

Dave Slaney and the Case of the Murdered Cow

“I specialise in unsolved cases. What the fellers in yeller can’t fathom, that’s bread and marmite to me. I thrive on it. I can smell the back-burner before it lights. I’m a scavenger of those barely reachable parts of the filing cabinet. These days, Plod doesn’t stick to a case like ... that stuff on your track-suit.”

Velcro.

“Doesn’t stick till he’s worried the solution from it – that’s just Ruth Rendell. Doesn’t pester and pester like a big-issue salesman, till you slip up or confess – that’s probably Columbo. Nowadays, well, his funding wears thin, his promotion board comes up, his casebook gets re-prioritised. So he drags a black youth in and finds some powder in his coat-lining; he plans a Christmas crackdown on traffic-light jumping and gets his picture in the *Banbury Guardian*. Mackintosh of the Yard, fingering his stubble and shaking his head saying Frenkly Miss Tromes, Oi’m beffled – not any more, if he ever did. But, nihil desperatum. Once the copper drops that the copper’s dropped, that that nice Inspector hasn’t popped in for tea and muffins in a while, there’s still somebody they can turn their hopes to. Relatives and victims I mean. Or even, you can’t but suspect, the malefactor himself. The client could easily go to the top of the list of suspects – what better bluff? So that’s me, the man they send for when the trail’s gone so cold even Jack Frost can’t stay on it. It’s a tough job, but somebody has to do it. That’s why they call ... Are you getting all this?”

I nodded and showed him my page of shorthand.

“I’m not going too fast?”

No sir.

“Dave, please Sandra.”

It’s not—

“I’m having trouble with the name.”

Yes, it’s Ca—

“Cadfael and Cuff, Farquhar and Fabian, Marlowe and Marple, Rebus and Regan ... Dalgliesh and Dupin, Holmes and Hawksmoor, Tracy and Trent, Wexford and Wimsey ... Gideon and Gray, Lynley and Lee, Poirot and ...”

Pascoe and Dalziel, Dempsey and Makepeace, Starsky an—

“You *see* – all the best names have gone. I need something that says Sherlock Holmes as much as Shoestring, Kojak as much as That Chap From No Hiding Place.”

I don’t see what’s wrong with Dave Slaney, I said.

■

“Jack Digby’s Uncle Frank’s nephew. That’s why everybody calls him Uncle Frank. It set him up, when his uncle died, Uncle Frank’s uncle that is, his favourite great-nephew. T’other Jack swore it was a mix-up and was meant to be him. That’s Uncle Frank’s son, T’other Jack – so he’s the only person in South Northants who doesn’t call Uncle Frank Uncle Frank – which is why he’s called T’other Jack, even though he’s older. Anyway, this inheritance set Jack up in a smallholding. Nothing big, it’s not Digby’s Farm by any stretch – everybody calls Uncle Frank’s place Digby’s Farm, though it’s correct name is Castle Farm. There isn’t a castle for miles, so your guess is as good as mine.”

Perhaps it’s—

“So Jack Digby – Jack Digby proper – does fine, with his smallholding, the ice-cream machine, a prize cow, and Jane. What a prize *she* was, the most beautiful cowgirl in the village, or in our entire school. I can vouch for that. I knew her when she got her first mini-skirt, long before she thought of being a smallholder’s wife. Jane’s ... well, she’s ravishing. Jane Blood before she was married, Charlie’s cousin. It wasn’t an insult, when we used to call her Everybody’s Jane, she didn’t mind – she was proud of it. She was anybody’s for a smile and a penny. You got the smile back, believe me. Funny thing is, they’re very happily married – brood of children, noisy happy household, always a pleasant place to visit, coffee on the go, fresh baking warm, Jack and Jane smiling at each other and patting bottom as they to-and-fro like they’d fallen in love last week, though it must be fifteen years now. Everybody said the inheritance clinched it, that was Jane’s reputation – sex and money she was after, or rather, sex and very tight clothes. But I don’t think so, I think they underestimated her. Jack didn’t change, I swear he wears the same coat now as he did fifteen years ago; yet Jane seems happy as a pig ... lark? rabbit? ... Rabbit. Not so T’other Jack, who’d courted Jane with a vengeance – where Jack proper had won her without trying, very casual – courted Jane for years, T’other Jack, and I dare say, being what she was, they won’t have drawn a line, they must have ... well, there wasn’t anybody she hadn’t, hardly. But she wouldn’t marry him. So Jack got Shangrilah and the village bike oops beauty in the bargain and I think it’s five kids. Worse still, Uncle Frank and Jack are thick as thieves, always have been. Jack’s like the son Uncle Frank never had, people

say, ironically – because of course he did have a son, the other Jack ... Sorry, am I going too fast?”

No. The reason I wanted to butt in, if you’ll forgive me, and obviously it’s none of my business really, I’ll take down whatever you want me to, but I’m not grasping the point of all this stuff about the Digbys. Also it’s all so complicated, I wonder if your readers will follow, who these people are and how they’re related etcetera. It’s impertinent of me really ...

“It was Jack Digby’s cow. His *only* cow, as it’s pigs and hens they keep mostly. And rabbits. A beautiful fawn cow, big eyed and sweet natured, a very creamy milker. I suppose I’ve a feel for it myself, grandad being a dairy farmer – large herd he had – I knew all their names, and had my favourites, growing up. Cows are likeable creatures. And Jack never had milking machines, as he never had more than a pair – he milked her with his own hands. He loved that cow. Whoever killed her knew that, that’s one thing we can be certain of. Killing the cow was aimed at Jack. For pity’s sake: you don’t feel murder in your soul at a cow, you don’t boil to a frenzy of fury against a cow, you don’t mug a cow for its credit card, you don’t storm out of your range-rover and beat a cow to death yelling This is what you get for cutting me up on that slip-road you bastard cow, you don’t lie in wait behind the hedge till your arch enemy – a cow – saunters by and then leap out weilding a stick and jeering Vengeance is yours, you don’t wait for years in mounting frustration till eventually you find yourself carefully plotting the murder of a cow in order to inherit its field: in short, you don’t cold-bloodedly murder a cow. Or do you?”

