

**DEAD  
PEASANTS**

**Paul Farnsworth**

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# Jubilee Street

**In Jubilee Street**, where the post box stands like an iron sarsen from another planet, and the launderette's grimy windows glisten with the snotty slug trails of a hundred faded scotch-taped fliers, there's a frenzied feeding pool around the fish bar. Caught up in the cascades of neon-lit proclamations, cavorting on the gum-flecked pavement before the glassy black stare of a smiling plastic haddock, a smouldering society of sixth-form fledglings, freshly forsaken by academia, celebrates liberty by noisily glubbing down hot chips as if they're choking on the regurgitated table leavings of generations gone before. Caged by the greasy yellow bars of light that filter out between glossy full-colour special offers, cheap photocopied handbills for gigs that have been and gone, and the over-enthusiastically punctuated notice, proclaiming in purple ink 'Driver's Needed - Enquire Within', they jostle and fight and curse and scream.

Shadows pitched into the cluttered gutter daub prophetic pictures of the future and drain their ambition. So let them laugh loud and kick long and hard while they can, for there's damn all to check any of them from being swept away by the storm.

As breaths of oily steam balloon out into the shivering air, the poster boys for abandoned youth wipe their fatty faces on the fatty paper and are siphoned off towards the amber and ruby illuminated slot machines of the electric fun palace. Passing them on an opposite heading, tottering on broken heels, the girl with the lazy eye from the convenience store leaves the nine-to-five behind her in the seven-eleven, a day's work discarded amongst the hand baskets, and the tatty receipts, and the dirty copper coins and grubby fivers. Tomorrow she's going to do it all over again, blunt her hopes against the damp cardboard packages and the dusty shelves, and let desire fall upon the torn linoleum, to founder amongst the sweepings and the silvery grey grit scrubbed from a thousand useless scratch cards.

She stops to light a cigarette, scrapes the heel of her thumb against the stubby metal wheel, coaxes the flame to life and cups her hand around it to defend it against the elements. The wind raises up abandoned fliers and wrappers and plastic bags as spectral mementoes of weekday industry; a sheet of newspaper briefly clings to her legs before she dispatches it and it cartwheels down the road to deliver its headlines to some other straggler.

The cigarette glows brightly then dies away, and she laments that she will never burn as brightly as she coughs, moves on, and pulls her coat a little tighter around her shoulders.

A clatter of spokes and clacking of gears fractures her thoughts as a youth bumps his bicycle up the kerb to cut across her course. Obscenities are exchanged, staccato

bursts of belligerence that ricochet like gunfire from the surrounding buildings - then, these social conventions having been properly observed, the woman turns away and heads home to a microwave dinner and an evening of boil-in-the-bag TV. The cyclist meanders his way down the street, slaloming his dinky little bike between lampposts and litter bins, leaning back nonchalantly in the saddle. The pose is calculated to impress, just like the smudge of his bum fluff moustache, the knocked-off designer trainers from the market, and the counterfeit sneer from MTV. But as there's no one around to watch him, he kicks out at an A-frame sign as he rattles past the newsagent's, and it folds up like a startled oyster and skitters along the pavement. Then he spins round, raises a middle digit in feeble salute to the newsagent emerging from his doorway, and heads towards the park - going the long way round to avoid the memorial, and the lads who used to bully him at school.

The newsagent breathlessly serenades him with a symphony of meaningless menaces, then waddles off wheezing to retrieve his sign. He moves awkwardly, toilsomely, a mighty oak normally found firmly planted behind his worm-riddled counter, and resentful of anything that might wrench him away from his grotto of pornographic magazines and out-of-date chocolate bars. He's sweating as he reaches down for the sign, his blotchy forehead wet with cold sweat which collects in the furrowed gutters of his brow and is channelled down his hot cheeks. Then, crimson faced and with his property gripped tightly in one podgy hand,

he shambles back to his shop where he resolves to comfort himself with a pork pie, and several more crusty savouries from the shelves.

At the window above, framed by peeling paintwork, pressed behind dusty warped glass that twists his features and makes him shimmer and fade as he moves, the lodger looks down from his rented rooms as this tiny drama is played out. And when the players have left the stage he observes the amber sky and the setting sun which takes its bow as the curtain of night begins to fall. He sees the tiny sparks that fizz and glimmer on distant windscreens and polished chrome; the ripples of rainbows that briefly play over rooftops before the darkness gobbles up all detail and texture, and the pinkly glowing streetlights flare into fury and paint the street in flat and fulvid hues with puddles of shadow.

Clutching at these scattered atoms of inspiration, he returns to his easel and rearranges the colours to paint away the drab streaks that stain the endless intervals. But the bristles scratch the canvas like desperate fingernails on a coffin lid. Tonight he is buried beneath the weight of too many worries, burdened by too many distractions. He has no energy, no faith and the hunger has gone, so he puts down his brush, sits on the bed and he waits and he waits and he waits for something else to happen.

*Acacia Avenue  
Bramley  
Hants*

## *Dear Mrs Womble*

I write with the unenviable purpose of complaining about the appalling service I received at your establishment, the EasySave Megamart, on Thursday last. I make no apologies for the bluntness of my opening remark. I speak as I find, as Mrs Mountjoy of the Rotary Club knitting circle found out to her dismay last week. Oh yes, I have no doubt that after those stern words I had with her beside the white elephant stall at the mayor's garden party, she'll think twice in future before using a crochet hook to publically lance her neck boil. "Ada," I said to her. "Ada, there's a time and a place for experimental surgery, and it is not during the Bramley Scout Pack's annual Whitsun picnic."

I expect my use of the word 'appalling' brought you up pretty sharp, didn't it? Yes well, I'm not likely to apologise for that, either. I choose my words carefully, as my regular correspondents will fall over themselves to tell you. I recently wrote to Mr Brandreth from the leisure centre and had occasion to resort to the word 'shocking', a course of action that I did not take lightly. Similarly, in a recent missive to the borough council on the subject of the dog do outside the library, I thought long and hard about 'disgusting' and my decision to underline the word

'disgraceful' was something I agonized over for several days. And some time ago, in a forthright communication to the BBC, I felt it proper to include two 'franklys' and a 'well really' so don't go thinking that I am the kind of person who is prepared to mince words just for the sake of someone's feelings.

But you're leading me astray. Returning to the point, to wit the disgraceful levels of service I received last Thursday. Now, I know what you're going to say, so do yourself a favour and hold your wind, because I'm about to run rings around you. I know your establishment operates exclusively on the self-service principle, and whilst I may not be entirely comfortable with rifling through cucumbers and bagging my own sprouts, I appreciate that I cannot stand in the way of progress. I still remember rationing, when surviving on a handful of runner beans was all part of the war effort, and if the man next door offered my mother a nibble of his plumbs she'd close her eyes, think of England and be grateful for small mercies.

It's like I said to Mrs Burkenshaw in the post office the other day. "Listen Kitty," I said. "If these people want to dispense with the troublesome inconvenience of employees and replace them with machines, who am I to argue? If the alternative is to have my crusty loaf manhandled by some red-faced teenager with greasy hair, impetigo and acne like the flock wallpaper in the Star of Bengal, repeatedly passing it over the bar code reader

like she's trying to plane it down one slice at a time, then let's take a leap into the future, that's what I say." ...Although I might wish that your automated tills could sound a little less 'up themselves'. Sometimes popping in for a few knick-knacks and a savoury pastry is a little like being interrogated by a cross between a surly car park attendant and something out of Flash Gordon, and if this is the shape of things to come then I think it was a black day indeed when they came up with the Speak and Spell.

No, I'm fully aware that self-service means that if I'm not happy, then I've got no one to blame but myself. That's as may be, but it's no excuse for letting standards slip, and the day we allow these incidents to pass without comment is the day we may as well all pack up and go and live on the continent.

So, it was last Thursday - the 14th, unless I'm mistaken, and I don't think I am, because it was the very same day, ten years earlier, that I first had the pleasure of a Rogan Josh. Didn't do much for me, to be honest. Anyway, this Thursday I called in to purchase a family sized tin of pineapple chunks, on the occasion of an impending visitation from my niece. Now there's a difficult girl to cater for. I've never known anyone demonstrate such an aversion to pickled eggs, and the speed with which she can turn her nose up at a cocktail sausage beggars belief.

Now, I don't normally buy pineapple chunks for myself. Ever since the late lamented Mr Womble passed over to

that great potting shed in the sky, I've rarely found a use for the things. I've got nothing against them, you understand. There's a little corner of Acacia Avenue where pineapple chunks will invariably find a cordial welcome, it's just that they rarely form part of my entertainment inventory. Nevertheless, I always ensure that I have some to hand whenever my niece is due to call, but on this occasion - due to your company's irritating habit of regularly rearranging your store as if it's some blasted Chinese puzzle - I couldn't locate them. In a less progressive establishment I would, of course, have turned to some friendly assistant who would track them down for me. The EazySave Megamart being noticeably devoid of friendly assistants, I had little option but to adhere to the self-service principal and direct my enquiry to myself.

Well, I was quite unprepared for the response I got. I hope I'm no shrinking violet. A woman of the world, in fact. Put it this way, I've seen things that would make your toes curl, but it still took my breath away when I politely tapped myself on the shoulder, asked myself where the tinned pineapple was and gave myself a mouthful of abuse in reply.

Yes well, many people may have let such insolence pass. Many might turn the other cheek, mark it down to experience and never speak of it again, but frankly I'm not that soft. I simply will not tolerate being spoken to in that manner - certainly not by myself. I placed a firm hand on

my shoulder and with an 'Excuse me!' that wouldn't have been out of place in the seedier quarters of downtown Marrakesh, I demand that I direct myself to the family sized tins of pineapple chunks in syrup forthwith. It surely cannot be beyond the bounds of civility, I recall myself reasoning at the time, to gracefully acquiesce to such a politely spoken request. But no, apparently that's not the way I do things. In response, I rounded on myself quite angrily with what to the best of my ability I can only describe as a snarl. I was so surprised by my own behaviour that I involuntarily took two paces back from myself.

Well you don't expect to encounter this sort of conduct in your local grocery store, do you? Certainly not in the frozen food section anyway, which is where this altercation took place. You would expect the wreaths of freezing fog rolling off the turkey fillets to cool any unnecessarily hot temperaments, and the glassy eyeballs of so many gormless haddock gawping out at you from behind their frosted windows are hardly calculated to inflame the blood.

It's really not on. I know that these days it's all supersonic travel, microwave comestibles and nuclear oven chips, but I'll have you know that good old fashioned manners have not been given the heave-ho down at the better end of Acacia Avenue. Oh, I realise that anyone walking down the high street with their eyes even half open might be fooled into thinking that the traditional 'how do you do?'

and friendly wave has been entirely superseded by a vacant stare and a series of hand gestures complicated enough to fool all but the most cunning of Bletchley Park boffins. I understand that what passes for polite conversation in some quarters nowadays is enough to make the hairs on Mrs Gladstone's cockapoo stand up. And I speak as someone who was more than happy to lend her weight in the soup kitchens on Greatorex Street back when MacMillian was telling us that we'd never had it so good. You got used to colourful language when you were up to your elbows in oxtail, I can tell you. All the same, I don't think it's too much to expect a touch of common courtesy while I'm out buying my provisions, which is why I am moved to put Parker to parchment now.

And by the way, don't go fooling yourself into thinking that this is not a matter of some considerable importance. My niece is a very busy young lady - and she has connections, oh yes. She once shared a taxi with a woman that did the wigs on *Carry on Columbus* - so think on, you're dealing with the jet set here. She may not be able to visit me very often, but when she does, by God you had better hope there are pineapple chunks on the menu, because I won't be held responsible for the repercussions.

Anyway, I haven't finished telling you about my awful ordeal, because the story doesn't end there. I found myself jabbing myself repeatedly in the chest. "Just who

do you think you're talking to?" I asked myself. "You come swanning in here, all high and mighty, and think you have a God-given right to speak to yourself like dirt, with all this self-important pompous talk about blinking pineapple chunks!" At this point I tried to interrupt myself, but I wouldn't let myself get a work in edgeways, and rolled on with my rant. "I will not allow myself to be spoken to by myself like that. And kindly have the decency to look myself in the eye when I speak to myself." And with a final tap on the breastbone I suggested that if it was pineapple chunks I was after, I'd be better off if I went and looked for them myself, instead of bothering myself with my own rude and ignorant demands.

Well really. That's no way to be talking to the runner up in the East Sussex Women's Guild charity bake-off 1968. Little did I know when that title was thrust upon me that my fondant fancies, which received special mention in the *Pidloe Examiner*, would fail to earn me the respect of the retail staff of my local supermarket. Well I wasn't going to hang around after that, pineapple chunks or no pineapple chunks, so gathering up whatever shreds of dignity I had left, I marched on out of there, resolving never to darken your etcetera.

Unfortunately, what I hadn't realised was that I had my half-filled basket with me and was technically shoplifting. Now, this is where it gets complicated. Being a fine upstanding pillar of the community - it was me that shopped Mrs Albumen to the RSPCA for feeding her

moggy on own-brand cat meat and offcuts of flaky pastry - I naturally attempted to perform a citizen's arrest. Well that was doomed to failure. Picture the scene: I've just grievously insulted myself, I'm bereft of pineapple chunks, I'm expecting my niece to phone to say she's on her way at any moment, and to top it all the new brassiere I'm wearing is riding up something chronic, so by now I'm feeling that this is not the best of all possible worlds. Do you imagine I'm going to take kindly to being citizen's arrested? No I am not. If you think I'm going to come quietly when I still got eight pounds of sprouts at home that need blanching, then you've got another think coming.

I made a break for it, high tailing it across the car park and through the alleyway between the butcher's and the new shop that's just opened selling scented candles and bits of twig painted silver. Unfortunately, I'm just as tenacious as I am stubborn, so I gave chase, rugby tackled myself to the ground and gave myself what they would describe at the rougher end of Maybourne Terrace as 'a damn good kicking'.

I hope you don't think that this is an acceptable way for your customers to behave towards themselves. An innocent query followed by an understandable mistake should not result in ear bashing, a headlong flight and an untidy scuffle in full view of a shop full of hippies buying new-age whatnots and tape recordings of whale songs. I think an apology would be appropriate, at the very least,

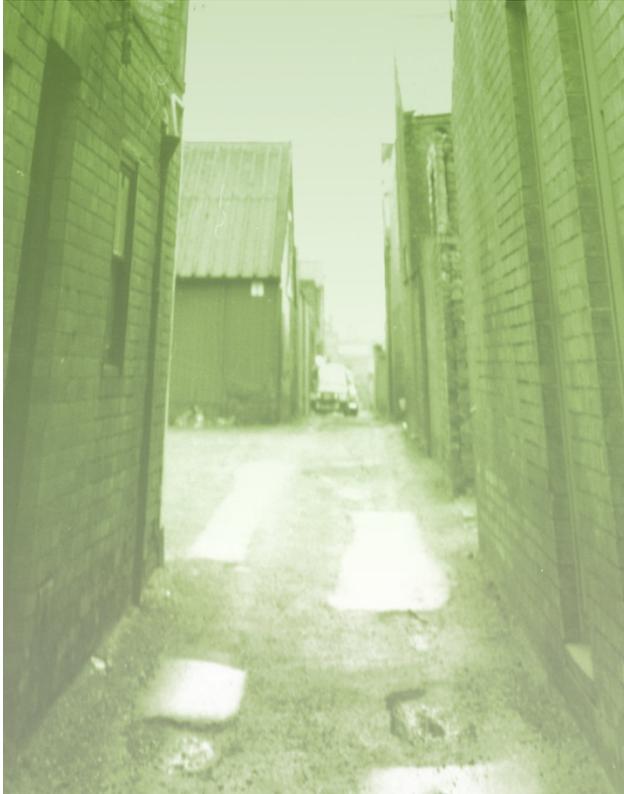
and possibly compensation in the form of a selection of wholemeal vouchers and tinned fruit. Not pineapple chunks though since, as it turned out, my niece once again had to cancel her visit, and I already have a cupboard full of the things left over from previously aborted stopovers. It's a pity, of course, as she had been intending to stay until Sunday, and I was planning to introduce her to Mrs Edmonton, who's always boring the undergarments off everyone about how well her son is doing in Perth.

Still, it can't be helped, and I'm sure she'll make in next time. And it does give me another free weekend to catch up on my correspondence. In the meantime I can look forward to receiving your heartfelt apologies, and whatever items you intend to send in reparation.

*My very best wishes*

*Edna Womble*

*Mrs Edna Womble*



"A day's work discarded amongst the hand baskets, and the tatty receipts, and the dirty copper coins and grubby fivers."

# (Big) Society

**Now come along** gentleman. Let me see those elbows akimbo! I want nice fluid movements. And up, and down, and up, and down, and one, and two, and one... Mr Pleasance, what have we learned about our grip? That's it, grasp the handle firmly, it won't bite! Solid strokes, that's what we need, and solid strokes we shall not have until we master the tools of our trade...

Ah good morning sir, I do apologise, I didn't see you there. Welcome to Fogwell and Co. I'm afraid you've caught us in the midst of one our practice sessions... Oh thank you, yes, it's most kind of you to say so. Well, we don't believe in complacency here. It's what sets us aside from the competition. You don't become the country's foremost painting and decorating firm without constant attention to detail and a dedication to maintaining skills... Thrust! Mr Montgomery, thrust! It's no good dabbing the brush into the paint pot as if you're teasing a kitten with a ball of string. A sense of purpose, man - dive in!

Oh yes, sir, the pursuit of decorating perfection is very much the ethos of our company. Of course, by our exacting standards, these gentlemen you see here today are mere raw recruits. But through our programme of intensive training we will nurture that budding talent until it blooms into the unparalleled craftsmanship that our

customers come to expect... Quite right sir, how witty you are to have chanced upon such an original description. They are indeed 'brushing up their skills'.

