile appeared, cracked and grey, reminding me of the large tortoise at Twycross poking out of its shell. Looking suspiciously left and right, the head was followed by a bent body in a string vest. In slippers he sauntered out nonchalantly, made as if surprised to discover the wine carrier and picked it up. Before he could turn I had slipped into the house. The "air" nearly felled me - feet, farts, fags and a filthy gloom. I sat down at the back of the lounge and he came in singing Chirpy, Chirpy, Cheep, Cheep - then yelled NO and began slapping his head with his spare hand. I leapt up and caught him cold with a searching stare.

I soon found out that he had £155 000 in savings and that that stupid song was ruining his life. It woke him up at night and he lay there unable to stop it. Like Consuela's clacking teeth. (What misery do all those unsmiling heads contain?) "It's what the Germans call an earworm." I told him. "But Chirpy, Chirpy, Cheep, Cheep didn't ruin your life, did it?"

"No. I think it's punishment for drinking. My ears sing."

His wife had been long gone, run off with a traffic warden who was going to give her a ticket. Her departure had caused him to drink, not vice versa. I told him that he would never be able to drink another drop without feeling sick and that he was going to be a good neighbour; that he would pay to have his trees cut down and, in return, his neighbours - and I - would landscape and restore his garden to good health.

A mantelpiece clock stopped at 2 13 had summed up his life. I had simply made it go again. "Normal" hypnotherapists do best when the subject is willing; some, the least talented, maintain that they can *only* practice their art when the subject is willing. When Freud invented the Id - the big, bad wolf of primitive urges - he conjured up a battle between it and the super-ego - the modern version of the soul - for control of the ego; another word for the mind, the personality, the individual. It was a theory based on religion minus God. But the theory is suspect. It is not the Id which is nullified in hypnotherapy but the super-ego.

Stan, as the tree-man was called, when stripped of his nasty *persona* - (there's another character in the psycho-drama / farce) - was perfectly pleasant and reasonable; the Id, exposed, did not snarl like a dog. It was as if he had been held prisoner and I had set him free. Was Hitler controlled by some subconscious urge

to be nasty or by a “person” who had grown in his mind like a cancer, stung, if that is the right word, into being by a whole series of horrid experiences, beginning with his cruel stepfather / uncle, continuing with his penis failing to develop and culminating in the demise of his beloved fatherland in 1918 - akin to the death of his own true father - and rejection of his self-belief and desire to be appreciated (as in childhood) by the Vienna School of Art? Perhaps his cat-and-dog-caressing Id was sound. If a child can be physically crippled by, say, polio, then it stands to reason that it can be mentally crippled by a lack of love. A psychopath = one with a sick mind, is not born but created. It is the gatekeeper who is sick not the dog in the kennel. Granted, he can kick the dog until it is rendered as vicious as he is. Stan wanted to be kind but his resenting and self-pitying controller preferred to be cruel. I had got rid of him in a moment after he had ruled Stan, unchallenged, for years. I wish I could go back and persuade that Viennese assessment board of Hitler’s artistic potential. It would have saved a lot of bother.

I decided to waive my fee. Doing good is often reward enough. I sit here now wondering how many prisoners could tell of unhappy childhoods compounded by the misery of being unable to get to grip with the absurd English spelling “system”. Most sufferers crave love, pity and understanding, and finding none, respond with hatred. How many aggressors would be utterly disarmed by the hand of friendship from their sworn enemy rather than the clenched fist they expect? King Alfred shared his kingdom with his Viking adversary Guthrum, rather than subject everyone to interminable war. This was surely the most underrated act of wisdom in history.

But while we still call kindness weakness little will improve.

## **16 The Comic**

But, being only human, when provoked, I can hate with the best of them. There is a stand-up comedian, who ought to sit down - permanently. He is baby-faced but as hard as nails. Some time ago, there arose a scandal about him not paying his taxes “legally.” There are few things more likely to rile me, surpassing littering and speeding, than freeloading. When I found out that he was a freeloader, I nearly blew a fuse.