I smiled with a shrug of embarrassed agreement.

“I hope you didn’t mind the language. I don’t mean it to have swearwords in, particularly.”

I shook my head.

“This is the technique you see. It’s called ratiocination. It means ...”

Mulling it over.

“Oh no it’s much more than that. It’s a special technique, Dupin invented it. You appraise yourself of the situation and the full facts as far as they’re known, and you go home and work it out by mental arithmetic, or logistics rather, a logic that’s as pure and infallible as mathematics. Well ... not entirely perhaps – I suppose Dupin would say it is, actually, so if it fails it’s some deficiency in the information supplied. Most people think detective work is about gathering facts. It isn’t – it’s about applying a ruthlessly rational logical analysis to the facts gathered. That’s how somebody like Sherlock Holmes or William

Baskeyfield approaches it. The most useful tools of the ratiocinating detective are a pipe and an easy chair, or Morse's music."

William Baskeyfield was that?

"Of Baskerville, William of Baskerville. He was a monk who investigated a murder in a monastery. Anybody can gather the facts Sandra but it takes a certain type of mind—"

That's not really true though is it.

He stared at me blankly.

I know Sherlock Holmes is like you say as *well*; but isn't his really distinctive quality that he spots things? Things other people don't notice. The I see you're not long from the West Indies and have fallen out with your sister-in-law game: that's not this logic you're speaking of, is it? it's keen observation, little things in people's manner and appearance: the initialled handkerchief, the inscribed cane, the cigar ash in the turn-up (identifiable at a sniff as a type only smoked in a certain gentleman's club in Knightsbridge). Or out with the old magnifying glass, direct deductions from clues at the crime scene. You should be looking, Lestrade, for a short red-faced man with a limp who has served as a subaltern in the Yukon ... I'm sorry, it's not my place to argue with you really, I just ...

He was looking daggers at me and looking contemplative, by turns.

I'll shut up, I said; it's probably ... it shows what you're saying's really interesting and will make the reader think.

"You think Dupin was wrong? Have you read the Marie Rosée one?"

No, I didn't know there was a series. I read Murders of the Rue Morgue, but I thought the film was better. The point is, he's made up, by an author. I can't remember who wrote it but—

"Edgar Allan Poe. The *inventor* of the detective story."

Was it really? I just associate him with horror and Vincent Price. But you said it yourself: he invented the detective story, a type of fiction. He didn't invent criminal investigation; he didn't invent logical thinking. I don't think Dupin's a very believable character, really. I'm sorry if he's your hero ... I'm not really helping by interrupting all the time am I?

"You know you say *really* a lot?"

Do I rea—

We laughed, thank goodness – I thought I was about to get sacked.

Do you want to carry on from You don't cold-bloodedly murder a cow or do you?? That was a good cliffhanger, that was a point for moving the story, the ratty-o-sination, forward.

“R-a-t-i-o-c-i-a-n-n-o-n-a-t-i-o-c-n-a-t-o-n, I mean i-o-n.”

Got it.

“I think you've got a genuine feel for literature haven't you.”

I wouldn't claim anything like that, and anyway I shouldn't be distracting you and wasting your time, and money.

“Do you read a lot though?”

Yes I like reading.

“What sort of thing do you read?”

Non-fiction mostly, travel and history.

He did a kind of dismissive laugh. “Science fiction? Fantasy?”

Not really ... no, except historical fantasy perhaps. I like historical novels.

“OK. The mystery of the murdered cow. Or do they? Well, they must, because they did, or somebody did. The cow didn't head-butt the piece of wood seven times till its skull was smashed to pieces and embedded in its brain; a tornado didn't blow the wooden post round and round bashing seven times against the cow's head; the cow didn't run to and fro and collide with seven blunt objects before falling down dead beside a frayed and bloody piece of wood.”

Mad cow disease?

“There the lads from Brackley didn't let us down. A vet did a post mortem – though Jack had to pay some of the cost – and the cow was in perfect health, apart from being dead with its head bashed in. They can deduce a lot from chemistry and cells and so on nowadays; the brain was in a bad way, he couldn't totally rule out a small tumour, but it wouldn't have had that sort of effect and none of the chemical pointers were present. The post mortem combined with her perfectly placid state when Jack last saw her, rule out suicide. Somebody bashed her head in with a four-inch-square wooden post, at least seven separate blows. The weapon was there. It was from a stack of spare fencing. No fingerprints. A few possible footprints, though the end of the field by the side of the barn where the wood was stacked was

muddy and frequently traversed by feet, human and animal, and tractor. The boot prints were all rather imperfect, but matches were made against Jack's wellies and Jane's, eliminating most. Then, enter the wonders of twenty-first-century policing: Our budget doesn't extend to boot-printing everyone in Cottiscot for a case of animal killing, says Plod. More important to catch motorists doing forty miles-an-hour, says Jack, that pays for itself. He thought they'd run with it a bit longer, especially having only just stumped up for the post mortem. Poor sod ... Do you know he sat crying over that cow, he loved her to bits, he sat all night with her after the vet had finished; then in the morning he buried her with his own hands. Except for Charlie's digger – Charlie Blood – he wouldn't take any help. Dug a pit in the corner of her favourite field ... Goes there every day ... I'm sorry to get emotional. Like I said I grew up on my grandad's farm, mostly. Once you know them by name, once you're familiar with them, cows are such lovable creatures. It brought it all back, memories of the foot-and-mouth, how grandad's entire herd had to be burnt. I was just a boy at the time ... Sorry. Well anyway, Jack's planted a little copse over the spot, in memory of her."

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You'd concluded that Jack himself didn't do it then?

He frowned at me.

It's just that I was picturing him going to the top of your suspect list, when he called you in.

"Yes, no, he didn't. Call me in I mean. It was Jane, sort of. I drifted into it, rather, from Jane saying how upset he still was. She thought solving it would help it out of his system. I got to thinking about it after ... after talking to Jane, a couple of times. So I suppose we consider her the client, properly speaking. However – I did eliminate him, yes, you're right, he had to fail the test the same as anybody. But he hasn't claimed off his insurance. He says although she was a good cow – high milk yeild, very creamy, the ice-cream machine depended on her – and he *is* fully insured, he says if he claimed, the excess would cut it in half and they'd double his premium next year. So he hasn't claimed. I can't think of any other motive for him."