And you are really rather perceptive in your reference to Sadler's Wells. The whole ensemble does indeed have a balletic quality to it, but it is all very practical, I assure you. Choreographing the movements of the whole team to music means that we can accomplish a more uniform coverage. For a moderately sized room we find that a waltz works best. If it's a rush job we can step it up to a polka, but the results are not as satisfactory... Mr Rumblelow, you're dripping! Have you overloaded your bristles? ...Oh dear, I very much regret that these gentlemen still have a long way to go, but we will get there in the end. Ladder technique, paste mixing, colour matching - by the time we release them into the world they will have mastered it all, along with the legendary Fogwell Flick.

Mr Bovis, bend the knee, man! Fluidity in our movements at all times... What's that sir? The Fogwell Flick? It surprises me that you have to ask. The Flick is the very ultimate in bristle technique, the epitome of brush control. Known only to Fogwell's master craftsmen, it will ensure that every drop of paint will be smoothly applied to your chosen surface, rather than being distributed over your carpet and curtains, as you might expect of lesser contractors... Oh no, no sir. You jest I'm sure. You wouldn't expect us to divulge information like that. As I'm certain you must realise, you are not the first

to ask. The Flick has remained our secret ever since it was originated by the great Mr Fogwell himself.

Ah no, sir, you flatter me - I am merely the 'and Co.' Mr Fogwell is, sadly, no longer with us, and greatly missed. It was his vision that painting and decorating should be an art, not merely a function; his realisation that it demands the utmost care and attention. Happily we have many satisfied customers who think likewise... Your footwork, Mr Sexton! Remember what we said: the key to quality lies as much in the gracefulness of the ankle as in the suppleness of the wrist.

...Yes sir, as I was saying, although Mr Fogwell was fortunate to have lived to a ripe old age, it is regrettably some years since he hung up his overalls and shuffled off to that great mixing bucket in the sky. But we continue to uphold the principals that he held so dear. If you look up there, in that glass case above the counter, you will see his brushes... Yes sir, those are the actual brushes with which he practised his legendary art. We display them there as a memento of his skill, and a reminder of the excellence towards which we should all strive.

Oh but sir, I'm forgetting myself. You're a busy man, I'm sure, far too busy to fritter away the hour listening to me expound upon our humble enterprise. How might we possibly assist you? A hallway bedecked in a tasteful tortoiseshell, perhaps? Or a dining room to be finished in a classic burgundy? ...A ballroom, you say? Oh my! No, no, sir, such a commission will present no problem at all. Far from it - indeed, I fear it will bring out the best in us. What's that? Arches? You have no need to worry, no

need at all, sir. Our specialists have never been known to be outwitted by such rudimentary obstacles. They are artisans to whom such architectural delights as alcoves and arches present no challenge. You have seen, no doubt, how an expert swordsman is at one with his blade? Well sir, the paintbrush is our weapon of choice and we wield it expertly. No rollers, no sponges, no pads: we find such methods abhorrent, and have always... Mr Mycroft, careful! We have discussed before why it is preferable that the emulsion should be applied to the wall, rather than liberally distributed around the showroom. Although I am sure that our visitor is worthy of being so honoured I doubt very much that he appreciates being decorated in quite the fashion that you have made your forte.

I am so sorry, sir. Oh no, I wouldn't hear of it. Please leave it with us and I will personally see that it is cleaned and pressed. And please be assured that the gentlemen whom you see going through their paces here today have yet to appreciate the damage that can ensue from a wanton twitch of the wrist or a careless bristle. They are a world apart from the peerless craftsmen to whom we shall entrust your commission. Now then, I wonder...

...Ah yes. Now, I admit that I become a little uncomfortable when it comes to matters of money. I can see that you are a man of affairs and have no such reticence, but to an artist like myself it can seem a little... well... vulgar. If I can direct your attention to our brochure you see that our premium rate, 'The Ambassador Service', is a little pricey... Yes, well, vulgarity

or not, we all have to make a living. And I can assure you that package will guarantee you the services of the very best craftsmen that money can buy. They will carry out the commission with the absolute minimum of disruption, employ only the choicest materials and produce work of the most remarkable quality. Leonardo himself could not fault their brushwork.

Mr Leonard, you're slouching again! Bad posture is the enemy of perfection... Now then - ah, of course, I can see that this package is, er, not quite in your line, shall we say? In that case, can I suggest 'The Executive Service'? Once again this will secure the services of our master craftsmen, and the very best of materials - quite expensive, I'll agree, but is nonetheless still a fraction of the cost of 'The Ambassador. Naturally you will wonder how we can afford to offer this option. Well, I'll be straight with you sir: once we've cashed your cheque, we exchange our top class team for some of our less experienced workers, who use whatever muck that they can find hanging around in the warehouse. I can honestly say that our customers rarely notice the difference.

No, of course not. I don't blame you sir, and in fact I'm ashamed for even suggesting it. In that case might I propose a third alternative, 'The Big Society Service'? This is our least fiscally demanding package, but nevertheless remains reassuringly expensive. The difference is that in this case we cash your cheque, then give you a threadbare paintbrush and leave you to get on with it. Basically, you appoint us to carry out the task, and we take your money then tell you to do it yourself...

Well, I don't know about that, sir. I mean, 'scam' is such an ugly word... yes... yes... yes, and so are 'con', 'hoax' and indeed 'downright liberty', but... but... but, sir, if you will just let me get a word in for a moment. I think you need to consider the benefits. The scheme creates a climate that empowers you, the customer. It takes responsibility out of the hands of the contractor and gives you complete control of the... Oh sir, really there's no need to... Please won't you reconsider... but... At least take a brochure, and if you change your mind you know where to find us. Oh, your umbrella, sir - mustn't forget that, I believe the forecast is for rain. Good day, sir! Good day!

... Redmond... Mr Redmond, you see that gentleman who just left? Yes, never mind about cleaning your brushes. Yes, I know what I always say, but we will make an exception for now. The gentleman who was just here - I think he could be trouble... Deal with him... Oh, and Redmond! Be discreet...

# THE ASSOCIATION FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY ANNOYED ABOUT SOMETHING



(BUT CAN'T QUITE PUT THEIR FINGER ON IT)

## **Minutes of Quarterly Meeting 28 February 2012**

*Present:*

<i>Keith Permanganate (KP)</i>	<i>Chair</i>
<i>Abigail Glanders (AG)</i>	<i>Finance Officer</i>
<i>Michael Ullswater (MU)</i>	<i>Head of Publicity</i>
<i>Ollie Damson (OD)</i>	<i>Strategic Planning</i>
<i>Clive Brumby (CB)</i>	<i>A Merchant of Padua</i>
<i>Ellie Lane-Devenport (ELD)</i>	<i>Membership Secretary</i>

### **1. Welcome/Apologies**

### **2. Minutes of last meeting and matters arising**

**OD** - Expressed surprise that certain comments made by **MU** at the previous meeting had been omitted from the record

**KP** - Stated that it was not common practice to include personal remarks of a sexual nature in the minutes, but promised to consider formulating guidance procedures on the advisability of incorporating contextual interpersonal criticisms in future records.

**AG** - Agreed that they would look into whatever it was that **KP** had just said.

### **3. Name of the Society**

**KP** - Gave a brief report on the progressive goal attainments that have been accomplished since the commencement of the society eighteen months ago. **KP** is happy to announce that, in real terms, and not withstanding periods in which members have temporarily absented themselves from society activities, membership has almost doubled, and now stands at just under sixteen. However, **KP** revealed concerns that the length, explicit meaning and connotations arising from the name adopted by the society may be reinforcing negative perceptual fruit pylon chicken vest necromancy onions.

**AG** - Clarified **KP**'s comments: the society now has fifteen members, but one or two people were concerned about the name. What did we reckon?

**MU** - Agreed that the current name is a problem, particularly from a publicity point of view. Stressed the need for something punchier to really put the

association's message across. Possibly something with 'laser' in the title.

**OD** - Asked how it might be possible to 'put the society's message across' when no one within the society knew what its message actually was? Also expressed the concern that the random and arbitrary use of the word 'laser' might be considered 'moronic'.

**ELD** - Reminded all present that the stated aims of the association were still under review, and would remain a standing item on the agenda until a more robust definition could be achieved. In light of this, it was her belief that a title containing the word 'laser' was as good as any, and would have greater impact on her friends at the golf club, who were beginning to entertain doubts about the levels of prestige that ought to be accorded to the membership secretary of such an impenetrably titled organisation.

**OD** - Reminded the group that the society did not exist to reinforce the standing of individual members within the community, and that its name should not be decided solely on the basis of what will best impress its membership secretary's golf cronies.

**CB** - Came up with the suggestion 'United National Irritation Committee'. This could be shortened to UNIC, which apparently sounds similar to something from *Dr Who*.

**OD** - Called **CB** a 'space cadet' and proposed that he should go back to reading his comics and let the grownups speak.

**MU** - Seconded this proposal, but expressed the opinion that using an acronym might be a workable idea. However, **MU** felt that it must have a lowercase vowel in front of it, and gave the examples *iUNIC* or *eUNIC*.

**OD** - Registered disapproval of **MU**'s idea, and called him a 'fly-by-night jazz merchant'. However, conceded that *if* a name change is necessary, the board members' job titles might also need to be reviewed. **OD** pointed out that 'Head of Publicity is not particularly 'punchy' and suggested it be changed to something with 'moron' in the title.

**ELD** - Asked what a 'fly-by-night jazz merchant' was.

**AG** - Suggested that discussion of possible name changes might be more productive when agreement had been reached on the aims and principles of the society. Furthermore, she had just put in an order for more stationery, and as a result it might be fiscally prudent to stick with the present name until the current batch of headed paper has been used up.

**KP** - Proposed the instigation of a working party to investigate the origins, meaning and relevance of the

phrase 'fly-by-night jazz merchant'. The results to be presented at the next meeting in the form of a report, with graphs.

#### **4. Aims and principals**

**KP** - As result of an executive think tank established for the purpose of formulating an official mission statement, **KP** was able to offer the following for consideration: 'We all feel that there's something not quite right somewhere and that something should be done about it, and just as soon as we find out what it is, we're damn well going to put a stop to it.' **KP** recommended this statement to the board on the grounds that it effectively encompassed the multiplicity of the sandpit flexibility macrobiotic backwardly transferable bishop fruitcake.

**AG** - ?

**OD** - Offered the opinion that, as mission statements go, it expressed 'diddly squat'. And anyway, if so much time and effort had gone into its creation, why did **KP** appear to be reading it off the back of an old envelope?

**ELD** - Asked who 'Diddly Squat' was. **ELD** wondered if he was the man from the chemists with the neck boil.

**MU** - Observed that all mission statements expressed 'diddly squat', this being the chief purpose of mission

statements, but the group did not welcome this feeble attempt at satire.

**AG** - Suggested that Diddy Squat might be one of the Fly-By-Night Jazz Merchants. Undertook to look this up on Wikipedia.

**KP** - When pressed on the 'envelope' question, **KP** admitted that the 'think tank' comprised himself, his brother-in-law and his eight-year-old niece, and that the statement had been composed over Sunday lunch several days previously. However, he did not feel that the circumstances of its conception in any way detracted from its suitability as a working document.

**AG** - Congratulated **KP** on his frugality in using an old envelope, rather than wasting the society's recently acquired headed paper.

**MU** - Protested that something more focussed would be needed in order to prepare suitable promotional materials. **MU** was concerned at the prospect of writing press releases that were vague, irrelevant and uninteresting.

**OD** - Pointed out that this had never bothered **MU** before.

**MU** - Made thinly veiled threats concerning a tragic story he was presently working on, involving the Head of

Strategic Planning, one of his less public orifices and the blunt end of a bottle of mineral water.

**CB** - Appealed for calm and reminded the meeting of how Dr Who had brokered a peace between the Axims and the Daleks in episode three of *The Mind Milkers of Kahn*.

**MU** - Suggested that **CB** might like to go home and play with his action figures, and reminded him that he had more than one bottle of mineral water to hand.

**ELD** - Asked whether society members ought to be engaged in bottle-based brutality, either threatened or actual. Raised concerns that her some of the other parents at her daughter's ballet classes might not react too kindly if they knew that she was a member of an organisation that sanctioned the violent use of glassware.

**KP** - Suggested that this was a question best put to the membership via a structured programme of procedural data capture droplets.

**AG** - Agreed that a questionnaire should be circulated, and suggested that this might be an appropriate use of the society's headed paper.

## 5. Membership

**ELD** - Gave feedback on recruitment activities since the last meeting. **ELD** was happy to report that she had personally recruited two members at last month's gymkhana, and had received several expressions of interest at a recent Rotary Club dinner, although nothing had yet been confirmed. She had also managed to pick up three members through a flyer in the local hairdressers, although her efforts to infiltrate the Women's Institute had ended in ignominy. **ELD** felt that the lack of suitable publicity material was hampering her campaign.

**OD** - Agreed that a recent run of colour posters featuring a picture of a jet fighter streaking out of the clouds was certainly striking, but that it remained unclear how this image might be expected to promote the association and attract new members.

**MU** - Undertook to respond to this criticism on three points. Firstly, the Avro Vulcan B1 is not a fighter but a bomber, as anyone with even a basic knowledge of classic British military aircraft would know. Secondly, the Vulcan stands for a combination of strength, elegance and sophistication, three principals which are an essential ingredient of any successful marketing campaign. And thirdly, Keith Norwich at the Post Office had liked it so much that he had put one in the front window, next to the poster with the lottery numbers on it, and if that

wasn't indicative of a successful campaign, **MU** didn't know what was.

**OD** - Seconded the motion that **MU** didn't know what a successful campaign was.

**ELD** - Advanced the opinion that the society should have a mascot - something fluffy like a cat or a rabbit. Definitely not a guinea pig though, as her father had once been bitten by one in the Cotswolds.

**CB** - Thought that having a celebrity as honorary president might generate more interest than a rabbit. Suggested the renowned Shakespearian actor, Sir Henry Doublebase, whose long list of film credits have earned him numerous Oscar nominations and a BAFTA fellowship. More importantly, Sir Henry once appeared as third Cyberman from the left alongside Jon Pertwee in the classic 1973 story *The Catacombs of Steel*, and that fact alone ought to guarantee the society maximum publicity.

**ELD** - Wondered what *The Catacombs of Steel* was?

**AG** - Stated she would be happy to write to Sir Henry on the association's headed paper.

**OD** - Announced that he was pretty sure *The Catacombs of Steel* was the first UK single by The Fly-By-Night Jazz Merchants.

**KP** - Agreed that the society should approach Sir Henry or, failing him, someone from *Antiques Roadshow*.

## **6. AOB**

**ELD** - Raised the issue of the mess left behind in the community hall at the association social last Saturday night. She felt that it cast the association in a bad light, and that if someone didn't step forward to claim the underpants soon, she felt there may be a scandal.

**MU** - Suggested that **ELD** might like to lighten up and stop being an 'old baggage'.

**OD** - Remonstrated with **MU** re. his language towards **ELD**, and ventured that if the latter wished to present herself to the world as a 'batty old harridan', then she was perfectly at liberty to do so.

**ELD** - Reacted strongly to the suggestion that she was a mentally unstable battle-axe, and upset several chairs as she exited the room.

**OD** - Reflected that if only **MU** would 'ponce off' in a similar vein, his life would be complete.

**CB** - Asked if the meeting was going to go on much longer, as he wanted to get home and watch an old rerun of *The Sweeney*, which featured an actor who had once been in something with another actor, who used to live

next to the brother of a man who used to write the Radio Times listings for *Dr Who*.

**MU** - Said that **CB** could go with his blessing, but warned him not to get his arse caught in the door on his way out.

**OD** - Wondered whether it might not be possible for it to be entered into the record that **MU** is a 'screaming great tit'.

**MU** - Raised an objection on this point.

**KP** - Upheld this objection, explaining that although it was generally accepted that **MU** was indeed a 'screaming great tit' nothing official could be noted until due consideration had been given to the point raised earlier, namely the recording of personal comments in the minutes. Work would begin shortly on assembling a team to look into the methodology of drawing up an agenda for a forthcoming focus group, to be tasked with perambulating a soused nonce inappropriately.

**AG** - Promised she would write to all interested parties, on headed paper, once a decision had been reached.

*Meeting adjourned.*

## THE ASSOCIATION FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE REALLY ANNOYED ABOUT SOMETHING



Registered office: Colin's Shed, 12 Harcourt Ave, Tranchester

Dear Sir Henry,

We've got your children! Ha ha! Sorry, only joking. I write on behalf of the Association for Annoyed People, or something. Can never remember the name of the damn thing. It's on the letterhead, anyway. Smart, isn't it. And this is good quality paper too, none of your cheap rubbish.

Anyway, you'll have to excuse my handwriting, I've had a couple of bottles of wine. V-nice. I like wine, do you? You probably drink port, don't you, what with you being a 'Sir'. Port and cigars, that's the ticket! Never understood how you manage to light the cigars after they've been in the port, but then I don't move in your exalted

Shit, sorry about that, knocked over my glass. I won't start a new sheet, if you don't mind, because I don't want to waste the paper. And as it's quite good paper it should soak up the wine without causing too much damage, so everybody's happy.

Hey! By the way, I was wondering if you have heard of 'The Fly-By-Night Jazz Merchants'. Someone I know says he saw them live in 1972, but nobody else seems to have heard of them. No? Never mind.

Anyhow, it was great to keep in touch. Hope you are well.