His tours are sell-outs - which makes me despair even more about human taste and judgment. I noticed in the local press that he was appearing locally so I hurried to buy a ticket for £70 - the greedy bastard - on the theatre website - choosing to be seated on the end of a row near the back.

On he came to rapturous - O Me Miseram! - applause. His routine was not funny and many of his barbs were cruel but this did not deter the silly audience from laughing. They were forcing themselves to laugh as if driven by the subconscious



desire to have their money's worth having paid up to a hundred pounds; not to laugh would have been a waste of money. I imagined them leaving and in the cold evening air and lamplight saying - what the fuck was I laughing at? Glancing around as stony-faced as I could manage, I noticed that many seemed pre-loaded and pissed. Had I been able to rush round the audience using my fluence prior to the appearance of the loathsome creature, he would have been making his inane remarks to a chill silence. In a lull of faint laughter I sprang to my feet.

"Pay your fucking taxes, you scrounger!"

But it was not me yelling. A voice on the far side had beaten me to it. The audience gasped and some laughed in embarrassment. Stewards were rushing down from the front trying to identifying the source of the voice - a female one. Some people were standing, pointing at the culprit.

"Yes, you greedy bastard," I yelled. "Pay up."

A hundred pasty faces swivelled to look at me. Somebody made a grab at my leg and a fat, multi-tattooed woman munching popcorn told me to shut up. Others, smiling and clapping thought it might be better fun than the act.

"That's a nasty slit you've got under your nose, matey!" shouted the really nasty baby. "You ought t' get it sewed up!"

A smattering of laughter and applause. He was obviously well prepared for hecklers. Being furious, but no master of wit and repartee, I was about to return - *you bollocks* - when my unseen partner in crime served an absolute ace.

"A pity your mother didn't get sewn up before your dad took an interest in her slimy wotsit - source of another - you."

The bouncers gave me a gentle leg-and-a-wing and I landed on the small of my back on the soft grass. At the feet of my fellow-heckler. I knew her!

"You okay?" she asked, crouching down and offering me a toffee. "Hold on, don't I know you?"

"Yes. I hypnotised you in Blackpool - to my regret and shame. I suspect you were brainwashed by some pretty unscrupulous people first, but that is no excuse."

In the drizzle I offered to hypnotize her back but she was adamant.

"No! You changed my life. I was going nowhere fast with my Tory partner. He had photos of all the main Brexiters on his kitchen wall board - and I was a secret Remainer. I have a degree in Modern Languages, you see."

"I read that people who speak another language develop dementia later than monoglots."

"Really?"

"Yes. It was in the Daily Mail, so it must be right. Your PM was a secret Brexiter."

"A very devious piece of work. Once outside in the rain in Blackpool, I saw the light. Davey held his umbrella over my head and I fell in love..."

“He....?”

“...kind of hypnotised me.”

I became aware of a young man nervously smoking a few yards behind her.

“Well, if you ever change your mind....”

“About Davey?”

“No, politics. Send me an email. Here’s my card.”

She was so lovely and it took me a while to stop thinking about her - and cursing my ears, and Davey - and his broolly.

\*

An unexpected text from an unknown source ended a few days of despondency. Apart from my loneliness, the world was turning sourer and I imagined it as a smouldering green bonfire about to send out a deadly flare. My text read - “*Come round for a coffee*” - Stan. I racked my brains. Then I realised it was the tree-man. Someone must have given him my mobile number.

I found him and his home transformed. A young man was clearing his garden in which the trees lay neatly sawn up. It was a sunny afternoon and he invited me outside. To my astonishment and embarrassment he took my hand and began to weep, telling me I was his saviour. I spluttered some kind of disclaimer but he waved it away, telling me he wanted to tell me his tale. So here it is....

As a young man, Stan had studied Theology at Oxford. He had applied to become a minister in one of the non-conformist churches. A terrible bomb outrage in Ulster had shaken his faith so badly that he had withdrawn into a mental corner to which his wife found no access and, seeking happiness elsewhere, she had left - to his disgust - with the traffic warden. (He reckoned he was the fellow who had given him a ticket for overstaying by just five minutes in an Earlstone carpark.)

“Parking fees are legalized extortion.”