And Jane, Mrs Digby?

"Well why would she kill her husband's favourite and only cow. For goodness sake Sandra, it's ridiculous."

It's—

"Ridiculous! Jane's utterly incapable of it. Gentle as a lamb she is. Loves everything Jane does, all creatures great and small. Take her any

forlorn foundling, from a mangy nag to a budgie with hiccups, she'll take it in and I swear she'll love it better. You should see the menagerie they've got, it's a good job they live on a smallholding – parrots and peacocks and rabbits and ducks and goats and a donkey and ... not to mention dogs and cats. She breeds big black flop-eared rabbits, some of them are as valuable as the cow. And where would the motive be? It's unthinkable."

Jealousy.

"That's my theory. That's why it all points to T'other Jack. But of course, being obvious, that road had been gone over by the flatfoots, taking them to their well-trodden dead-end. That's how the story continues. They *did* footprint and question T'other Jack, as the jealousy motive was plain, even down the precinct. He came up squeaky clean, his boots anyway, and an alibi they confirmed they'd confirmed, though they wouldn't say what it was. Jack hadn't wanted them to question him. Hasn't a suspicious nerve in his body, Jack Digby, Jack Digby proper. He couldn't have, he never would have, whatever you think of him, Jane says he said. Plod's first predictable question had been Do you have any enemies Mr Digby? They learn it by heart in training, except for the Mr Digby bit, which they have to improvise on the spot. He shook his innocent head, and even when some possibilities were suggested he wouldn't see it. But what kind of man says he has no enemies?"

A nice man, by the sound of it.

"He's all right Jack is, he *is* nice. I suppose Jack was probably my best friend, as lads I mean. But the answer is: A nice man who knows he *has* an enemy, but won't say because it's his own cousin, and would break his uncle's heart if they fell out – never mind if Jack was done for murder. Though it wouldn't be murder of course, cows not being ... They've always maintained pleasantries, the two Jacks, they've never openly fallen out, and it's Uncle Frank who kept that balancing act in line, or for Uncle Frank's sake. But that makes for an even more explosive seething of this insidious thing – is that the right word? – the most irrational of human instincts – jealousy. And T'other Jack has a shopping-list of it: being the losing namesake, the one who's called T'other, even though he's the elder by a year or two; being the one everybody likes least, though there's nothing wrong with T'other Jack, he's a nice enough chap, but proper Jack everybody likes; then there's the inheritance he thought should have been his, even though anybody can see the old uncle left it to Jack because he was poorer, Uncle Frank and his side of the family having Castle Farm, yet it never stopped T'other Jack thinking he should have got that inheritance; then there's the fact that his relations with Uncle Frank, his own dad, are cooler than between Uncle Frank and proper Jack; and then there's Jane ... yes, well, Jane ... And to round off the list, there's Mary. She's sweet, Mary, and she's probably as good looking as Jane, if she chose to be;

but she's very ... Not a few people thought T'other Jack had had a lucky escape, turned down by Everybody's Jane; and marrying Mary on the rebound, the nicest shy-girl in the village, they thought he'd been jolly sensible and done all right by himself. It hasn't gone all that smoothly; and the jealousy bit – as if being jealous of Jane, or for, or of having her, jealous of their marital happiness, weren't enough – isn't helped by their failure to have a family. Nobody knows why – obviously there are mutterings – nobody knows whether one of them perhaps isn't able, or doesn't want to, or whether they don't even try. And the rub is, if T'other Jack doesn't have children, Uncle Frank's farm will probably end up with Jack and Jane's children. *There's* a jealousy for you, there's a deep-rooted psychological motive. And how symbolic of that is killing a beautiful high-yield cow? ... Uh?"

I was surprised he paused as if wanting an answer. Trying to earn my keep more honestly, I didn't venture one. It was rather heavy on the psychological symbolic for me.

"How symbolic is that?" he repeated.

Yes, that's another good cliffhanger, I said stubbornly. You could have a chapter or section break there, and then move in towards the kill – I mean the logical entrapment of the other Jack.

"Oh T'other Jack didn't do it," he said, shaking his head as if it were obvious.

I was astonished.

"I'd not been on the case more than days when what do you think happened? In their Sunday-bess—"

A pagan cult of cow-sacrificers rang the paper claiming responsibility. He hadn't waited for an answer this time, but I gave him one for free.

"The sons of the truncheon toyed with something ritual, briefly, believe it or not, and I gave it some thought too. But evidence was there none. Sacrifice would have been done differently, a knife presumably, blood collected in a cup, bits cut off and burnt, or buried. The vet said there was no other sign of violence whatever, no mutilation, he even examined for sexual abuse. You obviously know there's a recognised phenomenon, mainly in America, of killing and mutilating cattle; it's generally thought to be the work of aliens."

Aliens? I didn't know of such a thing at all. And I was assuming he meant illegal immigrants.

"From UFOs. But I don't think that's all that likely. Why would they? And why would they come *here*? But some misguided new age youngsters, travellers or students, yes; or nutty political groups, anti-

farming. I did think the old bill hadn't quite given such things a run for their money, as alternatives to T'other Jack. Problem was that by the time they lost interest in their only suspect, they'd lost interest in everything else as well – they'd got no alternative cul-de-sacs to go down. Most people therefore thought T'other Jack had done it but was getting away with it."

But you didn't.