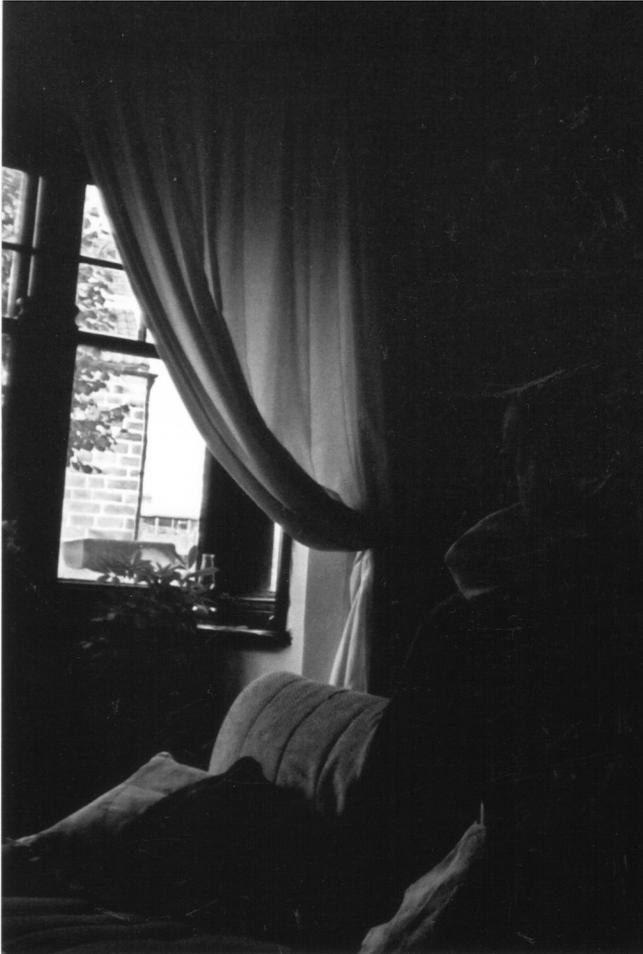
Yours Sincerely

Hang on, I forgot the reason I was writing to you in the first place. Apparently you're a famous actor or something, so we wanted to know if you would be our club's mascot. Is that the right word? Whatever. So, what do you say? We're not a bad lot, and will even let you use some of our stationery, as long as you don't go mad. Patron! That's the word - not mascot. Anyway, what do you reckon?

Yours Sincerely

Abigail Glanders

PS Did you leave your underpants in the community hall?



"We don't know what you're up to,  
but we want it to stop."

# The Everyday Dreams of a Rock and Roll Postman

## About

**Welcome to the official blog of the band *Kanndid*.**

*We are:*   **Simon Kann** - *Guitar, vocals*  
              **Graham Labbatt** - *Guitar, vocals*  
              **Will Fenton** - *Bass*  
              **Gary 'Sticks' Panglos** - *Drums*

2 September 2005

## **Let's Get This Show on the Road**

Hello, good evening (or morning) and welcome to my brand new blog. Yes, I've finally taken the bit between my teeth, set my shoulder to the wheel, put my faith in the mighty microchip and launched myself into the blogosphere with all the grace and athleticism of a pachyderm plunging headlong into custard. This will be the place where you will be able to find out what's happening with me (boring) and my band, Kanndid (yes!)

Thankfully the recent theft from our rehearsal room hasn't been too much of a blow. We have every faith in the local constabulary to track down the perpetrators of

this dastardly crime. The insurance covered most of the equipment (except my guitar) so that's good news. Personally I think that 'thieves' were responsible. Will reckons that it might have been 'robbers', but he's not ruling out the possibility that it was 'villains', and Sticks said he wouldn't be surprised if 'bandits' were involved. Gray said it must have been a bunch of pikey bastards, and if he ever caught them he'd 'cripple the fuckers'.

Gray's been a bit irritable lately, and this incident hasn't helped. I think he's getting a bit restless, musically speaking, and he's talking about shifting the emphasis of the band from Blues-Soul to Blues-Punk. Punk isn't really my thing, but I was outvoted and them's the breaks. This could be an exciting new direction for the band, and that can only be a good thing.

Change is certainly in the air. At the moment we're all a little edgy as we wait for the results of our A Levels. I'll be off to Uni and we will have to think long and hard about the future of the band. In the meantime, I'm keeping body and soul together by taking a temporary job as a postman, which will no doubt provide me with many an amusing anecdote for chat shows and interviews!

Finally, I'll sign off this entry with some fantastic news. Drum roll please! We are delighted to announce that next weekend Kanndid will be playing a guest spot at The Cartwheel in Exeter Street. Admittedly, the timing could be a little better as I'm still not fully recovered from the

accident, but the doctor expects the plaster cast will be off by then. And, of course, I'm going to have to dip into the money my aunt left me to get a new guitar, but this is an opportunity not to be missed. I'm told that the venue can hold six hundred, which is more than three times the audience we normally play to. No more village halls and social clubs for us! So if you're looking for a great night of blues and soul - and punk - we'll see you there!

Bubye  
Si

**No Comments Keywords: Thieves, Punk, Gigs**

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29 September 2005

### **Mistaken Identity**

Greetings to our legions of fans - if the four people who 'liked' our Facebook page can be collectively described as 'legions'. Still, we only launched it six months ago and I guess it takes time for word to get around. I'm checking it two or three times a day and I'm certain it won't be long until those four become four hundred.

The imminent release of our new video is bound to get things moving. Oh yes, I thought that would get your attention! Gray has written this great new song and a friend of his has offered to produce the video for it. Of course, these things aren't cheap, but luckily I was able to dip into my inheritance and the wheels are now in motion.

Talking of imminent releases, you'll be pleased to learn that I was freed from police custody without charge. That whole 'line-up' business was just a case of mistaken identity - it seems I bear an uncanny likeness to the 'Church Street flasher' hence all that fuss in the local paper, not to mention the people spitting at me in the street and the death threats. Still, you know what they say, there's no such thing as bad publicity!

Other than that, things have been a bit slow in the world of Kandidid, as Gray and Will settle into their respective seats of higher learning. I didn't get into university, of course, which is good news really as it means I can concentrate on the band. And the really great thing is that my temporary position with Her Britannic Majesty's Distributors of Mail is now permanent. Yes, I continue to walk the streets through rain, sleet and snow somewhere in your neighbourhood while you're still tucked up in bed. The mail must get through!

Thanks to everybody who turned up to our gig at The Cartwheel. It was a fantastic evening, most people thought it was ok and we got an acceptable review in the local rag (in between an advert for panty liners and an article about a mystery puma that's been seen in the memorial gardens). The fact that the audience wasn't as big as we expected turned out to be a good thing really, as it made the gig more intimate.

About the fight - I know there was a bit of an atmosphere after Sticks was sick on the pool table and then called the deputy manager a Nazi, but I felt that some of the clientèle were already in a pretty ugly mood by the time we finished our set, so I don't think we were entirely to blame. I'm sure the management will see it like that, anyway, and I'm certain we'll be invited back.

See you next time

Si

**No Comments Keywords: Video, Flasher, Punch Up**

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27 November 2005

### **After All, It Was My Blood**

Okay, so it looks like a couple of people 'unliked' our Facebook page, and I think it suggests that social networking isn't the best arena for our music. It's been an interesting learning experience. No news yet on the video. Turns out it's more expensive than we envisaged and I've had to write out another cheque to cover the cost of an editing suite. Then Gray's friend had to 'go away for a little while', which has delayed things further, but it should be worth it in the end.

My hand is healing nicely after I was savaged by the memorial gardens puma. Honestly, I swear it was the real thing, not some overgrown moggy like most people are saying. I got a bit of a shock when I was saddled with the

bill for cleaning the bandstand, but I suppose it's only fair. After all, it was my blood.

But anyway, on to more positive news. It's that time of year again and right now we're concentrating on the local radio Battle of the Bands contest. We've learnt a lot since last year, when one of the judges described us as being 'the musical equivalent of a bucket of three week old offal'. It's very valuable to get that kind of feedback - we have taken some of his less colourful and abusive comments on board and I now have a strong feeling that this will be our year. I've been inspired to write three new songs, which I think are amongst the best things I've ever done, but Gray now wants us to experiment with a punk-reggae sound and says that my songs don't really fit the new 'ethos'. And I think that it's great that he should feel like that. We have to keep moving forward, after all.

Talking about moving forward, we hit a bit of a snag after Sticks soiled himself in the back of Will's dad's van, and Will's dad said that we couldn't use it any more. Fortunately, Gray knew where we could get a used Transit for next to nothing, and which wouldn't need much spending on it to get it roadworthy. So my bank account has taken another hit, I'm afraid, but we're mobile again and that's the important thing. Thankfully, I've just been offered some extra shifts at the Post Office, so that should top up the band's coffers!

And we also hope to see a bit of the folding stuff coming our way thanks to our brand new EP on iTunes. That's right - four new songs, three by Gray and one by Will, available now! If the scores of people who keep telling us to release our material are anything to go by, the EP should do really well. So come on chaps, buy it and do us proud!

Signing off

Si

**No Comments Keywords: Puma, Offal, Van Soilage**

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14 January 2006

## **I Feel Sorry For the Dog**

As you might expect, we're all still a little shell-shocked following the explosion. For those of you who didn't see the footage on the news, our rehearsal room was totalled and the resulting conflagration spread to the neighbouring newsagent's. It's a good job I was able to use the remainder of my inheritance, otherwise we'd still be paying for the damage well into our retirement. And I think that the whole affair has taught Sticks a very valuable lesson about gas appliances, so at least there has been some good to come out of it. I just can't get over what happened to that poor dog - but Sticks reckoned it was on its last legs anyway, and a raging fireball was probably the best way for it to go. Everything, as they say, is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Big thumbs up to the three people who downloaded our EP! I know one of those was Gray's dad and the other was Sticks's cousin Mags, but whoever the mystery third person was, thanks! It's some consolation after the Battle of the Bands competition, anyway. I think we played the best we've ever played, and considering the high standard of all the acts on the bill there's really no shame in coming last. It's just a pity that the judges had to resort to abuse, and I felt that their quite unnecessary use of words like 'felch', 'pustule' and 'ball-bag' was taking constructive criticism just a little too far.

We're still waiting for Gray's friend to turn up to start work on our video. We were a little concerned when we found out that a Peruvian gentleman is now living in his flat, but I expect it will all turn out all right.

Meanwhile, I feel that the band may be entering a new phase, and there are some exciting new developments. 'Will' has decided to change his name to 'Wheel', for some reason, and is busily trying to 'reformat' the band's image - which is great. He's doing some really imaginative work. Meanwhile Gray is concentrating on acoustic material and has been making some solo guitar recordings, which is really quite positive. I think that not having the rest of the band on the record creates more space and allows the song to breathe. And anyway, I've not really felt up to being involved, ever since my mum tried to poison me. The nurses at the hospital secure unit have said that she's calmed down now, and the police

have told me that they don't intend to pursue the matter. This is just the kind of good news we're been hoping for. All in all I feel that things are really looking up. Here's to the future!

TTFN

Si

**No Comments Keywords: Fireball, Abuse, Poisoning Incident**

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23 February 2006

### **This Is The End**

So that's it - Kanndid is no more. Perhaps the raid by the anti-terrorist squad was an omen. I mean, what would I know about germ warfare anyway? It was a misunderstanding, I realise, but when you're laid up in hospital after being run over by an armoured personnel carrier, you have plenty of time to think about the future. Especially when your still mobile and entirely uninjured band mates don't take time out of their busy schedules to come and visit you. Although I gather that their lives have not been uneventful in my absence. Sticks has certainly been keeping himself occupied, if the Weekly Advertiser is anything to go by. In the space of a single evening he managed to start a fight in the Fox and Trumpet, was accused of gross indecency in the Seven Stars and had to be forcibly removed from the King's Head by a police dog team. So that's three more places that we're never going to play again. I've had a note from 'Wheel', meanwhile, in which he announces his intention to go to South America

and devote his life to the cultivation of exotic beans - in consequence of which he says he 'can't commit in any meaningful way to maintaining the harmony of the group'. Whatever that means. And as for Gray, for whom the phrase 'musical differences' appears to have been specifically coined, he's going through his fucking disco phase and is pretty much in a world of his own. Still, it's not prevented him from being offered a solo contract with an independent label.

So I've had enough. I've finally realised what a mug I've been to think that we could ever make a go of it. I'm presented with a choice between pursuing a pointless fantasy with a disintegrating band that ran out of steam years ago, or facing up to the real world. Life is too short to spend it with your head in the clouds. There's a chance of promotion at the post office, so it's time to knock Kannidid on the head. This has just been the futile dream of a rock and roll mailman. It's been fun while it lasted, but now it's time to move on.

Goodbye

Si

**No Comments Keywords: Death, Doom, Disaster**

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15 November 2010

## Recalled to Life

We're back! And I thought that we'd hung up our rock and roll trousers for good. Four years on, three of us are married, one of us has a kid and I have a very real chance of getting that promotion at the depot. It seemed like Kanndid were just a distant memory - but next week, and for one night only, the original line up will be back together for a special performance at the Music Week Festival. Yes, next week Graham, Will, Sticks and me will take to the stage one more time, and I am really looking forward to it. So, will this be our farewell gig? Who knows? We're not making any promises, but it could be the start of something new. Perhaps we're at the beginning of Kanndid 'phase two'. So here's to the future - watch this space!

**No Comments Keywords: Kicking, Screaming**

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# From Your Prospective Representative

**Let me ask** you a question: will you be voting in the Little Sodcombe Parish Council election next week? No, wait - perhaps the question we really should be asking is: do you care enough about your country? Do you care that this once prosperous and pleasant land has become a paradise only for the ruffians and cutpurses who roam its peaks and valleys, preying on the weak and the infirm? Hmm? Do you care that our businesses are failing, our industries are crippled and that the shops that were once stacked high with quality British products are now filled with cheap and flimsy foreign goods? And, good people of Little Sodcombe, do you care - do you really care - about the shameful decision to remove the post box on the corner of Church Lane?

I can see that you're all thinking long and hard. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I tell you this - and I'm not ashamed to admit it - I care! It may not be fashionable in this day and age to stand up for what one believes in. It may not be 'the done thing' to speak out for the values on which our society is founded. But I will say this to you - unless we as a community are prepared to join together and with one voice say 'this is wrong!' then we run the risk of losing everything that we hold dear. Everything!

Now you may say 'What is the point? What can we do?' Ask yourselves this: what would have happened if

Churchill had surrendered to this debilitating defeatism when we stood alone against the might of Nazi Germany? Consider, would we be the proud and glorious nation that we are today if Drake had turned tail and run rather than face the Spanish Armada? How well do you know your history, hmm? Did Wellington exasperatedly cry out 'oh what's the point?' on the eve of his epic battle with the French Emperor? No, ladies and gentlemen, he did not! And neither must we! To many this post box may be just an insignificant item of street furniture, but we know it for what it really is. This is a symbol of our country, a totem for our civil rights, a gleaming beacon that will shine throughout history in remembrance of a battle fought and won, of our precious democracy snatched from the jaws of bureaucracy and set upon a pedestal for the benefit of the generations of Sodcomites yet to come. This, my people, will be our Waterloo!

It's no use sticking our heads beneath the sand and denying that this nightmare vision of the future will never come to pass. It is here already. Right now, as I speak, I cannot step outside my front door without running the risk of falling victim to some despicable ne'er-do-well or boozed-up vagabond. The dystopian catastrophe is already writ large in the vista of boarded-up and abandoned shops that pepper our high street, making it necessary for me to drive into Stratford if I want to buy a decent bottle of Merlot for a dinner party. Believe this, if you will believe nothing else: if we fail now, if we will not save our precious post box, if we refuse to make our mark in the sand and declare that this is where the tide shall

turn, it will mean that I will have to walk all the way down Acacia avenue just to post a letter. The consequences do not bear thinking about.

And let us not fool ourselves into believing that our current Parish Council will step in to save the day. Oh no. The present administration has already shown itself for the toothless, petty congregation of cronies that they are; nothing but a bunch of self-serving parasites who have weaselled their way into high office. Think of their disgraceful refusal to tackle the dog mess on the recreation ground. Observe how they frequently allow the ornamental lawns in the memorial garden to go nearly three days without mowing. And you will recall, I am sure, the shocking débâcle of the homemade jam competition at last year's summer fête. It's still only mentioned in hushed voices down at the vicarage.

You would think that our leaders would hang their heads in shame. But they have none. Instead they boast proudly that the grit bin in Market Street has been refilled, and that the notice board outside the school has been repainted, and all the while they do nothing to tackle the dark secret at the heart of our community. I tell you, they care nothing for our heritage. Plans for the removal of our post box were made known to them four months ago, and yet they raised no objection.

Why?

You've heard the official line. The excuses! They say that the Post Office has told them that no one ever uses the box. This feeble defence reeks of corruption! Have they been got at? Have they been paid off? It is, of

course, not for me to say, but ask yourselves why Councillor McReedy's mail is always delivered on time? And has anyone noticed that Councillor Partridge seems to be unusually well-off for stamps? Judge for yourselves.

People of Little Sodcombe. I have a vision - a dream of a new world in which we do not seek to bury our heritage beneath the concrete car parks and drive-through restaurants of progress. If we let this post box fall then what will be next? Will they come to take our schools, our parks or, God forbid, the telephone box outside the hairdresser's? It is a terrifying prospect, I know, but one that lurks just around the corner. If we permit this travesty then, believe me, it will only be a matter of time before the inevitable decline. Our quiet community will be invaded by foreigners, streaming in from places as remote Naffley, Greater Bumton and Lower Tightly-cum-Podmore on the Wold. And with them they will bring their alien ideas of 'gastropubs', high-speed broadband and mini-markets that stock more than one kind of soap powder. They will not be like us. Some of them will be working class.