“I agree. But how did things deteriorate?”

“The garden grew around me like I was Sleeping Beauty, except I was the opposite - a misanthrope, a miscreant and all the ugly rest. I did not have the courage to take my own life and hoped that drink would take me off in my sleep. I could not pray properly anymore and times I cried out - Lord take me! And then you came - with the power of good and ill. Thank God it was good.”

Then he began to speak of Genesis - for him the most meaningful book in the Old Testament.

“What a remarkable allegory – not merely of Creation – but, in Chapter One, of the evolution of species! And what an insightful metaphor for the human condition! In Chapter Three Adam swapped his blissful ignorance for self-awareness. He was a

foraging ape, sub-humanoid. Beneath the tree of knowledge, in an instant, he becomes human. He and Eve become *self*-conscious and ashamed of their nakedness. The arrival of self-consciousness coincides beautifully with the use (implied) of a tool to sew together fig leaves to cover their shame. Awareness of death follows in the expulsion from Eden. These insights of whoever wrote Genesis by the power of thought alone to reveal truths about humanoid and human development, confirmed thousands of years later by Darwin, by paleontology and by anthropology, are truly astonishing – so much so that I believe them divinely inspired. And no animal, as Adam had been, knows it must die - until the fateful moment - as we do unless we are small children. I remember becoming aware that my mother would die and I cried until I worked out it would be fifty years away - which seemed an age for a small child of five.”

I told him I could not remember becoming aware of our mortality but that I doubted Adam’s innocence.

“Adam must have had free will in advance of the arrival of the serpent. Otherwise God would not have warned him about taking the apple.”

“But no! It was sheer disobedience.”

“Ah! A choice between that and obedience. God told him not to taste the apple which implies that God knew that Adam had a green and budding free will. Adam’s dilemma was not helped by Eve, but the main culprit in the tale is not her, not him, not the snake - but God.”

“How come?”

“He let him see the apple but did not warn him of the consequences of disobedience - thorns, pain, exile and death. Had Adam known, then the luscious scent of the fruit would have faded to insignificance in comparison to the loss of Paradise. How much more content we would all be now - instead Cain killed Abel - and still does.”

We argued long into the evening, me contending that free will was an illusion; that every second led inexorably to the next, carrying everything in space along to the next point. There was simply no time for free will. Every key decision was in fact determined by the evolving circumstances and it was sheer good fortune if the decision turned out not to be bad. (I had read Denis Diderot whose Jacques The Fatalist had told his master that everything was determined in a great scroll from the sky, to which his master retorted that he could throw himself off his horse by an act of sheer will to disprove the theory. Jacques countered that such an act - although unusual and absurd - would indeed be part of that scroll - pre-determined by the discussion which had just taken place between them. That futile act would be a link in Causality - (pointed out by Jacques’ awareness of the Paradox - resulting from his necessarily developed intelligence and elevation from the brutal state of his simian ancestors) - I add in post-Darwinian parentheses.

But what forced Stan to agree in the end was my pointing out that he had not the willpower to stop Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep playing in his head. As if to prove that the unexpected is part of that inescapable continuum of events, he ferreted out a bottle of brandy. I agreed to de-hypnotize him, and we got pissed. Whether that leads to him regressing is already determined by the strength of his willpower or lack of it. It was his last fling, he said. I can always re-hypnotize him if he relapses. I only wish I could go back in time to stop Adam grabbing the apple. Would you?

Anyway, I'm shattered and am turning out the light now at well gone three.

Whether it was Stan's brandy or the chunk of Stilton I ate before retiring, I have just had a troubling dream and am awake again at four thirty. The window is dark blue and I can imagine England just on the planetary turn from the darkness into the semi-blur before the dazzle of the sun. The pigeons are already drowning out the dawn chorus and one sounds as if he is shouting "Your beer is shit, your beer is shit," which makes me feel much worse. Another one is making the same accusation with the same vehemence on a roof further away.