"I did as well. Yes, no, I haven't been leading you down the garden path. I thought it was him till that Sunday I was about to tell you about. The difference is, I hadn't put my eggs in that basket, my other options, or logical avenues, were still open. But that Sunday, not a week after I was on the case, who should turn up at Shangrilah in their Sunday togs but T'other Jack and Mary, with a bunch of flowers. I've said they kept up a sort of cordiality, but they didn't visit, I don't think they'd set foot on Shangrilah in all these fifteen years. Jane was near dumbstruck; but hugely welcoming and hospitable, as she is to one and all. Jack however was in Martha's Spinney, planting another couple of saplings, or just sulking, I don't know. T'other Jack went out to him, with the flowers, and the women watched from the window – I have it from Jane. The flowers were laid down, and the two men shook hands, and then hugged, and then stood awhile. And when they arrived back at the house they were speaking of offering a reward, and of choosing a couple of good milkers from Uncle Frank's herd to graze at Shangrilah. And before Sunday tea was finished – nobody escapes from Jane Digby without being fed – they were going to the steam rally together, which they hadn't done since they were lads. I know ... I know what you're going to say – expiration of guilt or expert cover-up, or bit of each; I was already saying it to Jane as she told me, I was highly sceptical of the whole charade. But apart from her utter conviction that they were sincere, Jack and Mary, in sharing Jack's sorrow and outrage – for of course T'other Jack's a farmer too, he knows how it feels – *and* sincere in making it the occasion of a reconciliation, there was another absolute clincher. The alibi. And it came from Mary, who's as honest as the day is short. She confided in Jane that on the night the cow was killed they were in a clinic near Princes Risborough, where Jack was having tests to see why he can't have children, and Mary stayed with him for support, as being the bluff character he is it was a tough thing for him to swallow. The truth is the world and its uncle, including its Uncle Frank, assume it's Mary who either can't or won't, being pale and timid. She told Jane in the strictest confidence, not at all as if they needed an excuse or an alibi, but as if it was a load off her mind, sharing the secret. Getting home from the family planning clinic to the news about the cow upset them so much, it made them take stock. I mean of what's important in life. Jane believes it, so why shouldn't I? She and Mary – chalk and cheese at school, then and now – are suddenly chums; and the two Jacks, well, they are as well, in their way. Two of Uncle Frank's cows are sort of lend-leased to Shangrilah; the ice cream's back on line; and the reward

they spoke of is half-and-half from each of them, and if not claimed by year's end will be given to the RSPCA."

I was expecting to hear *you'd* got it. If you haven't solved it ... I suddenly realised what I was saying, or about to say, and shut up.

"I stick with jealousy. I still think Jack has an enemy, motivated by jealousy. I thought through the alternatives, like ritualism or sheer sadist perversion; like political antagonism towards agriculture; like a burglary or even a prank gone wrong – fence-post thief startled by cow lashes out. None of them make sense of the known facts. I've even given some thought to randomness. You think I'm too literal about the world of Dupin and Miss Marple and ... But I share your scepticism about it in one respect: they've never noticed the occasional randomness of the universe. You'd think in particular a philosophical ratiocinator like Poe's alter ego, or Colin Doyle's, or even *whatsisname's*, Inspector Morse, would now and then allow for the random way in which violence and destruction visit creation's poor beasts. But they can't bring themselves. Never did detective story end with the conclusion that person or persons unknown happened to be strolling through Shangrilah one night – did I mention a public footpath passes through the property, through the very field? – and without cause or purpose or malice aforethought, neither drunk nor drugged nor pagan nor alien, nor hungry nor angry, *nor* jealous, took up a fence-post and beat a fawn cow to death."

■

Until now.

"Pardon?"

Until now. You said, Never did a detective story end with that happening.

"No, that's not what I think. I've eliminated everything but randomness and jealousy. So it must be jealousy."

He was serious.

"It has to be. Somebody else we do not know is jealous of Jack Digby is jealous of Jack Digby. An old lover of Jane's perhaps ..."

I nearly said something, my mouth was open ready, which is why he paused. But I thought better of it, and shan't say what it was.

"Somebody with a grudge. Somebody who didn't get the rosette at the county show – did I mention Martha had twice been shown and twice won prizes? – or somebody who just doesn't think Jack Digby should be living in Shangrilah with Jane Blood and a beautiful fawn cow ..."

But? I mean And ...

“And I haven’t come up with one. I haven’t found a single candidate who passes a single test of their suspectability query suspiciousness. Like not just motive but do they care so little for cows? for cows are such likeable creatures, to people in a country place like this, even in the twenty-first century. Or would the cow stand there and let them – for cows are rather timid of strangers, and can run quite efficiently, for all they look like fat women who’ve missed the bus. Or strength—”

That’s a really important point then isn’t it? Doesn’t that bring us back to the upper rungs of the suspect list?

“Well ... At the risk of by-passing a perfectly good pun, nothing sticks, no matter with what ruthless logic I aim it. You’re going to tell me it won’t stand up, as a story.”

No, I said unconvincingly. I’ll type it up and we’ll see. I think it’ll come across all right, as far as it goes; I’m sure when you read it printed out you’ll come up with a way of rounding it off. Obviously it will need an ending. But I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’ll word-process it at home, as arranged, it’ll only take an hour, and then tomorrow we’ll go through it. I’ll bring my laptop. That’s of course if you still want me, if you’re satisfied with me – I shouldn’t presume. I realise I’ve interrupted rather, and spoken out of turn. But in fact I think—

“I think another voice in the story, asking questions and making remarks, is a great idea. I’d never have thought of it; I dare say you wouldn’t either. It’s happened naturally. It hasn’t gone as I expected, I admit that. I planned a grizzled, Marlowe-like monologue, and you’ve turned it into a dialogue, a conversation between the brilliant detective and his admiring assistant. I think that’s a good way of doing it, I think it’s helped.”

I’m relieved you feel that way. You got off to a really good start and then I started interrupting; I’ve been feeling a bit guilty about spoiling your flow ... Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow, if that’s ... I held my hand out, and he shook it more hesitantly than he had when I arrived. By the way, it’s Cassandra, I added.

“Ah. Do you dislike it?”

No, I said.

“Like in Mister Smith Goes To Washington?”

Not in the least.

“Oh”, he said, as if disappointed. And then added: “I’ve been very inhospitable. I should have offered you tea – we should have taken a break. Perhaps—”

We’ll do that tomorrow, I said. It’ll lubricate the ratiocination, like Sherlock Holmes’s pipe.

So that’s what we did.