From there it's only a few short steps to our once picturesque and welcoming village becoming a wasteland; a barren wilderness of broken windows, abandoned vehicles and packs of wild dogs which roam the streets, picking off the sick and the injured. Imagine that: the nightmare reality of our peaceful lives ripped asunder, the shattered streets littered with burnt out cars, while police gunships fill the night sky with light and sound as they

pick off the rampaging hordes of mutant ape-men that swarm across our now hideously despoiled open spaces.

It could happen - but it doesn't have to. All it needs is for us to take a stand. That's why I'm asking for your vote next Thursday. Bleak though this picture of our future is, there is the glimmer of a new dawn on the horizon. Give me your support and I promise I can make a difference! With your help I can turn our fortunes around and rescue this nation from the ravine of despair into which it has blindly stumbled. The post box on Church Lane must be saved! Because we all know what will happen if it isn't. Heaven help us if we should fail.



"Nothing but a bunch of self-serving parasites who have weaselled their way into high office."

# Baron Havoc Regrets

*Over now to Flip Heston, reporting live from the Dorchester. Flip, it's been an eventful afternoon.*

It certainly has, Tom. It was a relatively low key Baron Havoc who addressed reporters here today. Normally ebullient, frequently exhibiting a penchant for rhetoric and crowd-pleasing theatrics, it was a markedly different figure who strode into the conference suite, flanked by henchmen and with his trademark ermine-trimmed cape billowing out behind him.

And if he appeared to be more than a little subdued, then it wasn't without good reason. Currently ranked third on Time Magazine's list of 'Most Influential Supervillains', Baron Havoc has come a long way since his humble beginnings as a neighbourhood street hoodlum. Thanks to his super-secret death miasma, laser vision and bulletproof underpants, the Baron has risen swiftly through the ranks of Evilus Inc, one of the planet's most diabolical international crime syndicates, to become the youngest and arguably most evil chief executive officer in its forty year history. It's no mean feat. With its grubby fingers firmly planted into some extremely important pies - including most of the major corporations in the western world, at least seven governments and a pie stall in Camden market - competition for the top job is fierce.

And while the board of directors has publicly stated that it will stand by the Baron after this latest scandal, the arch villain is inevitably going to feel the heat over the next few months. After all, it's not every day that the CEO of a multinational corporation wipes a small town in Shropshire off the face of the Earth, and the question that both the board and the shareholders will be asking now is: can he turn this fiasco around?

Quasi Neutronic Quark Phased Missiles are very unpredictable. This is relatively new technology, and when you're holding the world to ransom, there are inevitably going to be one or two mistakes. The fact is we were very badly let down. We were let down by our suppliers. We were let down by our advisers. And we were very badly let down by the guys who sold us the maps."

Only time will be able to answer that question, of course, but if his performance here today is anything to go by then it looks like he might just pull this one off. Baron Havoc opened by saying, quite unequivocally, that he 'very much regretted' the annihilation of Ludlow. He told journalists that he had visited the town personally on several occasions, most recently to attend a conference on world domination, and said that the knowledge that its friendly, welcoming people, its quaint public houses and its delightful architecture were now distributed throughout the ionosphere as a series of charged particles was something that made him 'quite sad'.

Despite that, the Baron deftly sidestepped any suggestion that he would not collect his bonus this year, and in answer to reporters' questions he made it clear that he had no memory of ordering the attack. It should never have happened, he said. Clearly there had been an error of judgement, as it was completely out of character for an organisation which regularly threatens to unleash neutronic terror on the major capital cities of the world to instead turn its attention to a sleepy market town whose biggest claim to fame was that the launderette stayed open until eight o'clock on Thursdays.

In the organisation's defence, however, he did point out that in the six years that he has been CEO this is only the second

### Evilus Inc - A Roster of Shame

Despite what journalists may have been led to believe, this is not the first time that Evilus Inc has found itself at the centre of a scandal.

In 1989 a squadron of highly trained killer death rats was unleashed on Paris. The company said that this was an unfortunate oversight, and measures were put in place to prevent it happening again.

~

Two years later, four people in south Wales were transmogrified into pigs, using an experimental z-ray. Baron Havoc, then the corporation's public relations officer, offered his condolences to the families of the victims and said that everyone within the organisation was 'disappointed'.

~

In 1997, the Director of Public Prosecutions was buried beneath four hundred tons of custard powder, in what Evilus Inc described as a 'freak custard powder-related tragedy'. They were reported to be shocked by the accident.

~

In November 2006 the company's mining operations caused several Caribbean islands to sink into the sea. The official statement was that the organisation was 'Cognisant of the distress this had caused to islanders and the disruption to local flora and fauna'.

~

Most recently, the organisation came under extreme pressure when two thirds of the cast of a touring production of *The Sound of Music* were exploded part way through the second act. In response to a furore in the media, Baron Havoc conceded that the corporation had been 'very very bad' and that they would 'think very carefully' about what they had done.

time that a small town had been accidentally vaporised - a record that is all the more impressive, he said, when compared to some of Evilus Inc's competitors, who are doing that kind of thing all the time.

"The important thing now is to learn from our mistakes," the Baron told journalists. "We are not an organisation which tolerates failure. There are lessons to be learnt, procedures to be reviewed." He went on to explain that a robust staff retraining programme was being planned, comprising formal threats, executive beatings and a tank full of corporate piranhas.

Will this be enough to restore confidence in Evilus? Well it's early days yet, but there seems little doubt that Baron Havoc is genuinely embarrassed and saddened by this unfortunate miscalculation. "You deserved better," he told the press conference. "And we let you down. I understand that, I really do. Believe me, no one wants this business over more than I do. I want my life back."

Stirring and heartfelt words, but the real test will come tomorrow morning when the markets open. This is Flip Heston, live from the Dorchester.

Some cynics might argue that the Baron is all talk, but we did learn that, on this occasion at least, he has taken firm action. In a surprise announcement he told journalists that in the light of this latest incident the **International Extortion Department**, one of the company's most profitable divisions, would henceforth be closed down. The bulk of its current duties, he explained, would be taken over by the newly formed and completely different **Department for International Extortion**. This is particularly surprising as the **International Extortion Department** itself only came into being two years ago when the **Extortion Department (International)** was disbanded following the now notorious incident in which the governors of a high school in Wichita were inflated with helium to a pressure of 80psi. All three departments have been based at the same premises, a building previously occupied by *Madame Fru-Fru's House of Rubber*, although this is believed to have been a front.

# I Don't Mind If I Do

**I'll tell you what's wrong** with the law... Pardon? Oh well, if you insist, I don't mind if I do. To the brim, to the brim! Absolutely splendid, leave the bottle. Now, what was I saying? Oh yes - what's wrong with the law. There's too much of it. The statute books are chock full of it - you can't do this, you must do that, and don't even well blasted think about doing the other. Well, it's too much, I tell you. How's a fellow going to get a handle on that lot? I mean, I'm a magistrate, and I can't get my head round it. Haven't got a clue. Ha ha! Actually I probably shouldn't be telling you this. Let's just call it our little secret, shall we? Anyway, I think what we need is a top up. Yes, very nice drop this is. You not having one? No. All right.

So anyway, this law business. Now I know what you're going to say: "Surely this is your bread and butter," you'll say. "Aren't you spiking your own cannon, so to speak, with all this rot of there being too much of it?" Well - oh sorry, did I splash you? Get a bit carried away sometimes. Not to worry, I'll just top this up. Ah! So, where was I? No, no, I remember. More law means more lawyers. Lawyers, barristers, solicitors, advocates - pah!

Can't stand lawyers, you know. Wouldn't have one in the house. Odd breed they are, strutting up and down in front of me when I'm at the bench, drawing my attention

to A, pointing out B, leaping to all sorts of fantastical conclusions and expecting me to go along with them. Makes your head spin, and they get on my wick. And another thing... Do you know, it's gone clean out of my head. No idea what I was going to say. Give me a moment, it'll come to me. While I'm at it, let's have the top off that bottle - can't be expected to think on an empty glass.

Got it! Now this is the point that I wanted to make. Too much law, you see, is not just a pain in the rump to people like me; it's no damn good for the country. Turns people soft, stands to reason. Start making laws and all of a sudden people have rights. Everybody's going around saying they want this and they're entitled to that, and that people doing the other is an infringement of their wotsits. How did they get wind of all this, that's what I want to know? Who... who... who let the cat out of the bag? We would have got along just fine if everybody had kept mum, but no, no, no - some damn fool had to come along and start filling their heads with this nonsense about laws and rules and regulations and whatnot. Blasted do-gooders and journalists and trouble makers - that's who I blame. I say, this bottle's empty, I don't suppose... Ah! Splendid! Bring forth the nectar and we'll drink a toast! Well, I'll drink a toast for the both of us, then. Down in one, now. Zeus! Right, fill her up.

Now, as I was saying... What was I saying? Do you know, you look just like a chap I served with in Africa. What's the name now? Dapple? Kepple? Hepple? That's it, Hepplewhite! Pinky Hepplewhite? Good grief, it isn't

you is it, Pinky? No, no, no - Pinky had both his ears shot off and went blind. Couldn't wear his glasses anymore, you see. Well, well, well, good old Pinky. Now then, have you come about the drains?

Of course, yes, yes, I remember - we were talking about this blasted legal system, weren't we? Sure you don't know anything about drains? Pity. Well, top the old glass up and we'll continue. Thing is, if it was just a question of having all these laws then there'd be no problem. But no, that's not enough, is it? People aren't content with just having legal rights, they want to be able to enforce 'em as well. Some people, you see, are never satisfied. And so we have to lay on all these courts and tribunals and whatnottery and along with it we've got the lawyers and the advocates and the do-gooders and all the other hangers on. These people are swine, you know. They make the blood run cold. Did you ever run into Dennis Wintergreen? Dead now, of course but maybe you met him before the misunderstanding with the donkey. No? Shame. Now there was a judge who really knew how to treat a brief. Sir Dennis once found against a chap in a dog fouling case, purely on the basis that he objected to his representative's tie. The plaintiff got off with a caution, but old Dennis sentenced the lawyer to deportation. Don't think the sentence was carried out though - some newspaper kicked up a bit of a fuss, apparently. Damn newspapers, that's another lot that's ruining the country. You know what a blasted nuisance these journos are - present company accepted, of course. Or should that be excepted? Accepted? Excepted?

Whatever - I accept you and you are excepted from that thing I said just now, whatever it was.

Now, are you sure you're not having one? It feels quite improper to be drinkinining alone. As you wish. I tell you... I tell you... I tell you what. What? No, it's gone. Listen, you're not related to a landlady who used to run a boarding house in Scarborough are you? Quite sure? Just thought I caught a resemblance. Must be the beard.

Ah, ooh, I know what I was going to say - these fellows in court. It crushes the soul to endure that claptrap day after day. Well, how would you feel if you had to sit through some damn silly woman moaning about how a perfectly honest and upright mail order company has ripped her off; or some annoying chap whinging about how his employer has dismissed him for being the wrong colour? Why only last week I had to listen to a gibbon-faced youth bellyaching about how his insurance company wouldn't pay out over a motor insurance claim. And I have to say that the insurers gave a very good account of themselves. Very good, very impressive. I'm not entirely certain what their argument was, but they had lots of paperwork and diagrams and charts and things, and it all looked wonderfully professional, so naturally I found in their favour.

And that's my point, really. You see... oh what. Yes I don't mind if I do, very kind of you. I say, we're rattling through this bottle, aren't we? Yes, my point is that this sort of thing happens time and time again - some Charlie will crawl in off the street with a ridiculous, trumped-up charge against a decent, law-abiding businessman or

corporation. He doesn't know what he's talking about, he doesn't understand the law and he's done no preparation. Then the defendant will come in, and they'll have a team of smartly dressed lawyers, and they'll have all the paperwork, and they'll have lots of sophisti... sophisticat... Sorry I need to take a run up at this. They have lots of soph-ist-ic-ated legal arguments - most of which, I have to admit, I don't really understand. Well, obviously they're going to win. Obviously, yes? They know what they're doing, you see. They understand the law better than most judges - better than this one, anyway. Let them get on with it, that's what I say.

Oh, and by the way, you and I are paying for all this, by the way... by the way - the good old taxpayer. Well, *you're* paying for it - I'm registered as a container ship in Liberia. Legal aid, that's what they get - all that stuff. I mean, do we really want to be paying for these people to mither me after I've had a heavy lunch? Justice doesn't come cheap, you know. Perhaps it's better for everyone if it was left to those who can afford it.

And that's what I mean when I say that there is too much law. Oh, go on then - I may as well finish the bottle. Yes, too much law, and much of it is in the wrong hands. There's all this talk about justice for all, but as far as I'm concerned the more of them I can keep out of my court, the better. Ha ha ha ha ha! No, but anyway, the big companies and corporations, they know what they're doing. Let's just let them get on with it, eh? The court rooms of England are no place for ordinary people. We've all got their best interests at heart: the judiciary,

the corporations, the government. There's really no need for the average Joe to go to all the trouble.

Now, I suppose I'd better be getting along to my club. Sir Humphrey has promised me lunch...

Err... I was just wondering about that other bottle. Yes there is, 'sno good hiding it behind that lamp. Be a shame to leave it standing there all lonely and unopened. Might go all funny if it's not drunk quickly. Ah well, if you insist, that's very kind of you. I don't mind if I do. Bottom ups!

# Unlimited Capability

INT: DAY. A SMALL OFFICE SOMEWHERE IN  
WEMBLEY. THE INTERVIEWER RISES FROM HIS DESK  
AS MR SPIGGOT ENTERS

## INTERVIEWER

Ah Mr Spiggot. Please come in. Let me just move this  
aside so that you can get your wheelchair through. Oh,  
and let me help you with that.

## SPIGGOT

Oh thank you, very kind of you. It's not easy having to  
drag the drip round with me everywhere I go.

## INTERVIEWER

Yes, and I suppose that only having the one arm  
doesn't make it any easier.

**SPIGGOT**

I should say not. Especially as the hook they gave me when I lost my remaining hand has a tendency to come loose.

**INTERVIEWER**

Shocking. Isn't there anything they can do about that?

**SPIGGOT**

Well, I'm on a waiting list, you know how it is?

**INTERVIEWER**

Of course, of course. Well, can I get you a drink? Tea?

**SPIGGOT**

I'm allergic.

**INTERVIEWER**

Oh, coffee then?

**SPIGGOT**

What, with my colon?

**INTERVIEWER**

Oh dear. A biscuit, perhaps?

**SPIGGOT**

Not unless you want to risk my bag overflowing. The colostomy, you know. Very tricky things.

**INTERVIEWER**

Ah, yes. So I would imagine. Perhaps we'd better just crack on then.

**SPIGGOT**

That's probably for the best. I can't usually last very long between seizures.

**INTERVIEWER**

Really? Well this shouldn't take long. I've looked over your CV and it's all very impressive. I just wanted to

take this opportunity to get to know you a little better. So tell me, what was it that made you want to apply for this job?

**SPIGGOT**

Ah well, I'm very much a team player, you see. And I do enjoy working out in the open, so when I saw the advert this seemed like an ideal opportunity.

**INTERVIEWER**

Excellent. Yes, that enthusiasm is something that really came across in your application. And you do have a very impressive work record. There is just one thing I want to query. There does seem to be a bit of a gap in your work history over the last few years. Is that down to the accident you mentioned?

**SPIGGOT**

The series of accidents, yes.

**INTERVIEWER**

More than one?

**SPIGGOT**

Oh yes, most definitely. There was the first one with the scaffolding.

**INTERVIEWER**

Ah yes, you fell off some scaffolding.

**SPIGGOT**

No, no - that was the second time. The first time was when the scaffolding fell on me. I don't have much luck with scaffolding.

**INTERVIEWER**

I expect you've probably done your best to avoid scaffolding since then.

**SPIGGOT**

I certainly have. I'm not going to get caught out like that again. In fact, it was avoiding scaffolding that was the cause of my third accident - I stepped out into the road and got hit by a bus.

**INTERVIEWER**

Terrible.

**SPIGGOT**

Oh yes. It wasn't even in service.

**INTERVIEWER**

And it was while you were recovering from your third accident that you caught the tropical disease?

**SPIGGOT**

Ah no. Now let me see - I was hit by a bus in November and then the following February was when the microwave exploded. Yeah, that was a bit of a

shock. I came round to find myself covered in searing hot chicken tikka masala and staring at the blackened remains of the plastic tray embedded in the ceiling tiles. Even now I've still got the ringing in my ears.

**INTERVIEWER**

I see.

**SPIGGOT**

Pardon?

**INTERVIEWER**

Nothing. So you contracted the tropical disease in March?

**SPIGGOT**

No, I contracted the disease in Finchley. Have you ever been to Finchley - it's a jungle out there.

**INTERVIEWER**

My word, Mr Spiggot, you have had a tough time of it, haven't you? And was that your guide dog that was causing such a commotion in the foyer earlier on?

**SPIGGOT**

Tyson? Yes, he's mine. Sorry about what he did to that young lady, but he gets a bit boisterous. I think there's something wrong with his brains. Guess that's what happens when you buy a guide dog from a bloke in a pub.

**INTERVIEWER**

Oh think nothing of it. We can always get another secretary. Mr Spiggot, what concerns me... and I don't want to sound offensive in any way.

**SPIGGOT**

Go ahead please, I'm sure I will take no offence.

**INTERVIEWER**

I was just thinking, seeing how your various conditions and ailments affect you, should you really be working at all? Would someone in your position not normally be collecting some kind of sickness benefit?

**SPIGGOT**

Ah yes, well I anticipated that you might ask that question, and I can assure you that you've got nothing to worry about on that score. I made a claim for that Employment Support Allowance thing. They sent me along for a medical and it turns out that I'm perfectly fit for work.

**INTERVIEWER**

Really?

**SPIGGOT**

Oh yes. They really put me through my paces. Gave me a thorough going over. Turns out that I have no problem sitting down for long periods, for example.