My dream? I am on a mountain track pursued by a lava flow which is steadily overtaking me. I feel its heat growing and hear the crackling creep of its progress as it eats up whatever flora lies in its path. I cannot move faster, having the will but not the *willpower*. Darkness begins to fall as I become hotter and hotter. It feels like death is imminent but curiously there is no pain. Then, as my eyes open, I find that the darkness is only the darkness of my room, and, grateful to return to life, I struggle against the constraint of the sweaty, twisted rivulets of my duvet.

We immediately try to make sense of our dreams as, I suppose, we always have.

What was the lava flow? In my mind's eye, I picture a landscape, grey and rugged and twisted for the most part on the cooling surface, but with a glowing orange vanguard in pursuit of its inevitable course. I suddenly picture Stan shaking his head as I tell him that if he believes in an all-knowing, all-powerful God who is the alpha and omega of all things, then he must surely accept that the history of the universe was already written in that first instant, which would play out like a piano-roll, whether the Composer or Pianist was watching or not.

Then, as night-wandering minds do, I think away and beyond - and of my favourite singer Kathleen Ferrier and reach for my booklet of sonnets.

#### KATHLEEN

When All was strewn were angels meant to be  
In all the rage and tumult of that Birth?  
What Force distilled her noble entity,  
From swirling chaos round the charging Earth;

The spirit and eerie velvet of her voice  
Sweet potential since the seething world began,  
Within the Serendipity of Choice,  
Fashioned in accordance with some Plan.....?  
A contralto seraph, humane and warm, whose grace  
The fickle air did charm and hearts did mend,  
She blossomed from that black and monstrous Space  
Where her beauty must have been one subtle end.

The fleeing stars should stop and pause to hear  
What wonders from their matrix may appear.

At once I realise with a shudder of something like horror that every thought I have ever had and every word I have ever spoken from the most childish onwards have been pre-determined and recorded in my mind. That I cannot play the recording is irrelevant. The next thought that horrifies me is that, like the lava flow, all future thoughts and words will emerge and be fixed like the grey landscape. To shout out a string of nonsense in refutation would be the equivalent of Jacques' master tossing himself from his horse.

In the wider world beyond my head, all the interventions I have made, from the baffling of Mrs Clews, of the Goole boy in the tennis courts, of the traffic warden - to the persuasion of the defence secretary that Trident was an absurd un-necessity - all those interventions were, like Kathleen Ferrier, bound to happen - because they had! - and were inevitable since the first tick of time and the first surge of primitive hot matter ready to flow. If pre-destination is a Strait-jacket, it sits so easily and comfortably that we only notice it when we think about it. We are prisoners of air, sunlight and gravity, but it is an open prison.

And yet, I tell myself, I could have ignored Consuela's cry for help and her clacking teeth, the cuckolded businessman's suffering and could have turned my back on the tree-despairing neighbours. I had and have the power of yes and no - and always will have. Shall I get up now? No. Shall I write another word? Yes. Yes, no, no, yes.....Shall I stay on my horse? Yes, because to throw myself onto the rocky trail would be stupid and harmful. Do we for the most part make rational, self-protective decisions? The baby-faced comedian had ruined his reputation with many because of his greed, even if he had done his finances good. Stan had not done the rational thing and had caused suffering. Reason could and should rule the world. It was reasonable to love and respect others in the hope and expectation that they would love and respect me in return. Greed, conceit and selfishness - rather than proper and proportionate regard for self - caused distortions in the Fabric. The PM had failed to get in touch again. I could have told her that it was risky to

call an election, fearing as I did that she would scupper the Left. And it looks increasingly unlikely that her new-found friend will come and see us as she has less time, struggling with new problems of her own making. Her decision will, for good or ill, cause a billion ripples in the flow of time. A defeated Tory MP might take to drink, take to religion, take off, take a liberty, take revenge.....

I thought about taking her up on her standing invitation. I had the ID card which she sent. But no, I dislike London. Anyhow, she was doing enough to put at risk a cause which I hate without any further assistance from me. I could claim here and now to have put the thought of a risky election in her mind but it would not be true. Her new-found friend would have been a challenge to me because he seems to avoid eye-contact and getting him on his own when he has so many acolytes would have been difficult. I do worry that it is written in the stars - literally - that as a tool of unreason he will wreak havoc; perhaps another ripple in the flow is destined to intercept and neutralise him before he does. Me? But do you know what change I would have made in him before any other? Abandoning the Wall? Restoring health care? Being tolerant of Muslims? None of these - well not at first. The first thing I would have made him do which he never does?