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Dave Slaney and the Case of the Left-Open Gate

“I specialise in overlooked trivialities. No fact or clue, however peripheral, however seemingly slight, should be left un-noted, nor worse-still rejected as irrelevant – for it’s the food upon which ratiocination thrives. No misdemeanour or mystery likewise that is so insignificant as to be despised by the practitioner of investigative logical analysis. Not the least trite or ephemeral occurrence that requires explanation but that the logical mind can find stimulation and nourishment in it, and elaborate its significance. It’s the chaos theory of crime, the butterfly’s wing – the tiniest of incidents that sends ripples round the world. Well, South Northants anyway. You’ll find it trivial I’m sure – but even a left-open gate has its place in the annals of detection, in those columns chronicling the cases of that master of ratiocinaish—”

He stopped suddenly. I looked up from my shorthand and smiled.

“I wish I could think of a name. Even just one, like Lulu. Have you noticed how characters in fiction can have just one name? It would never be allowed in real life – you wouldn’t have a single friend, I mean if you refused to tell them your Christian name, and as for getting a library ticket ... Morse and Maigret and Lovejoy and Heathcliff and Jeeves and ...”

Watson, I contributed.

He caught my fleeting thought and said: “That’s you! ... Do you remember being fourteen?”

It wasn’t all that long ago really. I nodded.

“Little things can seem a great burden to the innocent soul of a fourteen-year-old. Young people are more easily hurt, especially their feelings. We won’t know for a while what it’s like to be 74. Mrs Hench knows – she’s 74 and three-quarters. She can’t keep it secret, because she’s local. Her friend Miss Cordeaux (Miss Corduroy, as villagers of various ages inappropriately call her) is older, but doesn’t speak of it, being more refined. Come to think of it, she doesn’t speak much at all – Mrs Hench is the spokesman. Primrose End is a cottage draped in clematis amidst a pretty orchard garden, where Peter roams free and yaps at passers by. The gate most distinctly bears a notice saying ‘Please Close The Gate’, and a springy thing that helps it happen, though it doesn’t always work. Even so, everybody obeys the notice – it’s a matter of respect, it’s part of the code of village life ... They

needed Miss Marple I suppose, but they had to make do with plain Dave Slaney. Miss Marple, there's another one-namer, sort of."

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"Jane. You're right, plain Jane."

He hadn't believed me, he had to look it up in a book.

"I'm not sure it suits though. Well anyway, our two fine ladies live together as ladies did in Edwardian times, a kind of affectionately bickering companionship. The eternal triangle of two old ladies and a dog. You wonder whether anything in the twenty-first century, fourteen or 74, can retain its innocence: jokes about the Old Dykes overheard in the Cat and Canary aren't necessarily set in those prehistoric ditches above Digby's Farm. Though whether they can still be heard there since Charlie and Pat took it over I couldn't say. Charlie's 34, Charlie Hench, Pat's actually quite a bit older – they're well matched though, and Charlie thinks the world of little April – so you can see what age Mrs Hench was when she finally surrendered. She was Colonel Hench's third conquest – or wife anyway – and he'd be a hundred or so now if he was living. So she was no spring chicken when he laid siege to her spinsterhood, travelling about with Miss Cordeaux – they used to go on long cruises and safaris, looking at naked savages and taking photographs of them, before the Colonel put a stop to it. And when he died Miss Cordeaux wasn't slow turning up, from Cambridge or Bechuanaland, with all her carousels. They did a slide show in the village hall once – more nudity than Channel 4 – the Rector said it was most educational, and was sorry his daughter had had to leave early as she wasn't feeling very well. Self-important and peevish and fussy they are, these two ladies of the world, very much of a breed that doesn't get bred any more. The funny thing is, speaking of wicked step-mothers as we weren't, Mrs Hench is thus the step-great-grandmother of the paper-girl ..."

I didn't say anything, honestly, I didn't know why he was looking at me as though I'd interrupted him.

"You're going to say it's all too complicated for the reader to follow, aren't you? no don't answer. Morning the Paper-Girl, everybody calls her. She's a rough-and-ready sort, in appearance, a tad unkempt and uncolourful. Yet she's terribly pretty, and a personality to match, she's the cheeriest thing you could hope to meet at eight o'clock on a dewy morning. It's because she says a cheery Mornin' to absolutely everybody she meets, and dogs and horses too, and waves through windows and shouts it through letterboxes, that everybody calls her Morning. Her actual name is Dawn, by some mystical happenstance query chance, so which came first, the morning or the dawning, is a mystery as ever. Dawn Hench she's sometimes called, by virtue of living with her grandad, like I did, mostly – not Dawn's grandad, mine

(you can leave that bit out); but she likes to be called Dawn Shepherd, as everybody knows Ned Shepherd, Dick's brother, is her father. Doesn't make any bones about it any more – and why wouldn't he? I'd be proud ... Her mother went off to Nuneaton, years ago. So she lives – Morning that is – with Old Abel. The reason we know Mrs Hench's age is because Old Abel's 74 and three-quarters as well, and at the age of 40 he got Florence Cox as she then was as a step-mother, and baby Charlie for a brother. They were in the same class at school."

He sighed.

"But Morning stands immune to it all. Old scandals don't touch her, life's slings pass her by. The world she graces hasn't fallen from grace, the gates of Eden never closed on her. She's innocence defiant Cassie, a ragged angel. Paulette Goddard in Modern Times. She's the minstrel of the dawn. Delivers everybody's papers, and not a few other things as well – people are always asking her to bring them a loaf or get them a prescription or take their dog for a walk – she'll do anything for anybody, and she's completely trustworthy. Then she goes to school – runs to catch the bus, the driver always starts off but then waits. Comes home and cooks herself and Old Abel a modest but lovingly prepared supper; then she plays with her hamsters and goes to bed. When she grows up she wants to be a stable-boy stop-press poodle-clipper – horses were last season. It follows that she thinks the world of Peter, the yappy chappy at Primrose End, a poodle imprisoned in the body of a terrier, but why would she hold that against him? And the entire population of the village thinks the world of Mornin."

That's deliberately without the g, is it?

He nodded. But then said: "I don't know if it shouldn't be spelled m-a-w-n-double-e-n."

Mawneen.