**INTERVIEWER**

Aren't you confined to the wheelchair?

**SPIGGOT**

Exactly. But then they tipped me out of the chair and observed that I was able to climb back into it by using the drip as a support. So no real problems with mobility either.

**INTERVIEWER**

They were very thorough then?

**SPIGGOT**

Certainly - they even made a full assessment of my mental health. Because prior to that I had suffered from quite debilitating bouts of anxiety.

**INTERVIEWER**

Well I suppose being repeatedly hit by scaffolding is bound to leave you a little edgy.

**SPIGGOT**

Exactly, but they told me that I couldn't possibly have any anxiety problems as they didn't observe me 'rocking back and forth'. You can't argue with proof like that. They even took a look at all the medication I was taking and told me I didn't need it. Marvellous, isn't it - that they can achieve all that in ten minutes when ten years of on-going clinical diagnosis has consistently got it wrong.

**INTERVIEWER**

Astonishing. And these are specialist doctors, are they?

**SPIGGOT**

Oh yeah, they're real, proper doctors. I think this one was an aromatherapist or a homoeopathist or something.

**INTERVIEWER**

And did they note your limited vision?

**SPIGGOT**

Ah well, when I arrived they told me to 'watch the step' and apparently I did, so they concluded that I had twenty-twenty vision. As it turns out, it seems I don't need Tyson after all. Pity really, I've got quite attached to him.

**INTERVIEWER**

Well, Mr Spiggot, I think I've heard enough. What you've told me is all very enlightening.

**SPIGGOT**

Yes?

**INTERVIEWER**

I've given your application my full consideration, and in view of your lack of mobility, sensory deprivation, mental health issues and sundry other conditions and limitations, I can only conclude...

**SPIGGOT**

Yes?

**INTERVIEWER**

Mr Spiggot - congratulations, and welcome to The Football Association. I think you'll be best linesman we've ever had.



"When I arrived they told me to 'watch the step' and apparently I did, so they concluded that I had twenty-twenty vision."

# Help Yourself

*Sue McClusky, Presenter, Radio 4's 'This Hour' Programme:* At a time of extreme austerity, when politicians are constantly reminding us of the need to tighten our belts, it might seem strange for anyone to advocate a raise in salary for Members of Parliament. And yet the outspoken Treasury Secretary Sir Anthony B'Leind is suggesting just that. His comments have caused an outcry amongst the public and the media, although reaction from his colleagues has, perhaps understandably, been somewhat subdued. Well I'm delighted to say that Sir Anthony has agreed to answer some of our questions, and joins us here in the studio today. Sir Anthony, a pay rise for MPs - a controversial move, surely?

*The Right Honourable Sir Anthony B'Leind:* I would prefer the term 'forward thinking', but I do have to acknowledge that it has caused a bit of a fuss.

*McClusky:* Not surprising, I would have thought, given the timing. The jobless figures continue to rise, we're still reporting negative growth and there are few signs of those 'green shoots' of recovery that we're all waiting for. Is a pay increase appropriate?

*B'Lend:* Entirely appropriate, Sue, largely *because* of those factors you just mentioned. Politicians of every hue are under a great deal of pressure at the moment. I can tell you from personal experience that the situation is very bleak. Whenever I visit my constituency I'm exposed to increasing levels of deprivation and squalor. It's very upsetting. I think a pay rise, therefore, reflects the stresses of the job.

*McClusky:* Wouldn't your constituents - the ones living in increased squalor and deprivation - wouldn't they find it difficult to have sympathy with that point of view, don't you think?

*B'Lend:* I dare say they would, but then we've all got our problems, haven't we? Anyway, the stress is just the beginning of the matter. People see their elected leaders being driven about in flash cars from one freebie junket to another, but they fail to appreciate that we're feeling the pinch as well. You see, hitherto we have been able to supplement our income through press bribes, tax avoidance and by hammering our expenses. But of course, many of these avenues are now closed off to us. It's left us in a very difficult position. You tell this to ordinary people and they really don't understand the responsibilities we have. They don't have big houses to maintain, race horses to stable or corporate mobsters to pay off, so how can

they possibly understand what it's like when money gets tight?

*McClusky:* I think many people would argue that they are acutely aware of what it's like to experience poverty.

*B'Lend:* Balderdash! Bless you, Sue - I don't mean to be rude but that's nonsense. If you have very little to start with, then you've really got nothing to lose, have you? But anyway, these factors aside, there is another very good reason why we should get a pay rise. You see, it's a well known fact that if you pay someone an obscene amount money you remove the temptation for corruption. Why would anyone want to steal anything if you simply hand it to them on a plate, eh?

*McClusky:* It's a familiar argument. At first glance, however, it might seem to have two major problems.

*B'Lend:* Oh I don't think so.

*McClusky:* The first being that it suggests that our political system and the judgement of the electorate are essentially flawed. 'Buying off' politicians doesn't address these flaws, it merely wallpapers over the cracks.

*B'Lend:* And what's wrong with wallpaper? I like wallpaper. Wallpaper is good.

*McClusky:* The second problem is - and I think this really is the clincher as far as this theory goes - paying politicians more money doesn't appear to work, does it?

*B'Lend:* Ah, well now you prove my point. It's because we're not paying them *enough*. I'm afraid the current rates of remuneration seriously underestimate just how much it takes to keep a politician on the straight and narrow. Consider my position - I work at the treasury, and I am constantly surrounded by hard cash.

*McClusky:* Really?

*B'Lend:* Oh yes. The building is piled high with bank notes and there are wheelbarrows of loose change being trundled up and down corridors all day - you really can't move for the stuff. I've even got a gold brick propping up my desk. Is it any wonder that I'm constantly filling my pockets?

*McClusky:* That's appalling.

*B'Lend:* Well exactly. It seriously weighs me down and it spoils the cut of my jacket, but what can you do?

*McClusky:* Perhaps you should exercise some self-control? After all, should we not be able to trust the people who hold positions of responsibility?

*B'Lend:* Well, I daresay you should, but while crooks like me keep getting elected this kind of thing is going to keep happening. I'm only human, after all - so obviously I'm going to keep helping myself.

*McClusky:* Do you not feel any remorse?

*B'Lend:* Oodles of it. Of course I do. But I'm a victim to my own avaricious desires, you see. People see me waddling out of my office, stuffed to the gills with moolah, and they say to themselves 'Well he's doing alright for himself'. They don't realise the agony of my situation. I'm an addict. I need help.

*McClusky:* And that help would be primarily of a financial nature?

*B'Lend:* Exactly! Substantially financial. It's really the only thing that can save me from myself at this point.

*McClusky:* Well thank you for speaking to us, Sir Anthony. I'm not sure you've managed to persuade anyone with your argument, but I'm certain that this debate is set to run and run.

*B'Lend:* Thank you, Sue. It's been a pleasure being here.

*McClusky:* And if you can just put the microphone back and empty your pockets on the way out, that would be just lovely... Well, coming up after the news headlines, we'll be speaking to Marcus Bream of the National Institute for Piscine Studies...

# Jacob Wanting

## Chapter XVIII

### OF JACOB'S VISIT TO THE ADJUDICATOR AND HIS FRUITLESS APPEAL FOR ASSISTANCE

**The not insubstantial** figure of Mr Rudolph Snickerty was as familiar a landmark as the spire of St Jasper's to those various persons within the orbits of the little house at the corner of Bimini Square. The bootblacks and the broadsheet vendors picked out his silhouette, moving through the dawn mists, with easy familiarity, as he tumbled from his street door into the waiting cab at precisely just after seven each morning, without fail. And the lamplighters and road sweepers marked his return with equal dependability, as the cold vapours began to congregate in dark corners and beneath sagging eaves, at very nearly exactly just before eight each evening. Each of these public appearances, was met with polite expressions of greeting from all those who encountered Mr Snickerty, and such felicitations were volleyed by that latter gentlemen in the same respectful and formal manner as they were served up, as was only to be expected of such an accomplished and esteemed authority. It would hardly have been proper to err towards the casual in one's relations with Mr Rudolph

Snickerty, known to all as 'The Adjudicator' in connexion with his official position relating to the administration of relief to the poor and needy. Many there were who, being without the means to support themselves, were grateful for his judgements when they fell in their favour, and no less respectful when the decision went otherwise.

The weight of this responsibility hung heavy around Mr Snickerty's shoulders tonight, as he climbed down from his cabriolet with the stately ponderousness expected of a man of his circumference. If, of late, his movements had become more laboured or his gait a touch more sluggish, then the cause was surely, in equal measure, as much the constant burden of his professional obligations as the sumptuous lunches which he forced himself to endure, in order to maintain both his strength and his spirits. And who would deny him sustenance, either of body or mind? Being both the first and final arbiter of whom should receive financial assistance from the state, was a responsibility that was not without its stresses and strains, and Mr Rudolph Snickerty's contribution to society had not escaped recognition. Indeed, popular opinion held that it would only be a matter of time before that *Mr* Rudolph became *Sir* Rudolph, and in consequence it was entirely appropriate that a respectful distance should traditionally separate that gentleman from his neighbours, both socially and, secretly to the great relief of all parties, physically. It is generally known that all men of greatness should, whenever possible, be kept at arm's length.

This evening, so far proving to be much as any other, Mr Snickerty drew his fob from his waistcoat pocket and noted, with some satisfaction, that it was precisely just about nearly eight. Snapping the watch lid shut, he bandied a few insignificant pleasantries with a correspondingly inconsequential neighbour, and went inside; thence, pausing briefly to catch his breath before the ascent, he proceeded up the stairs to his apartments on the first floor.

While there was little doubt that this house had seen better days, it would be impolitic to suggest that these dark and wormholed stairs had ever creaked beneath the boots of a more commendable gentleman than he who now ascended, grunting and wheezing as he did so. Certainly, none worthier numbered amongst its present inhabitants, all of whom were cognizant of the fact that they lived in the shadow of an astonishing man.

Mr Snickerty halted mid-step and clutched the railing. "Pilfer!" he called, upstairs. He paused again, briefly winded by the effort of exposition. "Mrs Pilfer! Supper on the table if you will." And the command being issued, he continued to climb. This clarion call was part of his familiar routine, as his neighbours well understood. Miss Mimsy, the little seamstress who occupied the ground floor parlour, knew that every evening as he returned from his offices, Mr Snickerty would call for his supper, like the Merry Old King Cole of the nursery rhyme. And Mr Blotter, the unseasoned young clerk who availed himself of the attic, knew that at that signal, Mrs Pilfer, the goodly gentleman's cook, housekeeper and much

more besides, would quickly wash down the brandy and water that she was nursing, and rush to charge Mr Snickerty's table with such vittles as are required by a gentleman of import, when he returns home from a busy day in his chambers.

On occasion, Mr Snickerty might append other trifles of conversation to his instruction, regaling Mrs Pilfer, and thus the other occupants of the building, with details of his day, the state of his health, or some scandal or other with which he had become acquainted. This evening he started upon an enquiry, but got as far as "And has that -" before thinking better of it and reverting to silence. What he had intended to say was, "And has that fool Pinscher arrived yet?" but being a gentleman of some foresight, he stopped himself when it occurred to him that the expected person may indeed be present, and may not express any great delight in being referred to as a fool.

It was a wise precaution, for Mr Snickerty gained his apartment to find that Mrs Pilfer had already been busy. A vigorous fire crackled in the grate, the table was submerged beneath a satisfying quantity of cold meats and cheeses, and the aforesaid gentleman, Mr Martin Pinscher, had his legs firmly beneath it, sucking the meat off a chicken drumstick.

"Ah Snickerty, old fellow!" said Mr Pinscher with such evident surprise, that it did not occur to him to stop eating as he spoke. "Excellent bird, this," he continued, scattering morsels of masticated meat across the table in his haste to sing its praises. Anyone meeting Mr Pinscher for the first time might forgive him this discourtesy, since

the fellow looked as thin and emaciated as the chicken bone he waved so enthusiastically in the air. What they would not be aware of, is that this appearance was Mr Pinscher's natural state. No matter how many fowl he devoured, bones and all - and it had amounted to a fair few during his lifetime - Mr Pinscher retained the appearance of a frail and listless marionette, that has been abandoned by its master. His long, splinter-like limbs never appeared to develop any meat on them, despite the dizzying number of pies and pastries that he consumed. His pale, sunken cheeks remained concave, even as he was filling them with divers biscuits and puddings. It was a wonder that Mr Pinscher ever found the strength to lift food to his mouth, but lift it he did and in quantities that would cripple another man, and bankrupt Mr Pinscher if ever he was required to pay for it himself.

He was momentarily distracted by the arrival of a large pie, borne aloft by Mrs Pilfer, who evidently feared that the banquet was not extensive enough already. Mrs Pilfer was not the sturdiest of housekeepers. Certainly, she was not nearly as substantial as the pasty that she endeavoured to transport, and as a result her progress towards the table was somewhat faltering and uncertain. This, combined with her wayward limbs, a bearing that was naturally off-centre and a shakiness arising from an afternoon spent making an inventory of her master's liquor cabinet, gave rise to grave doubts that the plate would ever arrive at the table replete with its original contents. If Mr Pinscher was a betting man - and this

history will go some distance towards establishing that he was - he would have laid a handsome wager on the pie coming to grief, upended on the floor.

As it turned out, he would have lost his stake, since Mrs Pilfer managed to land the pie safely on an uncluttered corner of the table. This achievement came not only as a surprise to Mr Pinscher, but also to one other, for accompanying both pie and Pilfer into the room, and gazing at the former with a lustiness almost equal to Pinscher's, was a plump and sluggish brown and white terrier. The disappointment on its chubby, tufted face at Mrs Pilfer's successful delivery of the foodstuff was very nearly heart-breaking, and it whimpered softly once it became apparent that the pie was not destined for the floor. Not that the animal would have suffered greatly by forgoing the occasional meal. Lacking a son and heir, Mr Snickerty had seen fit to lavish all his attention and favour on his pet and, such favour being mostly dietary, the animal's bowed legs and sagging belly endowed it with more than a little resemblance to its owner.

"Settle down, Hermes," Mr Snickerty told the dog absently, falsely labouring under the impression that the creature was all of a dither at his return. In fact, the dog showed barely any regard for its master's presence, and as Mrs Pilfer swept from the room, a good deal more nimbly now that she was unburdened, and returned to the kitchen in search of something to settle her nerves, the dog, without taking its eyes off the heaving table, lay down to patiently wait its turn.

"I hope you're feeling lucky tonight, Snickerty," Mr Pinscher declared, reluctantly setting the drumstick aside so that he could better concentrate on the pie, and ignoring a low and menacing growl from the dog. "I aim to win back every penny I lost last week, and twice more besides."

Mr Snickerty sighed. His weekly games of Shove-a-Duck or Three Card Spaniard were a tradition that had been established many years ago. At first these evenings had proved a pleasant diversion, then a routine, and finally an ordeal that he nevertheless attempted to endure in the best humour. Whatever pleasure he gained was moderated by a growing undercurrent of impatience, and whatever monies he won, when he won, was more than offset by the devastating impact that Mr Pinscher invariably had upon his larder. Nevertheless, he made the effort because he knew how happy it made Mr Pinscher to spend one evening in each week away from his wife and family.

"And how is Mrs Pinscher?" Snickerty asked, too well versed in the social niceties to omit enquiring after the good lady's health, even if his friend would rather she wasn't recalled to mind at this point.

"She is well," Pinscher replied, putting a brave face on it. "Leastways, she was trilling to herself like a linnet when I left her this morning, so I assumed she was in fine spirits."

"And the children?" Mr Snickerty asked.

"Full of devilment, as children often are," Mr Pinscher replied. "They want for nothing, save perhaps a little

discipline, but that I leave to their mother. I confess I don't have the energy to keep abreast of them." Mr Pinscher shook his head, and for a moment he looked genuinely crestfallen. "Listen Snickerty, you don't know how lucky you are. I envy you your bachelorhood."

Mr Snickerty drew his breath sharply over his teeth. "Surely not?" he responded, though with little in the way of verisimilitude. Much to Mr Pinscher's dismay, he reached out for the largest and plumpest of the drumsticks, settled into an elbow chair, and embarked on a series of exploratory nibbles. "Here speaks a man with a devoted wife," he said, jabbing the drumstick into the air to punctuate his speech, "an adoring family, and a position which affords him the respect of the district, invites the jealousy of his inferiors and provides for a most comfortable mode of living indeed. And what has such a man to envy in me? These dusty and dismal rooms? Mrs Pilfer, perhaps? Sir, say the word and you may have her. Or perhaps you crave the companionship of this flea-bitten hound here?"

To emphasise the question, Mr Snickerty tossed the chicken bone to the dog, having decided, after barely denting the item, that he wasn't really hungry at all. Mr Pinscher could not disguise his dismay, as the animal proceeded to tear it apart.

"No sir," Mr Snickerty continued, too preoccupied to mark the tear that sprang to his friend's eye. "It is I who should envy you."

Mr Pinscher could only nod. Everything Mr Snickerty said was true: his wife, his family, and most especially his

position. For although Mr Pinscher could never hope to be held in the same reverence as his celebrated acquaintance, his role as gatherer of the council's taxes afforded him equal power. If Mr Snickerty was known to all as 'The Adjudicator', then Mr Pinscher enjoyed equal notoriety as 'The Collector' and his appearance at the door in pursuit of arrears invariably guaranteed a satisfying quantum of deference.