Smile.

## **17 A Letter**

My Dear Robert Cook,

I write to you in difficult times. The last few weeks have been the most trying of my life. Against my better judgment, I was persuaded to call an election in order to grind a party I hate into the ground and clear the decks for Brexit. I shall not name him who persuaded me, except to say that he should get his hair cut. Did he have an ulterior motive? Whatever the truth, I find myself in troubled waters surrounded by smiling sharks. I am not a people-person and cannot act spontaneously when confronted by tragedy of which, latterly, there is an overload. I have been forced to throw my two closest advisors overboard to the sharks and was even thinking of leaving this place to attend to my roses when I suddenly remembered you last night as I was making cocoa. Please come to me and let your soothing words do their work. I need good advice. My people will be briefed to allow you into Downing St if you are wearing the badge I sent you,

Yours in despair,

T.

PS – another party would also like to meet you.

Well, well, well, as the drunken pussy said before he fell into the nearest one. It looks as if it is written on that great roll in the sky that I shall go to London after all.

### **18 A Strange Meeting**

I found myself with my new friend in a richly decorated room far, far too high for us. I understood immediately that it was designed to inspire awe, and, therefore, awe I pretended to feel. The PM seemed pleased to see this effect it had on me and patted the cushion next to her on the plush sofa. I pretended not to have read the cue and stood my ground.

“I am so glad you could come, Robert,” said she in a whisper. “I have no idea whom to trust in this building anymore.”

She seemed however to be at ease and her long hand did not tremble as she poured me a drink. Through a chink in the door to the next room I saw shadows moving and could make out two voices, one low, one high, one emollient, one angry.

“There is a person next door whom I would like you to meet. He turned up half-an-hour ago unexpectedly. He needs reassurance too and you have just the right manner to do the trick.”

As if by magic the door opened a little wider and, spying for a second a mop of blonde hair, I thought – God, no! It can’t be – *him* here? Now? How? Impossible! I went to take a closer look. The owner of the mop was shuffling backwards, head bowed, so that I could not get a good look at the face. The door now opened fully and I stepped forward, just in time to see the ample rear of the Foreign Secretary disappearing. Disappointed, I looked back at the PM who was urging me to go further into the room. I could hear the whine of the second speaker muttering to himself – a voice familiar but one I could not place. Two long legs, a walking stick and two gnarled hands were all I could see of the man sitting on the sofa just behind the door.

“Please go in,” urged the PM. “His bark –“

“Bleddy idiot!” now burst forth the mystery guest. “Who does he think he is, the scruffy buffoon, to tell me to grin and bear it? I’d swear he’s swipecy...”

Swipecy?

“Did we elect a bleddy Tory government to drop me and *her* in the brown and sticky without a by-your-leave? She should have showed her the door and asked that red chap with the beard – he wouldn’t have.....Hello? Who’s there? Show yourself and stop skulking! If it’s you, Medem, we are not on terms...”

She gave me a shove and there I was stupefied to find myself face-to-face with...

“Your Royal Highness. I am so pleased to meet you.”

No! A Royalist is the last thing I am, but it is almost a part of our British genes to feel humbled by our Betters.

“And who the hell might you be? Minor minister of hers? Never clepped eyes on you.”

“No, Sir.”

“A servant??”

“No. He’s my Special Advisor.”

“I told you, Medem, we are not on TERMS. You do no more than go over there, and ask that vulgar words fail me creature over to stay with us, off your own bet....”

His hands gripped the silver Corgi on the top of his stick so tight that they whitened and he cleared his throat making the loose skin wobble. He fixed me savagely with his marbly eyes and said

“Advisor? What do I need advice for at my age? *She*’s sent me over to tell you that we won’t heve it – that she’ll have a chill so you’ll have to put that foul men up here – or with that Boris fellow – I’m sure they’d get on famously.”