"Then one day the gate gets left open. The butterfly's wing Cassie. Within hours the dark cloud that's gathered over Primrose End has cast its shadow over all of Cottiscot – and over Cottiscot's most beloved young resident. Peter – who can blame him – has bolted; he probably tried to put as much distance between himself and the old dykes – oops – as he could, before he remembered he hadn't got a tin-opener. Or perhaps he followed interesting smells, for the poor frustrated little chap's been a lap-dog to a pair of talcum-scented hags all his life and never sniffed anything as exciting as other dogs' exertions before. Or perhaps he followed a scent we can appreciate better; for he turned up – after long searching and long agony – not all that far from Old Abel's place. Though Mawneen had through all this excitement been at school oblivious under her classroom name of Dawn. He was a tad bedraggled and hungry – the pooch – but none the worse otherwise for his adventure. Obviously that's down to luck, that he wasn't lost beyond

finding, or trampled by sheep, or eaten by one of Jane Digby's rabbits, or vice versa, or most likely run over by any number of wheeled vehicles – for being behind a gate that everybody must close, it had never crossed his mind to learn the highway code. I doubt if he'd even read it. Well, by tea-time Peter was safe and pampered and writing his memoirs, but Mawneen's ordeal was only just dawnin'."

So if the dog was found and is all right, why should it matter?

"The dog's wellbeing and walkabout aren't what this is about at all Cassie. No, it goes far deeper than that – betrayal, a sacred trust, the bonds of community, the code, the fabric of village society – and it all hinges on the gate."

Laugh when *they* think they've made a joke, not when *you* think they have, was one of the various naff mottos they taught us on the temping course. I wasn't ever good at taking good advice. There's probably something wrong with my sense of humour anyway. I thought hinges on the gate was so funny I dropped my notebook and couldn't quite focus on it for several minutes. My theory is that there was some kind of chemical reaction between my irritation at being called Cassie and my assuming the gate bit was a joke – by the time I perceived he didn't really require audience response, I was disposed to irritate him by laughing more hysterically than I'd intended. Rounded off of course with a serious poisoning of the pen and clearing of the throat, and that useful little word. Sorry.

"Quite apart from the disruption of the entire village, the search parties, the incident in the post office with the toddler, the concern of farmers for their fields and flocks, the postman so flustered he dumped all Ash Bank's post at Ash Bank House so that Major Thorley had to telephone Miss Walsh to send Norris, and to take the prize the worst crime of all in Mister Plod's book, wasting police time ... Well ... You have to understand that a kind of violation had occurred, of the delicate respect owed to the two old ladies, the matriarchs of the community, queer creatures as they are. Like swearing at your granny. But that wasn't all: for a paper-girl ... she's a kind of cosmic force, an angel of the morning, a vestal virgin entrusted with rituals that meet the arrival of each new day. All of Cottiscot felt betrayed. How could she, was on everybody's lips. But of course, the girl was innocent."

I'm glad to hear it. But you've implied you were working for the old ladies.

"Whoever I work for my job is to discover the truth. If the old dykes – you're right in assuming they had neither hesitation nor compunction in blaming it on Mawneen, and broadcasting the fact, with all the venom of two old witches to boot – but if they were making a terrible mistake they needed to be saved from themselves, and would

ultimately thank me if I stayed their hand from smiting the innocent. That was my aim.”

And?

“Weren’t we going to have a tea break?”

Absolutely. I’ll put the kettle on. *And* ... (reaching into my bag) since the only cake you had on my last visit was stale, I’ve brought us a Yorkshire Tea cake.

■

“But of course the paper-girl was innocent,” he resumed, “I was quite certain of that. There’s little point in going into reasons. They’re reasons, rather than evidence – there’s no indubitable evidence. At that time in the morning, few people are about and those that are are busy or on their way somewhere. Mornin’s like the dawn, she’s beautiful yet we take little notice – of somebody who comes each day, who’s part of the eight a.m. landscape. But that’s a reason for accepting her absolute and bitter avowal that she *did* close the gate – because she’s a creature of habit and always closes gates, she’s closed that gate six days a week for the last two years. Sunday’s her day off: most people toddle along to the post office to pick their Sunday paper up; those who don’t or can’t, Norris, the Postmistress’s son, takes out mid morning. Another point in her favour is that Peter’s always there to bark Mornin’ to her and have a fuss made; she knows he hasn’t got a highway code or an Ordnance Survey map, she’d never breeze out of the gate and leave him to get lost or run over, within seconds of their little daily ruffle. Does she rely unduly on the springy thing that helps the gate bounce back? I hear you wondering. Of course not, because it only helps, it doesn’t reliably close it to the click, it never has. And as I said, it often doesn’t work at all. It *wasn’t* working that day. By an inverse but entirely sound logic, well-known in detection, *that* makes it even more likely that she closed the gate, for she was used to its idiosyncracies and would clearly feel (on entering) that the spring wasn’t springing. Well, you can imagine how upset she was, to get back from school and find the whole village rounded against her for a crime she hadn’t even heard about yet, never mind committed. As for the dog squad, they interrogated her but they couldn’t break her; the bastards enjoyed intimidating her though, making her cry – grown people take a lot of pleasure in doing that to children, you’ll notice. Imagine skipping off the school bus with no thought but to buy a cherry coke from Walshes and waltz home to make Old Abel his supper and play with her hamsters, and instead, there’s Constable Miss Piggy in her bowler hat and luminous vest saying I think you’d better come with me young miss, there are person or persons who’d like a word or two with you in the back room of the village hall – the incident room, people are still calling it. The poor girl’s probably never heard of *habemus corpus*. Only the arrival of Linda Blair will have stopped them dishing up the

full course in crime prevention: strip-searching her bottom and beating her black and blue and dangling her by the ankles from a precipice to make sure she was innocent, and wouldn't do it again."

I know you don't hold the police in very high regard, but we can't really include that, if the story's true – I mean, it could be libellous.

"Actually it was County Councillor Shaw and Charlie, Charlie Hench, and this new W.P.C. (as they used to be called). But Shaw's on the Police Committee and looks exactly like Derren Nesbitt. The other person who didn't have doubts was Linda – doubts about Mornin's innocence that is – at least once she'd rescued her from the incident room and put germolene on the truncheon bruises. Emotional bruises last longer."