Nevertheless, Mr Pinscher could not allow the notion that he lived a life of domestic and professional bliss to go entirely unchallenged. "Yes, yes," he said, as he picked up a boiled egg and absently rolled it around his palm. "You are right, of course, about all those things. My wife is devoted, though she often chooses to express this as disapproval of some of my more innocent habits. And my children idolise me, although they occasionally allow their idolatry to be overshadowed by their adoration of their mother. And my position does indeed allow me to enjoy some measure of respect, although it is frequently not without its trials." Warming to his subject, he abandoned the egg on a side plate and clapped his hands. "By way of example, today I visited a most irresponsible citizen in Cardew Street." His own words caused him a momentary shiver, and his hand went to his forehead. "Cardew Street!" he cried. "If ever there was a more loathsome cauldron of humankind than that which you are unlucky to find bubbling away in Cardew Street, then I have yet to encounter it. And I have no wish to ever encounter it, for the people of Cardew Street give me more than my fill of trouble as it is. No public responsibility, that's the

trouble. They're happy to enjoy all the perks and the amenities that the borough council, in its munificence, has the good grace to supply, but will they pay their taxes? No sir, they will not."

Mr Snickerty sorrowfully shook his head. Suddenly overcome with thirst, he searched round for refreshment, and upon finding none, commanded Mrs Pilfer to bring in the port. Then, seeing that his friend was all wind and thunder, and that the storm was not about to blow itself out, he permitted him to proceed.

"This fellow I called upon today was hewn of the same stuff," The Collector continued. "Hadn't paid a penny this last six months, and it came very plain to me during the course of our talk that he had no intention of doing so. He spun me stories, sir. Told me fanciful tales of having no money, no work and no prospects. He took off his shoe, showed me the leather all worn through and tattered. Then he took me to the kitchen and showed me the stove, cold and lifeless and unused - he had no fuel, he said, to fire it; and no food to cook upon it if he had. And these stories, are what he offered me in lieu of money. Consider what we might do with tales of worn out shoes and empty pans, I told him, but my words had little effect. How is the borough to provide for him?"

"It is indeed a strain on the public purse," Mr Snickerty agreed. "It is a marvel that the council is generous enough to do all these things for this fellow."

"Generosity is perhaps our greatest fault when it comes to dealing with such unsociable attitudes," Mr Pinscher replied. "Perhaps tomorrow the bailiff may have

more success where I had none, but I think not. The stories are the same wherever I go."

"I little doubt it, for I am well acquainted with those same fictions," Mr Snickerty grumbled. He leaned back into his chair, head slumped in a posture that was designed to take some of the weight off his chins. "One hears every day the same tawdry tales from people who claim they are unable to feed and clothe themselves. They turn up at our office daily, plump and well-shod and making demands on our charity."

As he spoke, Mrs Pilfer tottered in with a tarnished silver tray bearing the port, already uncorked, and two mismatched goblets. She began making her way to the table, red faced and glassy eyed, when Mr Snickerty diverted her with a gesture and bid her set the tray down on the occasional table beside his chair. This done, she moved off in the same manner as she arrived, managing to find the doorway on only the third attempt, and finally exited the room.

"Why just last week," Mr Snickerty began, but was interrupted by a crash and a clatter from the kitchen. He cocked an ear and listened, and taking the low moan that issued from that quarter to be a signal that his housekeeper was alive and well, he began again. "Why, just last week," he said, picking up the port and registering a brief stutter of surprise at its lack of weight. He upended it into his goblet, but it issued barely enough liquid to wet the bottom of the glass. Mumbling to himself, he set it down and, determined to ignore the soft

whimpering that now drifted from the kitchen, he began once more.

"Last week," he said, folding his hands across his belly, like a proud father embracing his child, "we received a visit from a most extraordinary woman, who rode into town on a pig. Twenty miles, all told, the animal had carried her, and no doubt she had been cheered on her way by many low and disreputable characters along the route. She claimed to be lame, which infirmity was the sole cause of her inability to find employment. This pig, so she explained, was the only means of transport available to her."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Mr Pinscher, although it was not certain whether his interest was roused by this uncommon mode of conveyance, or by the vague suggestion of sausages. "A pig, you say? The ingenuity of these people! She wanted assistance, I take it?"

"She wanted money, Mr Pinscher, let us not be coy," said Mr Snickerty. "Pounds, shillings and pence were what she was after, and by this ridiculous stunt, pounds, shillings and pence is what she hoped to get."

"I take it that you disappointed her?" the collector asked.

"Unquestionably," returned the adjudicator. "The Department of Working Peoples is, as I am sure you know, the very jewel in the coronet of our modern state. We pride ourselves that through the provision of funds for those individuals who find themselves, through illness or injury, unable to work, no man may suffer to go to his bed feeling hungry and cold. The dark days of poverty and

despair are long behind us now that the state has made this contract with the people to ensure the welfare of all, from its richest and most noble gentry, to the humblest and most vulnerable infant. Now, we can't very well maintain such a commitment by handing out money to all and sundry. Why, it is plain to see that the whole scheme would come crashing down around our ears if we engaged in such foolhardy benevolence. And so I told this woman, pig or no pig, if we were to - "

Mr Snickerty was interrupted by a sharp rap at the door, which occasioned sufficient surprise to very nearly cause him to jump from his chair. He wasn't expecting anyone at this hour. He looked to Mr Pinscher and was about to ask him if he anticipated a visit, when he realised that this might seem a foolish question to ask of a guest. A second knock brought him to his senses, and he reasoned that a knock on a person's door naturally demanded an answer. He called for Mrs Pincher, but the only sounds now coming from the kitchen were heavy snoring, and so he rose and unfastened the door himself.

"Mr Snickerty?" said the silhouette framed in the doorway. The landing was dark, and Mr Snickerty could not make out the man's features, but his outline was ragged, his posture was stooped and he had about him the odour of old leather and horses.

"The same," acknowledged Mr Snickerty, managing to imbue those meagre words with a palpable measure of impatience.

The visitor moved forward slightly so that the light from within fell across his face. His eyes were dark and

hooded. Hair hung limply around his forehead and the skin of his cheeks and chin was pock-marked and grey. Yet despite this striking appearance his demeanour remained respectful, and his voice was shot through with soft humility. "Mr Snickerty, I am wery sorry to intrude upon you in private, sir," he said, keeping his voice low. "I wundered if I could have a word. I know the hour is late - so it is for me, sir, perhaps more than you can know, but it cannot wait."

Mr Snickerty writhed irritably, but the fellow appeared in earnest, and the adjudicator reasoned that it would be more expedient to hear him out, than turn him away. He grunted, and beckoned him in, and returned to his elbow chair and his empty goblet. The visitor nodded a polite acknowledgement upon seeing Mr Pinscher, and remained standing, restlessly fiddling with the tattered hem of his threadbare coat, as he waited his turn to speak. But before he could, Mr Pinscher startled him with a sudden exclamation. "I know this man!" he declared, as he paused with a hunk of beef that he had speared with his fork, mid-way to his mouth. He set the implement down on the side of his plate. "Well, well! Another one of those wretched citizens of Cardew Street who does not feel the need to pay his council taxes. I've had occasion to visit the fellow more than once. Mr Gates, is it not?"

"Wanting, sir," the visitor corrected him. "The name is Jacob Wanting, Mr Pinscher, sir, and Blacktop Road is where you have visited me in my 'umble home. You remember, I'm sure, what I told you that day, and never

did I ever speak a truer word, or bless me, let the shade of my dear old departed mother strike me down. I told you I had paid my taxes for many years, sir, before my present misfortunes were visited upon me, since when I have been unable."

"Ha!" Mr Pinscher cried. "And yet, despite your lack of contributions, you nevertheless remain capable of enjoying the benefits that we provide: your streets are illuminated, your roads are mended, your refuse is hauled away and there is even a constable to keep you safe while you and your family lie abed. What do you say to that, Mr Wanting? Are you not looked after?"

"I'm sure I must be, sir, I don't doubt," replied Jacob Wanting. "Between yourself and Mr Snickerty here, and my old missus and my blessed departed mother, I must be very well looked after indeed. Although I should say that Blacktop Road is a dark and dirty neighbourhood, and the constables, they never come nowhere near it. But I know that the borough has provided those splendid new council chambers, for us all, and by all accounts it is a most magnificent building, although I myself am not allowed admittance, sir. And I have heard that a 'andsome sum has been lavished on the mayor's new coach. A very impressive carriage it is too, because I have watched it from a distance, and it does me good to know that his worshipfulness and his fine friends can travel in such comfort and style, sir."

Mr Pinscher did not reply. He merely grunted and picked up his fork to continue his assault on the table. Jacob Wanting turned to address the adjudicator. "And

Mr Snickerty, sir, we have also met, not one week ago when I came to your offices to ask for an allowance, though I didn't never ask for any charity before, this being the first time and out of absolute necessity."

Mr Snickerty shrugged, and failed to meet the visitor's eye. "I see so many people," he said. "I cannot be expected to remember every face."

"Of course, sir, of course," Jacob Wanting said. He shuffled restlessly. "Only, on that occasion, my request was turned down, sir."

Mr Snickerty waved a hand. "So many are," he said. "Even our generosity can only stretch to the most deserving of cases."

"The most deserving indeed, Mr Snickerty, sir, and I have no doubt that those most deserving folk are so wery thankful for your kindness," said Jacob Wanting, and hesitated before he spoke next. "And for the others," he said slowly. "Them that don't deserve - well, I'm sure that they are no less grateful that you should have taken the time to make a judgement. But I wonder whether there might be some sitivation where you might want to..."

And here words failed Jacob Wanting. Mr Snickerty looked up and briefly caught his eye, before the visitor turned his attention to the floor. "Well?" Mr Snickerty demanded, leaning forward in his chair. "You will do me a great disservice if you disrupt me at this hour merely to examine my floorboards and leave me guessing as to the nature of your business. Situations where I might want to what?"

"To reconsider, Mr Snickerty, sir," Jacob Wanting said quietly.

"Reconsider!" Mr Snickerty said. "Why I've never heard of such a thing." Mr Snickerty glanced to his friend, the collector. "Reconsider, he says! I am the adjudicator! Mr Wanting, when I judge something to be so, it remains so, and requires no reconsideration. It is your own case that you wish me to reconsider, I take it?" Mr Snickerty calmed down a little and leaned back in his chair, and then somewhat surprisingly said: "Very well, I will hear your story, and I shall pronounce judgement. But I warn you, by this act I will demonstrate two things: firstly that I am as charitable with my time as I am with the departments funds; and secondly, that my decisions never - never, I tell you - necessitate revision."

Jacob Wanting nodded in gratitude. "I won't take much of your time, Mr Snickerty, sir," he said. "If you'll allow me to acquaint you with a little of my history. I have worked all my life, sir, since I was a boy. Lately I have earned a 'umble but honest wage in the stables of some rich and respectable gentlemen of this city. I have paid my taxes to the council, when I could." Here he politely acknowledged Mr Pinscher. "And I have discharged my duties to the crown. No man could ever claim that I shirked my responsibilities to my family or to my country. Neither have I ever given my employers cause for complaint, so strike me down if I utter a false word. And during my working years, Mr Snickerty, sir, if I did not earn myself a fortune, at least I earned myself a reputation as a trustworthy and dependable fellow. "

"My, how the wretch goes on!" remarked Mr Pinscher, idly fingering a crust.

"Indeed he does," Mr Snickerty agreed, making great theatre of stifling a yawn. He addressed Jacob sharply: "You have done all that is expected of you, and nothing more besides. In this there is nothing so remarkable as to explain you waiting upon me now. Come sir; explain the purpose of your visit."

"My purpose is this, sirs," Jacob continued, though he gave no indication that he would be hurried. "You gentlemen would agree, I'm sure, that a man cannot live on his reputation alone. He must have bread and water, and a roof above his head, and clothes for himself and his family. Reputation cannot give a man such things. Hard toil can, but ever since I suffered a horse's kick in the service of my master, I can work no more. The blow from that wayward mare did not just break my back, it crushed my spirit and any hope I ever had of earning another penny in my chosen trade."

Mr Pinscher chuckled softly to himself, and Jacob was sufficiently disturbed by this unexpected reaction, that he momentarily abandoned etiquette, and asked him what he found so funny. "I believe I comprehend exactly why that poor nag delivered you such a knock," the collector replied with a sneer. "I fear the animal must have been driven to distraction by your meandering monologues."

A flicker of a smile played around Mr Snickerty's lips, but he resisted the temptation of an open display of mirth. "Nevertheless," the adjudicator said. "This fellow's story is a familiar one, and his visit is now recalled to me."

Correct me if I am wrong, Mr Wanting, but am I mistaken in remembering that your assessment was interrupted?"

"That's right, Mr Snickerty, sir," said Jacob. "The pain overtook me, as it often does nowadays, and I couldn't finish the tests."

"We subject applicants to a number of simple tests," Mr Snickerty explained, in response to Mr Pinscher's quizzical look. "We make them stand, make them sit, ask them to pick up items from the floor, and we award points for each task they cannot perform. By such means we can establish whether the applicant really is as inconvenienced as he claims to be."

"Capital!" Mr Pinscher said approvingly. "Make sure the fellows are not playing you for a fool and taking advantage of your charity, eh? Very wise." He gestured lazily at Jacob. "And this chap got found out, did he? Is that it?"

"I was unable to finish the tests, Mr Pinscher, sir," said Jacob, "on account of the pain that took a hold of my back, and shot down through my legs, and made it so that I couldn't stand, nor sit, nor do any of the things that Mr Snickerty would have me do. And that is why I would like you to reconsider my case, Mr Snickerty sir, if you would see your way to do so."

Mr Snickerty made a steeple of his fingers and pressed them thoughtfully to his lips. Then he tutted and gently shook his head. "Well, I really don't see that there is any cause," he pronounced. "The situation, as it presents itself, is very clear. Everyone who is awarded an allowance must score at least fifteen points in the

assessment. You did not. There really is no need for re-evaluation."

"But Mr Snickerty, sir," Jacob protested. "I didn't take the tests."

Mr Snickerty grew irritable. "And therefore you scored nought," he snapped testily. "Really, I fail to see why you need to labour this point. It is surely apparent to even the most muddle-headed of fellows that a failure to take the test will result in a failure to be awarded the allowance?"

"Yes, but..." Jacob Wanting haltingly continued. Circumstances were such that he had no option but to persevere, and no hope unless he was able to persuade the adjudicator to reverse his decision. "Mr Snickerty, sir, I don't like to have to beleaguer you like this, but there is no food on my table, and I have no means to earn it. The missus, she says I should come here and ask if you will think again, and she's right, is my missus, because if you won't help, then we will starve."

"Listen, you ill-mannered windbag," Mr Pinscher abruptly interceded, having found that this visitor's words were interfering with his digestion, at a time when his digestive system had more than enough to contend with already. "Mr Snickerty here has had the good manners to consider your plea." That eminent gentleman shot his friend a look which seemed to suggest that he was more than equal to dealing with this increasingly annoying intrusion himself, but Mr Pinscher failed to read the meaning of the expression, and carried on regardless. "He has decided to stand by his original decision," the

collector continued. "It is not for you to question his verdict, nor to encroach upon his time a moment longer."

Jacob Wanting stood his ground, with the stubborn resignation of a man with no other options left open to him. "But, gentlemen, is it fair?" he implored. "I ask you now, here am I a man incapable of earning a farthing for himself by the sweat of his own brow, and I am denied help because I am too ill to even to undertake the tests. This cannot be right."

Mr Snickerty got to his feet. "My judgement stands, just as I said it would," he said. "It is unnatural that you should question it. Society determines that we live by certain rules, and that where judgements need to be made, decisions are taken only by those persons possessed of the impeccable good sense to take them. By these rules, and by my judgement, you do not qualify for assistance, and therefore assistance you shall not have. That is my final word, sir."

By Mr Snickerty's lofty demeanour, Jacob Wanting knew that further argument would be fruitless, so he thanked the gentlemen that they had at least heard him out, and then he left quietly. Mr Snickerty did not feel in the best of humours, as he fastened the door behind him. His friend, Mr Pinscher, was more animated as he remarked upon the nerve of their visitor. But Mr Snickerty dismissed his comments. Such encounters were commonplace in his business, he said. "Though very rarely do they follow me home," he added as he returned to the table and began to load up a plate with a variety of meats and cheeses.

"Not even when they come riding swine?" Mr Pinscher asked impishly, recalling their earlier conversation, and causing Mr Snickerty to laugh.

"No," the adjudicator replied, returning to his chair with his plate fully laden. "No, not even then."

"Curious though," said the collector, "that this woman you spoke of should arrive at your chambers, claiming to be incapable of feeding herself. Now that I have given the matter some thought, it occurs to me that all the while she is pleading poverty, she is in possession of an animal that could grace her table for the best part of a month."

Mr Snickerty agreed. "I was sensible of just such a possibility," he said. "But when I raised the point, the woman protested that she could not eat her only means of transport, and so there the matter rested. Or at least, so I thought, for several days later I learned that the pig had expired whilst it was carrying her home. I am optimistic that, unless she can acquire another sturdy hog to carry her to my door, I will have seen the last of her." He tore off a chunk of bread, and chewed it thoughtfully. "It's a pity of course," he said. "A very real shame."

"You feel sorry for the woman?" the collector asked.

"Heavens no!" the adjudicator answered. "There's no cause for sympathy in the case of a duplicitous, malingering burden on the state such as she... But that was a very impressive pig. Oh yes, I would have given a great deal for a pig like that."

Mr Snickerty shouted for more port, but his demands went unheeded. Mrs Pilfer was sound asleep on the

kitchen table, and far too wound up in her own befuddled dreams to answer her employer's call. Mr Snickerty fetched the bottle for himself, and he and Mr Pinscher spent the remainder of the evening in pleasant conversation, as they gradually picked the table clean. Meanwhile, Hermes, the little dog, sat at their feet where he received a steady supply of scraps and morsels, and remained the only recipient of Messrs Snickerty and Pinscher's munificence that evening.



"Consider what we might do with tales of worn out shoes and empty pans."