“He’s charming behind all the bluster –“

“What? He’d probably grab her hend, like he did yours – or worse. It was bed enough to put up with that Romanian at the Palace – Ceaucescki –“

“Ceaucescu.”

“Yes, him, the bounder! Just to please thet Cellaghen, bleddy fellow traveller. Three days of pure hell. The man stole towels and silver service...hhrumph. What’s your name anyway?”

“Robert Cook. I think I can help.”

If I had to hypnotise him into compliance, then of course, I would have to do the same with his wife. That could be construed as treason, if it came to light. So I could see only one solution. I turned to the PM who was half hiding, half peeking, and said.

“Do I get the impression that your decision to invite him over was one which – shall we say – was taken in the heat of the moment?”

The Duke leant forward and stared at her savagely.

“Well. I was trying to be strong and stable and decisive so as to cement our special relationship. But, but...”

Here she snivelled and hung her head.

“He grabbed me while no-one was looking just before we came on camera. I’d already asked him to come over by then. How could I disininvite him?”

“Bleddy hooligan! I’d set the dogs on him if he tried that with Liz.”

I began to tell them of my plan and gradually their faces lit up.

“Well,” said HRH “That sounds fine by me. Do you think you can persuade him? He strikes me as someone who likes to get his own way. And of course if you go



over as plain Mr Cook you won't cut much ice. Wait outside a moment will you, while I bring myself to speak to Medem here."

After five minutes of whispering and some exclamations on both sides I was asked to return.

"Would you please kneel down, Cook. I'll do the honours. *She* won't mind."

I did as I was told and felt the walking stick settle first on my right then on my left shoulder.

"I dub you Sir Robert Cook and appoint you to be our special royal emissary to Washington, care of the British Embassy, in charge of making arrangements for the presidential visit....I don't think."

"I knew Robert could come to the rescue!" exclaimed the PM, beaming through her tears at HRH, who seemed less than convinced.

"Hmm. We'll see about that. Now, just have my mobility scooter brought round to the front door, will you, and I'll be off."

### **19 In Which I Meet The Most Powerful Man On Earth**

"You are Her Majesty's special emissary, Sir Robert?" asks the great man, putting aside my letter of introduction. "That is a very fine suit, Sir. Saville Row? May I feel?"

I tell him to help himself and feel a strange charge of electricity shoot up my arm as he rubs my cuff. His eyes meet mine with a look of troubling intensity. Therein lies a conviction of rightness almost impossible to shake. I will have to catch him completely off-guard. He is staring me out and I tactically give way, making him draw his face up smugly almost into a smile.

"Mmm – I must order myself some suits when I come over," he mutters, gesturing me towards a chair. I pinch myself. Yes, I am in the Oval Office. Two aides whom I recognize from photos I have been shown at the embassy are standing unsmiling behind his desk. Can I get rid of them?

"I can let you have ten minutes tops," says he, waving his right hand, thumb and forefinger forming, as usual, an arsehole. "I have to tweet a new threat to that Kim Jong fella - and there is someone I have to fire in my team....forget who though."

An aide approaches and whispers a name into his ear.

"Eh? I thought I fired him yesterday!"

"No, Mr President...that was whisper, whisper..."

"WHAT?? He's a good guy. You go and unfire him this minute!"

The slick aide hurries away and leaves just the one to get rid of.

"Anyhow, Sir Cook, how may I be of assistance?"

"Can we be alone, Sir. This is rather delicate."

"Oh no, oh no....I always keep a witness...there is so much goddam fake news out there about me. We are being recorded but I still like extra company. Now, what's

on your mind?”

I tell him that the Duke at 96 had given up public engagements and needed his peace and quiet.

“He tires very easily and Her Majesty is very concerned that he should not be put under pressure.”

He is reading my thoughts and begins to nod sardonically.

“How many rooms in the Palace?”

“Not sure. About eighty?”

“How many people am I and this man and the one just gone out?”

“Three?”

“So we need three rooms. And I’ll watch tv.”

“What about all your other staff?”

“I’ll book a coupla floors at the *Savoy*,” he replies with a snarl. “I’ll only need one more guy near me – the schmuck with the nuclear codes in his briefcase who’s sitting outside.”