Is that the W.P.C. – Linda?

He shook his head. "Linda's a nurse, does a bit of amateur social nursing now district nurses are but a memory. A sort of vigil-auntie, haha. Arrived home, heard Mornin was getting the fourth degree – or heard her getting it, come to think of it, the crying and the whiplash – dashed round to the village lock-up with her guns blazing, like *Her Out Of Alien*. Not *the* Linda Blair – though she looks a bit like her."

I thought the name sounded familiar, but I can't think of her.

"Best that way, believe me. Well, all we can do is reason our way through the alternatives, for one of them must be the answer. Not a windy day at all. No hurricanes, no earthquakes reported. Gate, except for unreliable springy thingy, perfectly sound – if pulled to, it latches. Plod and others tried it on the day, I a few days later. Little yap-features – did I mention he's the most irritating creature, about the size of a chicken but not so cuddly? – can't reach the latch, and has lived there some years without devising any better escape plan than the one he used that day – waiting for somebody to leave the gate open and legging it. The gate was definitely open, by the way, he didn't tunnel out or parachute from the laburnum tree. The old biddies found it that way before they'd even noticed how peaceful it had gone – lack of yapping usually correlating to occupancy of a certain dog-basket. Miss Cordeaux rushes in and finding it vacant, musters the strength to screech the dread words Oh Florrie before fainting onto the nearest comfortable sofa. So much for inconsequential. Other callers that morning, prior to the unaccustomed quiet being rent by aforementioned screech? Well, as it happens ... They did receive post that day – the postman comes at a similar time to the paper-girl, usually a little ahead of her, but in fact exact timings haven't been established, nobody saw him. But of course he has the same qualities of regularity and reliability as Mornin. The balance of opinion is that he'd already been by the time the telegram arrived."

Telegram?

“*Telegraph*. It’s a posh newspaper. And also as it also happens, they were expecting a man first thing to look at a window – they called him a glazier but he wasn’t exactly that. He didn’t come. That makes him irrelevant, you’ll think, and you’re not alone. But to the analytical mind he instantly becomes the key suspect. We detectives have a class of evidence called the curious incident of the dog – nothing to do with Peter by the way – it didn’t bark in the night. Though it doesn’t *have* to be night. What *didn’t* happen may not be the only thing that happened. It suggests a theory that he did in fact come – the window man – came and went, whether failing to make himself heard above the yapping, or suffering from a phobia of diminutive hounds, or taking one look at the jacket of clematis all over the cottage and thinking better of such an assignment. Or perhaps he was a terrier liberation activist, a compulsive gate-opener, couldn’t read ... various variations. Plod wasn’t interested in him – if he didn’t come, he can’t have left the gate open. That’s Dock Green logic for you, they’ve never heard of a dog that didn’t bark. Anyway, leaving a gate open isn’t considered a crime in Brackley, apparently. But I traced the non-arrived odd job man by means of the telephone number Mrs Hench had used to recruit him in the first place. I questioned him myself. By phone ...”

He paused as if savouring – or barely believing – his own boldness.

“He was a surly character, I wouldn’t trust him near my gate, if I had one, never mind windows. I don’t know why they didn’t get Danny Cox – but that’s Mrs Hench and Miss Cordeaux for you. It’s him the sweeney should have dangled by the footsoles over a precipice – the surly window chap I mean. He’s from Middleton Cheney but comes round in a van and puts adverts in phone boxes. Well my hunch – no not hunch, don’t write hunch – my process of logical elimination was correct. I didn’t at any point directly challenge him you understand; I’m not angling for promotion to *Chief* Inspector, I don’t depend on convictions, I don’t have targets – you know the Tango Charlies have targets now, and not just for their speed-guns, there have to be a certain number of crimes a month on your patch or you’re for it, you have to fill in forms. Spend six hours a shift filling in forms – the joys of modern police work. Where was I? Oh and justice, justice doesn’t concern me at all – not in the courtroom sense. Analysis is sufficient unto itself; it’s not adversorial, it’s absolute. Moral justice, however, is a pleasing soufflé to a course of ratiocination – putting Mrs Hench and Miss Cordeaux’s minds at rest, not forgetting our lovely Mornin Shepherd’s, poor angel. No it’s more important than that then isn’t it: we should say something like Moral justice is my imperative stroke guiding light, it’s *not* just a soufflé – we’ll revise it tomorrow. He told me – the window man, I won’t disclose his name – that he’s been a bit overworked lately, so he’d dropped a few appointments. Does that mean you didn’t come to Cottiscot that morning? He hesitated, and then said no, he didn’t. Then when I said I thought I’d seen his van he

said he *had* been in the village, doing other work, but didn't keep his appointment at Primrose End. I hadn't seen his van, it's the technique of bluff by anticipation. Did you notice the hunt for the missing dog? Err yes, he said. First police helicopter we've ever had in the village, I said – another bluff, there *was* no helicopter. Yes, he said, what a lot of fuss over a little dog. That was enough. I didn't put him on the spot, I didn't need to. We can approximate from there to what happened, by logic. Now Cassie, have you spotted the key word?"

It's Cassandra—

"Guess again" he said, seemingly with complete seriousness.

Helicopter. No, you made him admit he saw a helicopter when there wasn't one – but that proves he *wasn't* in Cottiscot.

"No, it proves he wasn't working on another job here. The van made him admit he came, the helicopter made him reveal he didn't stay. The key word is ..."

I looked stupid and shook my head.

"The word is 'little'. Fuss over a little dog."

I wrinkled my brow.

"Who's told him the dog was little? Hunt and helicopter ought in fact to have suggested a rotweiler ... Amazing how much one little word can reveal to the trained mind. This man's seen Peter. It also means he didn't accidentally leave the gate open."

My eyebrows raised, and my mouth probably sagged a bit as well. I admit I was impressed, I was beginning to wonder if he wasn't really the world's most useless detective after all. Except ... You mean all this proves it wasn't him?