# Pancreas

*It was one of those muggy, fuggy days where morning rainstorms have given way to baking sun that boils the wet ground until it steams. I was in my office, camped next to the AC, watching those poor suckers slogging through the fetid miasma outside when in walked this dame. She was unsure of herself, hesitant, like they all are when they fetch up at my door. I put on my very best shark tooth smile and the seduction began.*

**Me:** Hi there toots, what can I do for you?

**Her:** Oh, it's just that... Is there where I come for a loan?

**Me:** This is the very place. Come in, come in.

**Her:** It's just that the rent's due and I need something to tide me over until -

**Me:** Of course, of course you do. Hey we all need a little something from time to time. Come on in. Take a seat.

**Her:** Yes well... I'll admit to being a little uncomfortable about this -

**Me:** You wanna drink? Sure is warm out. I can get you something cool.

**Her:** No thanks. As I was saying, it seems silly to borrow more money when I already owe so much, but -

**Me:** Hey, there's nothing silly about wanting to improve your lot, doll. Nope, that's straight up smart. You wanna new rug? Okay, so you get a new rug. Got your eye on a couch? Jeeze, go for it! And surely you're not going to deprive the kids of those new roller skates?

**Her:** It's really only -

**Me:** Well of course you're not. Hell, what kind of mother would you be?

**Her:** Really it's only the rent, you see, and -

**Me:** Rent schment! The whole world spins on credit. You don't think that guy driving round in the Aston Martin has actually earned it? Hell no. Why should you wait, eking out your life earning every penny so you might eventually get what you want when you're too old to enjoy it? Get it now.

**Her:** But I'm not sure I can afford to take out a loan.

**Me:** Hey, you're a beautiful lady, you know that? Your fella sure is one lucky guy. Heck, you deserve to treat yourself every now and then. Don't you? Hey?

**Her:** Well, I don't know. It's just that I'm worried -

**Me:** Life's too short to worry. Worry won't get you nowhere, cupcake. See?

**Her:** Yes. Of course. I see. But can I really afford a loan?

**Me:** Afford it? Of course you can't afford it. If you could afford it you wouldn't need it. And you do need it, so why fight it? Listen, you pay it back within seven days and it will hardly cost you anything at all. How's that sound?

**Her:** When you say it will cost me hardly anything at all, exactly how much -

**Me:** Exactly! Hardly anything at all! It's easy.

**Her:** Yes but what if I can't pay it back?

*I'll give her her due, this doll wouldn't give in so easily. Sometimes you get 'em like that, but it's all part of the same game. You just have to play it a little smarter, that's all. So I got up, sat myself on the edge of the desk and looked deep into those cool blue eyes.*

**Me:** You know lady, you remind me of my mom. You worry too much. So you don't pay it back within the time - it's no big deal. There's just some stuff about interest and fees and stuff. It's all in the paperwork, if you're really that interested, but trust me toots, it ain't no thrill-a-minute potboiler. So you let us worry about all that. The bailiffs will explain it all to you anyway.

**Her:** Bailiffs?

**Me:** Yeah, they're just some guys. Nothing for you to worry about.

**Her:** You're sure?

**Me:** Sure? Sure I'm sure. Listen - look at this suit. Cashmere, made to measure. See this Rolex - that's the real deal, ain't no fake. I'm no schmuck. You think I'm doing pretty well for myself, yeah? Well I figure you can too if you follow my advice. So how much you want?

**Her:** Erm, two hundred, I think, should cover it.

**Me:** No way, doll. Two hundred - it's chicken feed. You gotta start thinking bigger. Make it a grand. No, even better, two grand. No point in cutting corners, huh?

**Her:** I really don't know.

**Me:** S'okay. You don't have to know. We know. Have some faith in us, yeah?

**Her:** Okay, if you think so.

*Gotcha! Now there's nothing left for me to do but reel her in. But you gotta move fast while they're still wriggling on the hook. So I zipped back behind my desk and whipped out the contract, real quick.*

**Me:** Great! Sign this. And this. No, not that - this. Beautiful. Now all we need is your pancreas.

**Her:** My... sorry, my what?

**Me:** Pancreas. Pancreas. It's about yay big, sort of brown colour, kinda slimy. It's in the contract.

**Her:** What contract? Where?

**Me:** The contract you just signed, lady. There, see?

**Her:** What do you want my pancreas for?

**Me:** I don't want it *for* anything. Jesus, that would be nuts. But I gotta have some, uh, collateral from you. I mean, you're borrowing money from me. I gotta know that you're committed to paying it back. So we take your pancreas, see - just to prove to us that you're serious about the whole deal. Don't worry. It's just what we do.

**Her:** So you demand all your customers' pancreases?

**Me:** No no no. It's not always pancreases. Sometimes a spleen, sometimes a liver. Hell, we even got one guy's bladder. He was cool about it - kept making jokes about us taking the piss. Funny guy.

**Her:** But that's monstrous.

**Me:** You think? I thought it was kinda witty. Oh, you mean the whole collecting organs thing. Well yeah, if you must know, I think it's pretty shitty. I mean, I've got to find somewhere to put them all. I've got drawers full of kidneys, a filing cabinet full of lungs and the smell from the broom closet is enough to make your eyes peel. Heck, I've even got a bunch of appendixes in the trunk of my car. Or should that be appendices?

**Her:** But, to take my pancreas...

**Me:** You get it back when you've paid off the loan.

**Her:** But surely I can't just hand you my pancreas. Don't I need it?

**Me:** Do you? What for?

**Her:** Um... Ah... Well yes, I see what you mean. Okay then, when do you want it?

**Me:** Well hey, there's no time like the present, toots. Now then, you go behind that screen there, and when you're done you can just slip it into this padded envelope. Okay?

*And so she sashayed behind the screen and came back moments later with this bulging envelope, just like I asked. I think I noticed a new confidence about her as she coolly sat down, adjusted her blouse and brushed the hair from her eyes. Sweet. I put the envelope in my drawer and handed her the check.*

**Me:** Hey that's wonderful. Nothing to it, was there? And here's your loot - a beautiful thing, ain't it? Enjoy, and don't spend it on anything I wouldn't.

**Her:** Thank you.

**Me:** The pleasure's all mine, toots. Oh and hey. I almost forgot, this is yours as well.

**Her:** A paper bag?

**Me:** Take it.

**Her:** What is it?

**Me:** Take it. Look inside.

**Her:** Inside? It's... It looks like someone's kidney.

**Me:** Yeah. Cashback. Now get out of here you tramp.

*And she went. No messing. The deal was done and I kicked back and waited for the next mug to call.*

# Chip Papers, Doggy Doings and Sick

**I don't know**, lovely reader, whether you've ever faced the simply awful nightmare that is trying to park the car in town. I rarely ever get the old Oxford out of the garage these days, not nearly. For one thing, it's quite a beastly palaver battling to keep the thing on the road, what with all the various apertures to be wiped, flanges to tighten and reservoirs to fill and inflate. Oh botheringtons, I'm really not very technically minded at all, you must forgive my waffling nonsense. I'm alive to the possibility that you're all marvellously enlightened when it comes to valve rings, drive belts and whatnots, clever young poppets that you are, and my ill-educated blather is bound to come across as quite silly, but I get into such a fluster at the merest mention of a rotary socket wrench. These matters aside, I confess to quite another reason why I venture into town most infrequently, and that is... well... disappointingly, there doesn't seem to be much of a town left to visit.

I remember in my youth that our town centre used to be such a busy place, oh really. Ah, now, yes, you tease me now, ha ha - you naughty little flopsy, you. Well, in spite of what you might consider to be my great antiquity, I don't have to think so very far back to remember the colourful little shops that spilled their wares out onto the pavements, and the bustling lines of people that slalomed in between the greengrocers, the newsagents and Sykes

the Butcher's. I happily recall that it used to inject a particular bounce into my step to perambulate through the market on Fridays and Saturdays, and pleasure myself with spiced meats and seafood and brie, quite possibly. Gone now. All gone, gone, gone. I'm sure you may think me a fluffy old fool if I admit to shedding a tear at their passing, but there it is, and what to do, and we may just as well move on and forget it, oh well.

Now, my little darlings, it's all grey, isn't it though? Or maybe it's no more grey than ever it was, quite possibly, but it seems that way. Those little palaces of trinkets and treats have all blown away - even the little jeweller's shop with the fat, ugly blobs of jade and the silver plated tat, what have you. Swept aside like crumpet crumbs from auntie's best tablecloth, to be replaced by Oxfams, and Dr Banardos and bakeries that sell morsels of reconstituted gristle wrapped in cold slabs of pastry, like flaky little tombstones for the many and varied creatures that gave of their lips so that we might eat. Or worse still, the shops are boarded up, depleted and defunct, neglected even by the vandals, and sadly announcing themselves for immediate possession through the medium of bleached cardboard signs. Ahh.

And the car parks. Oh yes, the captivating car parks with their cracked bollards and splintered tarmac, and flecked with chip paper, doggy doings and sick. All abandoned, of course, my precious little dew drops - apart from the chip papers, doggy doings and sick, most certainly. So why, you're asking yourselves, would anyone find parking so lung-burstingly bothersome?

Well, my inquisitive little Munchkins, the problem is not one of space but of finance. In shortness the issue is this: should I wish to descend upon the town, to park in its unloved and lonely car parks, to walk its barren, filth-strewn streets and perusify its depleted boutiques, the town council will charge me two pounds fifty to do it. Four pounds if I should wish to linger all day, I should say.

Ladies and gentlefolk, boys and girls, cherubs and cherubim, I remember a time when it was the role of a local council to provide services to its community. I know you think I'm being an impossible old fuddy duddy but golly gosh, I swear to you it's true. They would sweep our streets and empty our bins and light our way and run our schools and community centres and information podules and all sorts of lovely wonderfulness to justify the money that they took from us. But then... well I said the horrid word just now, didn't I? Money.

There was a sea change, and local government stopped being about serving the community and dedicated itself to the collection of cold hard cash.

I'm not sure when it happened, but it was probably on a Tuesday. Horrid things always seem to happen on a Tuesday, my sweetlings. The state of affairs just seemed to pivot, like when the ghastly little fat boy from two streets away would come along and plonk himself down on the see-saw and leave us dangling in mid-air. Everything now has to generate income.

*"We'll put up the prices in the leisure centres and for the hire of the community halls. Can we charge for the parks and the libraries? We may have to break that one*

*in gently. The street lighting doesn't earn us a penny. Can we put them on a meter? Maybe it's better to turn them all off. The street cleaners don't really bring in a lot of cash. Maybe we can contract it out and make ourselves rich on the kickbacks. As for the memorial gardens, well I've always thought that they were the ideal location for a supermarket. And then there's the car parks. Free parking is all very well, but we're not living in the fifties. We'll charge for the lot - every street, every parking bay, every spare patch of bare earth, we'll stick up a parking meter. And instead of hiring workers to do things and mend things and help people, we'll employ them to collect taxes, process payments and harass the bottoms off of anyone who cannot afford to pay."*

And that is just what they have most assuredly done, my lovelies. I believe they call it 'monetising' which is a perfectly repulsive word for more than several reasons. Now our once happy little hamlet is a ghost town, because all the people who used to come here have been driven out to the new out-of-town family megapark which is cleaner, more fragrant and where they can park the car for nought. And this is just as well, because that's where all the shopkeepers moved to when the rates went up.

Which leaves our detestable town council serving no function in the middle of a wasteland, patting themselves on their collective backs for doing nothing and wondering how they might successfully realise the fiscal potential of chip papers, doggy doings and sick. Heavens.



"Now, my little darlings, it's all grey."

# There Are No Monsters Here

**"Come in. Sit down.** Let's have some lovely hush so we can get fings started. This is a seminar, not a fucking social club, so easy on the chatter there Tonto. Now, I'm going to... You at the back there! Yes you, you fucking gormless squint-eyed twat! You with the fistful of sausage roll! You've got a choice, son: you can either quit nattering to your new best chum and pay attention, or you can fuck right off. Yes I'm talking to you, fucknuts. What's it to be? No, it's not a rhetorical question, what's your answer? Right, good, well in that case, put down the pastry, eyes front and shut the fuck up.

"As you will have seen - those of you who aren't completely numb from the neck up - this weekend is called 'The Customer Journey - A Guide for the Public Sector'. Not my title - dreamt up by some wanker on free times my salary with his own parking space. Before we start we'd better make sure that we're all in the right place. It usually happens - it doesn't matter how many signs I plaster all over the fucking venue, there's usually some nonce who's wandered into the wrong place. Nobody? What about the greaseball down at the front here? Yeah you - the ginger virgin with the bum fluff moustache and the 'wacky' tie. Does your mother know

you're out? I fink the model railway geeks are next door. No? You want to stick around, copper top? Fair enough.

"Ok then, let's crack on. For the next two days I'm going to be teaching you all about 'customer service'. Aren't you lucky?

"They say that the customer is always right. Let's get that horseshit out of the way to start with. Just look at yourselves. You're all customers, off and on, and frankly I wouldn't trust most of you to dress yourselves without a team of paramedics standing by. You there, the flat chested tart with the bad teeth. Oh for fuck's sake, yes you - I'm pointing at you. Stand up and turn to the rest of the audience. Now take a good look at her, people. This is a typical a member of the public. Would you really trust this poor cow to handle anything more complex than eating soup? Of course not, clearly she's a fucking moron. And yet if you were working... All right love. You can sit down now. You've had your fifteen seconds of fame. This isn't the bloody X Factor. Jesus!

"As I was saying, if you were working in the private sector you'd have to kowtow to the great British public, irregardless of how stupid and retarded... Somefing funny? You're smirking, did I say somefing funny? Yes you are, I know what a fucking smirk looks like.... What's that? Oh, is that right? No such word, is there? Okay Mr Dictionary, what should it be? That's what I said... Yes I did... Regardless, irregardless, what's the fucking difference? Fair enough, you've made your point, now get out. Go on, I'm not joking - take your shit-stained raincoat and your tatty briefcase and fuck off...

" ...

" ...

" ...

"And close the door behind you, fucking retard... Right, do we have any other literary critics in the room? Anybody got a problem with the way I speak. Anybody? No? Fine, perhaps I can carry on then?

"As I was saying, private sector workers have to bend over and take it from every harebrained halfwit that comes their way. They don't have the choice of replying to moronic enquiries with a stinging rebuke, or an acid insult, or my personal favourite: the playful but firm tap on the chin. But you, ladies and gentlemen... Are you playing with yourself, mate? Then sit still, for Christ's Sake... You, lads and ladettes, are lucky lucky lucky bastards. You all come from different walks of life - tax inspectors, doctor's receptionists, road menders, the filth. This butterball down here is probably a traffic warden, judging by the slimy look he has about him, but you all... What's that, son? Are you really? Fascinating. Fing is, I don't actually give a toss, so keep it to yourself, yeah? Listen, we break for lunch soon - you just concentrate on that. Mmmm, lovely pies. Somefing to look forward to, innit? Fat cunt.

"Ok, so you all have one fing in common - you don't have to give a shit about anyone. The public might look to you to provide help and information, but the brutal

truth is that we are only here to keep these bastards away from fings what don't concern them.

"Understand this - it's them and us, and you're one of us now. You're the foot soldiers of the state - the latest recruits to swell the ranks in the age-old war between the ruling executive and the people they have been 'chosen' to govern. It's not a vocation for the faint-hearted. Day upon day, week after week, they will come at you with their complaints and their demands and their desperate, sickening, pathetic excuses. Don't fall for it. Don't be tempted to be nice - they won't fank you for it. Our motto - remember this - is 'fuck 'em'.

"Over the next two days... Oh what the hell is it now? Oh, you do, do you? Ladies and gentlemen, for the benefit of anyone who failed to catch what this frumpy bitch just said, she reckons my attitude is 'disgraceful'. I bet she's a librarian. Are you a fucking librarian, love? It's the cardigan that gives it away. Speak up, darling. If you're going to heckle me it helps if people can hear what you're saying, you fucking amateur. Oh, a social worker! I see... Yes, yes, very good. Proper little Mary Poppins, I'm sure, but listen love, out here in the real world... Oh all right, you're off, are you? Bye bye then! No no no, you don't have to get the last word in. Just go. Yes, and you. Don't get your arse caught in the etcetera etcetera.

"Well, there you go. There's always one. Pity - that gobful of abuse she dished out before she went was very promising.

"So anyway, over these next two days we'll be teaching you some of the best strategies for dealing with

the public. From basic excuses to full frontal abuse. You'll be learning about the various technologies you can use to misdirect emails and phone calls, and how to generate standardised bullshit responses. You will also learn about the correct use of bureaucracy as a tool for obstruction. You will master the smug and insincere apology that never, ever hints at genuine regret.

"Occasionally, ladies and gentlemen, somebody might fuck up. Somebody might drop a bollock. Somebody might get caught with their hand in the till. That person might be someone you know. It might be *you*. It happens, you're only human. Some of you are *barely* fucking human, but it's no matter. This weekend you will learn that a brief display of contrition usually sorts it out. Maybe even some small act of penance, but it blows over very quickly and fings rapidly go back to normal.

"But, most importantly of all, you will learn how to do this... You see? You see what I'm doing?

"You, the dickhead with the neck boil and the piss stain down your trousers - what am I doing? Yep, that's right, I'm smiling. Give yourself a biscuit. This, my fledgling bureaucrats, is the most powerful weapon you can ever deploy. It's not a real smile. A real smile would not nearly be so devastating. This is an *official* smile, a *professional* smile. This is a government-issue smile which says 'Hey, we're going to get through this encounter in a calm and pleasant matter, but I am in charge so don't push it, or I will seriously fuck you up.'

"Yes, boys and girls, you will learn all these things before we send you out into the world... But right now

we'll break for coffee. Before you go, on your chairs you should have found a feedback form about this weekend. For the cretins amongst you it's easily identified by the words 'Feedback Form' at the top of it. We put it on there in big letters to make it easier for you. I would urge everybody to fill it in, or at least those of you cunts who haven't already made a paper hat out of it. Not that we give a flying fuck what you think, but it does help us to weed out the trouble makers.