“But there will be breakfasts and dinners and lunches –“

“They can send mine up – or I’ll send out a guy for some goddam fish and chips....”

“I’ve come to offer you accommodation at Downing Street – or Chequers. Then the Duke would only need to be present at the farewell banquet on your last night at the Palace.”

“Chequers?”

“It’s the PM’s country retreat. Well away from left-wing protesters.”

“Ah! So that’s it.”

He begins to shift his papers around on the desk absent-mindedly and I see my chance when the aide takes a call on his phone. I duck down into his eye-line and give him the most powerful stare I have ever mustered.

“Send him OUT,” I whisper.

For a second, I think I have failed. He just looks back at me almost wistfully. Then he gets up and whispers to his aide to leave.

\*

I am privileged to be at his shoulder when he begins his press conference, hurriedly convened after he has consulted a while with me.

“After due deliberation with my new British advisor, we have decided to make the following policy changes, effective as from now. One – Kim Jong Un is cordially invited to the White House for tea and donuts. Two – we will endeavour to persuade the Cousins to abandon Brexit. Three – all illegals in the US – apart from those with serious – and I mean serious – criminal records, will benefit from an

amnesty. Four – we will immediately create a fund through progressive taxation to pay for health care for our citizens on the British model. To this fund I will contribute half of my personal wealth in remorseful recognition of my previous tax avoidance strategies. Five – we will be pleased to visit Britain but will not impose ourselves on their majesties as they deserve peace and quiet. Six – as from this moment all gun sales in this great country are prohibited. All guns must be surrendered to local police stations by midnight. Refusal to comply will be punishable by ten years incarceration. The use of a gun in any crime will incur a sentence of life imprisonment. Seven – we will make plans to phase out oil, gas and coal from our economy and introduce wind, solar and hydro power within ten years. Eight – we will engage in serious multilateral talks to abolish nuclear weapons from the planet. As a gesture, twenty percent of our stockpile will be destroyed by the end of this year. Nine – the United States will aim to eliminate disease, poverty and water pollution from the Third World within my term of office. Sanctions will be applied to those corrupt leaders whom we deem to be obstacles to the welfare of their citizens. Ten – we will not interfere by stealth in the internal affairs of other countries to subvert them.

In conclusion, I submit that it is enshrined in the American Constitution that the pursuit of happiness is the right of all. We will, by progressive taxation and by the introduction of a generous minimum wage, reduce the gross inequality of income between poorest and richest here. We will reduce our absurd military spending to what is commensurate with the threat to our country and spend those freed-up resources wisely and virtuously. That will be all. I am not taking questions.”

As he retreats, the stunned audience gets to its feet and cheers him to the rafters. Is he really going to make America great again? I pinch myself.

\*

As I fly home, half-dreaming, I gaze down at the endless blue of the Atlantic. It is easy to imagine that there are no land masses, no solid ground on which the corrupt sons and daughters of Adam vie, conspire, mistreat, mislead, despise and destroy. I think of the whales, dolphins, fish, plankton and corals hidden below, utterly oblivious to the naughtiness of their bipedal relatives above; below, where the bigger consume the littler only because they are hungry; below, where there is no cruelty or torture, where the littler fish only hide out of instinct – no terror, only instant death and the removal of the burden of existence, where the faeces and rotting flesh drift and sink in a constant recycling of matter into the descendants of the deceased – unselfconscious, soulless replicas of them who might as well be them. O Stan of the wicked garden! Why had God not rested on the fifth day and ended the project there? Pondering the implications of this, I drift off completely to

sleep and dream of a deserted white beach lapped by gentle waves.

As I snooze, my key phrase **out of the blue** comes to mind. To text or email it to my powerful victims, should they deviate, would lead to destruction by their own hand.....

\*

Well, you sceptics and you cynics who say nothing can change, into the diseased body of humanity I have injected virtuous stem cells. Now, content with all I have done, I look forward to relaxing in my garden and observing the gentler world of bees on lavender and butterflies on buddleia.

Farewell.

THE HYPNOTIST