"Back here in fifteen minutes everyone..."

# The Last Supper

**Dinner time** was a heavy number. It was when the whole household gathered together. The *only* time. Martin would have spent the day wandering around the echoing empty manor house, poking his nose in here, fiddling about with this or that; roller skating in the cobweb-festooned ballroom among the shattered shards of a once magnificent chandelier, or pulling faces at himself in the long mirrors. Or when he wasn't doing that he would have been in the gallery, doodling on all the old masters. There were hundreds of paintings in there, stacked against the walls, lurking under dusty sheets, piled high against the windows, blocking out the blue October sunshine. Someone here had once been quite the collector. They were worthless now. Fit only for doodles.

Occasionally he would zoom by the study, which The Colonel habituated seemingly at all hours of the day and night - when he wasn't at dinner, that is. He would be hunkered down into a cracked and stained leather armchair, steadily steeping himself in brandy and port and vintage sherries, of which he seemed to have an unending supply. Martin had never found out where it was hidden. The routine was always the same: Martin would fly past the open doorway on his skates, down the long oak-blocked hallway, and shout "Ullo Colonel!" The

Colonel would respond "What there, boy!" long after he was gone.

And then there was Mrs Cowling. Martin didn't know where she spent her time. There must have been some dark, private corner of the manor that Martin had yet to discover. Somewhere that Mrs Cowling could while away the empty hours trying on dresses, for whenever the three of them gathered for dinner she always had something new to wear.

So here they were, all three present at seven o'clock sharp, just as they had been every evening for as long as Martin could remember, with the Colonel taking his rightful place at the head of the table. Strict etiquette had to be observed. The Colonel insisted upon it. Formal attire had to be worn, insofar as that was possible, although only Mrs Cowling seemed to have the means to achieve this. Martin wore the same dirty shirt and tattered jeans that he always wore. The only clothes he owned. Rags really - the fraying gashes at the knees testament to many a skating misadventure.

The Colonel himself wore the same dinner jacket day and night. Martin knew it was the same dinner jacket because it had the same dinner on it - splashes of gravy about the left sleeve, a smudge of mashed potato around the hem and the ghostly imprint of a broccoli floret above the breast pocket. The Colonel, it seemed, collected mementos of his various meals with the same assiduity as a squirrel gathers nuts for the winter.

"What is it tonight then, Colonel?" Martin asked hungrily as he eyed the silver-plated tureen that

demanded everyone's attention in the centre of the table. The Colonel reached forward and lifted the lid with a palpable theatrical fervour, like he was a circus huckster unveiling his latest curiosity to a hushed and expectant crowd.

"Stew," he said. Mrs Cowling actually applauded. It had been stew for the last three weeks. "Ah yes," The Colonel breathed, taking in the hot steam that rose from the dish. "I always said that Cook makes a wonderful stew."

As was the custom, The Colonel took it upon himself to serve, ladling the thin, anaemic fluid into the outstretched dishes of his fellow diners with a delicate accuracy of delivery that, if his bespattered jacket was anything to go by, did not come naturally to him. "Although," he went on, as he played mother, "I fear that this shall be the last of it." And in a timely confirmation of his prediction, they heard the ominous chime of the ladle scraping along the bottom as The Colonel chased the last few drops around the tureen.

Mrs Cowling's countenance grew dark and troubled, an expression which The Colonel noted immediately, for he promptly moved to placate the lady's fears. "Oh worry not," he said. "We are creatures born to survive. The larder may be empty but, mark my words, something will turn up. Once we dined like kings, you remember, and one day we shall do so once more. Why, I recall when this table was heaving with - "

"*This* table?" Martin interjected.

"Well, no, not this table, but one very much like it," The Colonel replied. "Before I was here. At the other place. Please don't interrupt, boy, when I am reminiscing about food. You know it is my favourite subject."

Martin apologised and settled down to work on his stew, and to listen to The Colonel's stories. He had heard these tales of 'the other place' a thousand times before, but he never tired of revisiting them. He didn't know where 'the other place' was, but that didn't matter. Wherever it lay, The Colonel seemed to have lived a charmed life there.

"Roast beef! Roast chicken! Roast parsnip!" Each item rolled deliciously off The Colonel's tongue as he listed them.

"Parsnip's a vegetable!" Martin exclaimed. He'd seen a picture of one once.

"Didn't matter," said The Colonel. "Everything got roasted in those days. There were great big hunks of meat carved straight off the bone. And mounds of potatoes - boiled, steamed, fried and, yes, roasted. We would eat until we could eat no more, and then we would eat some more. And the wines! Let me tell you about the wines."

The sound of a terrific explosion outside punctured The Colonel's recollections. It was powerful enough for the table to jump slightly and for the ladle to clatter in the empty tureen.

"That was closer than last night," Martin said after a pause to allow the ringing in their ears to desist.

"No, surely not, lad," said The Colonel, but as he looked across at Mrs Cowling, her anxious pop-eyed glare seemed to support Martin's estimation.

"I thought I heard sirens earlier today," Martin said.

"Never," The Colonel objected. "Why, there haven't been any police around here for over a year. They retreated south."

"Well," Martin continued, "I know what I heard. This morning I saw smoke coming from the cathedral. Maybe someone got hold of a fire engine?"

"Good luck to them! It's about time someone showed some public spirit," The Colonel declared. "Maybe this is the turning point? Maybe soon the riots will be over?"

"Sirens didn't last long," Martin added. "They sort of... died away. Maybe they set fire to the fire engine?"

Mrs Cowling shook her head sorrowfully, gazed across at The Colonel and frowned. "I know, I know," The Colonel said, reading her thoughts. "How did we get to all this, hum? People can fend for themselves, we said. Seems so long ago now. We have spent so long cossetting, nannying and providing for their welfare. Time had come to set them free. Time for the disadvantaged, the poor, the sick, the homeless and the hungry to stand upon their own two feet. To realise their potential, we said."

Martin sat bolt upright. "Listen!" he hissed.

They listened. "I can hear nothing," The Colonel said at length.

"The mob," Martin said. "They're getting closer."

They strained to hear and caught the soft, almost melodic ripple of noise that, at a distance, rolled in like the gentle swelling of a far off ocean, rather than the angry crashing, foaming and bursting that they would have heard at closer quarters. Even so, they knew what they were listening to: a fearsome tide rushing inland, crashing and crushing everything in its path; uprooting and tearing, and leaving in its wake nothing but smashed and burnt flotsam.

"And this is what they have done with their freedom," The Colonel said, his voice breaking above the encroaching tempest. "This is what they have done with their independence. They have turned upon their liberators. We, who sold off their hospitals, their public spaces and their libraries that they might be free of such burdens. We, who pulled back the smothering blanket of the welfare state and dragged them blinking into the light of self-reliance. This is how they thank us for their sovereignty."

Three chimes rang out; metallic clanks, rending iron and the explosive splintering of wood. "That was the main gate," Martin commentated.

"Don't worry, they can't get in," The Colonel assured them briskly in response to Mrs Cowling's suddenly pale and wan appearance. "This place used to be a fortress in old times. Well, not *this* place. The other place. It stood up to Cromwell and shall not fail to defend us against these rogues." He was getting confused now. "No, we are securely barricaded. Please, Mrs Cowling, relax and enjoy your stew. It really is most excellent."

"It must have been the high life indeed, back at the other place," Martin observed, not wishing The Colonel to desist in his nostalgic wanderings, and hoping he might encourage him to return to the path. "Were there many servants?"

"Many servants," The Colonel said. "There were pastry chefs, and boot boys, and butlers."

"Like Mr Hargreaves, who used to do our butling here?" Martin asked.

"Yes, just like Mr Hargreaves," The Colonel affirmed. "And more besides. There were under-butlers, and master-butlers, and butlers that I cannot recall the names for. All gone now."

"Just like Mr Hargreaves has gone," Martin reminded him.

"Yes, just like Hargreaves, lad," said The Colonel. "And there were scullery maids, and parlour maids, and footmen, and stable lads. All gone."

"Just like Gwen. She was our scullery maid here, wasn't she?" said Martin.

"Aye something of the sort."

"And what about the errand boy?" Martin quizzed him. "Was there an errand boy, like John, the errand boy we had here?"

"Oh yes," The Colonel remembered fondly. "There were teams of errand boys who used to fetch and carry, and bring in groceries from the farms and the villages."

"Gone now," Martin completed for him. "Just like John has gone. And what shall we do now that he cannot

bring us provisions, and the last of the stew is gone? Shall one of us have to go outside?"

A crash of cascading broken glass reached them from somewhere at the rear of the manor. The shouts and cries were suddenly louder, more distinct. They were in the house. Mrs Cowling, in her alarm, dropped her spoon into her dish and splashed her dinner up the front of her latest new dress.

"Best not," The Colonel said. "Best wait for it all to blow over before we venture out."

Mrs Cowling paused briefly in dabbing her outfit with a handkerchief and gave one of her now familiar startled looks. It should be observed that Mrs Cowling had looked consistently startled for a period of not less than six months, but The Colonel had become sensitive to the distinctions between the peaks of her most extreme agitation and the troughs that reached the baseline of her general background panic.

"Don't you worry, Mrs Cowling, dear" he reassured her. "Blow over it most assuredly will. Take it from me, most riots tend to peter out once they get into their tenth year. I've seen them all before: the hunt saboteurs, the benefit scroungers, the strikes and the pickets. Granted, nothing on quite the size of our current troubles, but things are bound to die down just as soon as people realise how silly they're being."

The frenetic shouts and sounds of destruction were drawing nearer. Martin heard people trampling through the gallery, fracturing frames and slashing the canvasses of his artfully amended masterpieces. Mrs Cowling could

also detect the unmistakable tearing of fabric, in this case coming from her hitherto hidden corner of their retreat, and she hung her head in dismay. Even The Colonel could not fail to register the smashing of a bottle of French brandy in his study. Indeed, it was almost as if he could determine its vintage from the tinkling of the shards, and had anybody been keen enough to notice it they would have seen a single tear run down his cheek.

"As I say," The Colonel repeated, in spite of his private grief, "nothing to worry about." Notwithstanding this earnest prophesy, he asked Martin to drag the sideboard against the door to 'block out the draught'. "But enough of all this talk of high politics and social complications," he continued brightly. "We are not gathered here to set the world to rights. Our responsibilities are only to sit and be at peace and enjoy this wonderful stew."

To emphasise this he raised a spoonful to his mouth, dealt with it lovingly and let out a satisfied 'aaaahhhh!' It was as if all thoughts of the approaching mob had been driven from his mind; as if the fact that they could be here in a heartbeat had no relevance to him. He did not even flinch when a brutal crack on the dining room door signalled their arrival. Martin and Mrs Cowling both twirled round in their seats, but The Colonel kept on lapping his stew as if this was an evening just like any other. Behaving, in fact, as if he was back in that other place, long ago, surrounded by his rich and influential friends, and his many and varied maids, butlers and footmen.

"The time will come again, companions of mine, when our lives will be enriched by all the fine things that we could desire. My cellar shall be stocked with all the best wines and liqueurs. You, Mrs Cowling, shall have the latest fashions, direct from Paris, or wherever it is that the latest fashions come from these days. And you, boy - you shall have whatever it is that young boys want. Whatever that may be."

Neither Martin nor Mrs Cowling heard him. They were both preoccupied with dragging more furniture across the room to pile it before the door, the panels of which were beginning to sag before a hurricane of blows.

"We shall spend our days in idle retreat, just like the old times," The Colonel continued in between slurps of stew. "Hunting, shooting and fishing. We shall have not a care."

The top half of the door burst inwards under pressure of the mob. Heads, arms and shoulders reached through. Mrs Cowling was grabbed by grasping hands and hauled over the barricade, swallowed up by the mob as completely as an alligator gulping down a defenceless rodent. Martin jumped back out of reach, his back pressed against the edge of the table as the door was forced inexorably open.

"Sit down lad!" The Colonel barked. "Eat your dinner. Don't worry about them - they'll never get in, that sideboard is solid mahogany. This trouble will blow over very soon, and then we can all go back to the other place."

"But Mrs Cowling!" Martin protested.

"Well yes, it seems Mrs Cowling will not be joining us," The Colonel admitted. "Gone, like the rest of them. Like the butler, the errand boy and the maid."

"We have to do something!" Martin insisted. "The barricade won't stop them."

"Do something?" The Colonel quizzed him. "What's to do, boy? Nothing we *can* do, apart from sit and enjoy this delicious stew. He scraped his spoon along the bottom of the bowl and lifted out the final piece of moist gristle, which he had been saving until last. He chewed thoughtfully. "Yes, they're all gone: Mrs Cowling and the errand boy and the rest."

The mob erupted into the room, tumbling over themselves to get at Martin. There was nowhere he could go; nothing he could do. He was grabbed by a hundred different hands and they tore into him. The Colonel paid no regard as they came for him next. He was chewing on something hard - a bone, perhaps - which he spat out into the dish. It was a wedding ring.

"Ah yes," he said wistfully as he was engulfed. "Now even Cook has gone. I always said she made an excellent stew."

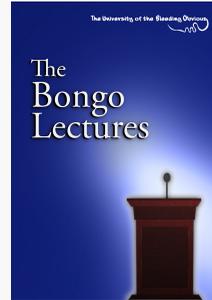
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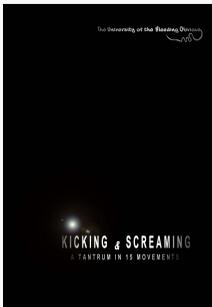
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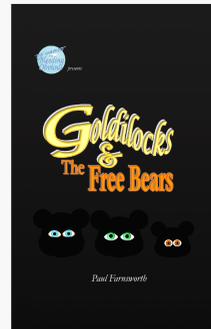
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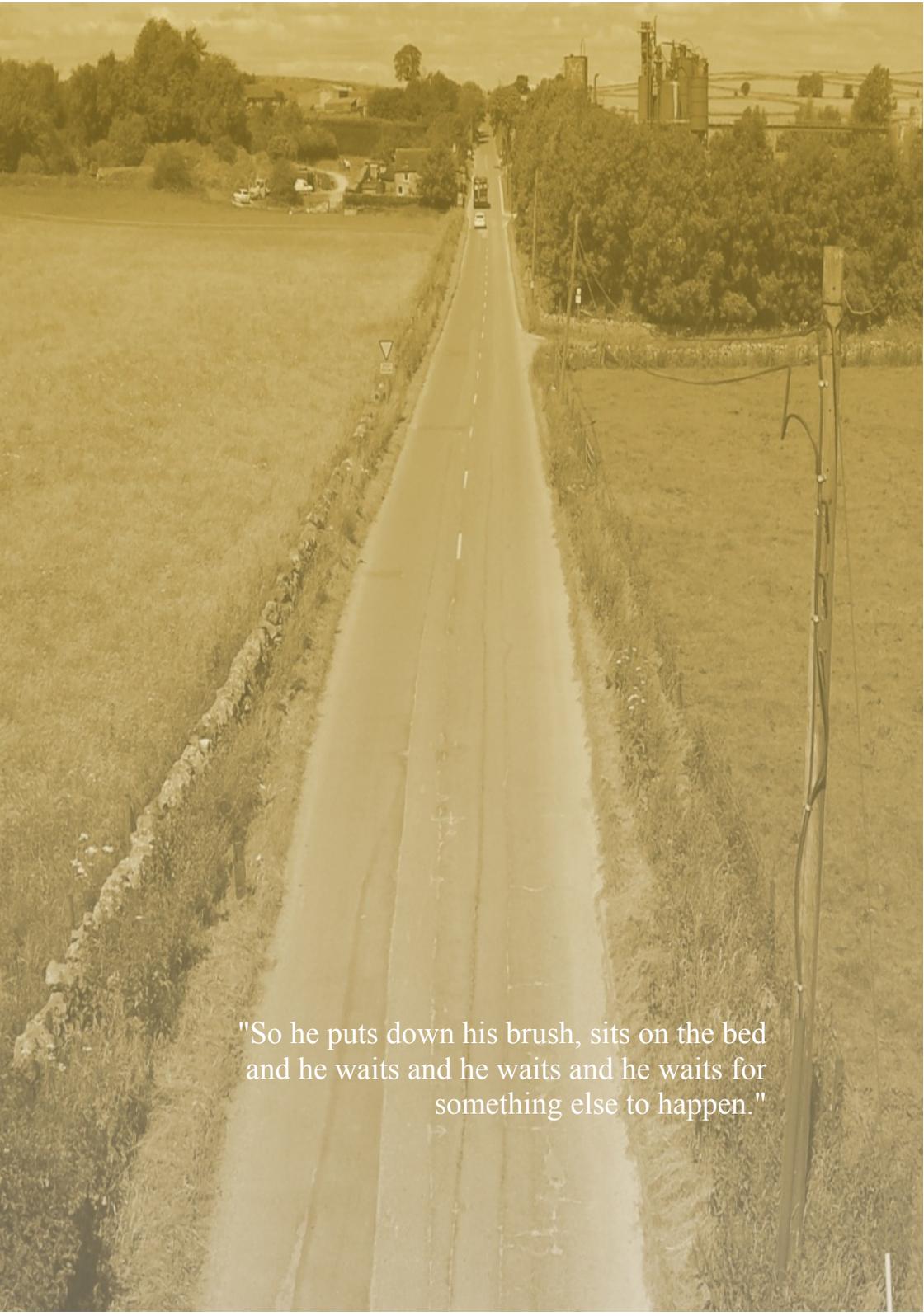


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"So he puts down his brush, sits on the bed  
and he waits and he waits and he waits for  
something else to happen."