"It suggests the following scenario Cass. Odd-job opens gate, pauses, looking at house, perhaps – for the sign says 'Please Close The Gate', omitting 'Our Dog's Waited Years For This Moment' – perhaps steps away from open gate contemplating rotten windows bedecked in clematis like a carnival float. Little dog laughs and exits yapping. Odd-job can't face knocking on door saying he's liberated fido, slopes off leaving gate open deliberately – so little dog can come back; or alternatively, runs after little dog thinking of retrieving situation – again you'd naturally leave gate open – but fails to catch the blighter, gives up and goes home. It wasn't the clematis put him off after all."

That's quite brilliant, I said, with genuine admiration, and a pinch of astonishment.

“Elementary my dear ...”

Cassandra, I said.

■

I word-processed it and printed it out, and took it back the next day to go over with him.

I wanted him to add something about how he’d written to Mornin (at least I persuaded him to revert to my spelling), a really nice letter telling her he’d never for a second doubted her innocence and had now managed to prove it to Mrs Hench’s satisfaction, so word would soon get around and it would all blow over etcetera. By the way, Mrs Hench would like you to ring the bell and go in for a moment one day – don’t worry, she’s just going to ruffle your hair and tell you how pretty you are like old people do, and then eat humble pie, which doesn’t come easily for a lady of her breeding. Let me know how it goes. Love, Dave. I thought it was really sweet, so thoughtful of him. But he wouldn’t let me put it in, it didn’t suit his nameless persona of the cold ratiocinating genius (he thinks).

As I was about to leave, the story of the left-open gate revised and finished, or so we thought, there was a tap on his door. The visitor was the self-same Mrs Hench, aged 74 and three-quarters.

You’ve got company so I won’t stay, she said.

Oh I’m just—

He stopped me with a curious hand gesture, like conducting – I didn’t know what it meant but I was fairly sure he wanted me to shut up and let her leave.

The letter speaks for itself Dave, she said, smiling, handing him a piece of paper. Pop it back when you’re passing. Sorry to have disturbed you.

And off she went, Dave just saying “Thanks”.

She wasn’t the hatchet-featured hag I’d pictured, not by any means – how wrong you can be, or how misled – she was nice looking, thoroughly cheerful, nicely spoken without being posh and certainly not snooty. She thought I was his girlfriend of course.

“It’s from Eric the Postman”, he said, after an initial perusal and then slumping into his armchair as if the shock had pushed him. After some more moments scanning the letter, in evident disbelief, he began reading it aloud.

“Dear Mrs F. Hench and Miss H. M. Cordeaux, Blaa blaa blaa. It’s been on my conscience, but I’m afraid I couldn’t rat on a fellow postman till today, when he’s been suspended by Royal Mail and arrested by Police in an unrelated matter of missing mail for Middleton Cheney. (Unrelated to the gate, I think he must mean.) I was off with a bad leg a few days, and when I got back I heard about your gate being left open and the little fellow going missing. Miss P. N. Walsh told me all about it, and of course you spoke of it yourself when I saw you the other day. Though it’s funny no one ever mentions the helicopters. I’m sorry it happened on my round, and feel I owe you an explanation, now I can speak free. I’m afraid the relief that stood in for me them few days was a bad sort, and left a trail of chaos all across NN13. Wrongly delivered, undelivered, recorded delivery not signed for, and gates left open left right and centre, I’m afraid. In Cottiscot alone he delivered the entire of Ash Bank’s mail to Major J. T. Thorley’s house (Retired) and Master N. Walsh had to go and fetch it, and he left a small package for Mr J. Cox and Ms A. Huntley on their back door-step and they didn’t find it till it had got soaked with rain, and he ran over a hen of Mr and Mrs J. Digby’s at Shangri-La Ice Cream Farm. My suspicions that it’s him left your gate open have now been confirmed by his brother, that belongs to the same Pentecostal church as me, a very honest young chap, with his own little glazier’s business. By sheer coincidence Desmond, the brother, was going to a job in Cottiscot that same morning and noticed the commotion, and the helicopters. Knowing what his brother was like he wondered if it was him was at the bottom of it, and mentioned it when he saw him, that he’d been in Cottiscot and there was this big hunt on because the paper-girl had left a gate open. The brother, the postman, he says just shrugged and said, What a lot of fuss over a little dog, and Desmond, a very bright young chap, reasoned it must mean he knew exactly which gate, for *dog* hadn’t been mentioned, and even if he guessed it you’d have assumed it was a big dangerous one, what with helicopters. Blaa blaa blaa. I take the liberty of writing in hopes to put your minds at rest as to the true state of affairs. And if you see Maureen the paper-girl before I do perhaps you’d tell her too, for everyone I speak to swears it was her I’m afraid, and her grandfather A. Hench Esquire told me she is terrible upset about it. Yours sincerely, E. R. Beardsley (your regular postman Eric).”

We sat in silence for a time, or he sat and I perched, for I found myself perched on the arm of the settee when he finished reading. I’m not sure at what point I’d settled there.

Eventually I said: I shouldn’t worry Dave, I don’t think it was any less impressive a demonstration of how your ratiocination works, really. I wonder if that was the right thing to say under the circumstances. Then even more vacuously: All’s well that ends well and all that – it still exonerates Mornin ... And for goodness sake, it’s *your* suspect’s *brother* – how closer could you have got!

“Big box of chocolates, the old dykes have for her. For Mornin. A shaggy puppy on the box.” I think he was in shock.

It gives us a twist for the end of the story, I said. I don’t think that was the right thing either.

“It’s not going in my story!” he snapped. And then after a while, almost piteously: “And the worst thing is, that surly liar the window chap used *my* technique, my reasoning ... or pretended to.”

But that’s—

“A lying odd job man thought the same thing I thought Cass. I’m not having it.”

The postman vouches for his honesty.

“So where are all these helicopters?”

Yes I did wonder about that ...

“I don’t accept it,” he said decisively. “He’s lying. It’s ... It probably happened exactly as I said, but he’s blaming it on his equally disreputable brother because the brother’s happened to get cuffed.”

I’m sure you’re right, on reflection.

“I’m not having it.”

It’s your story Dave, it can end however you say. *Your* solution is *much* neater, really.

“Do you think so?”

I nodded and smiled, though I’m not sure what I thought really, except that he needed lifting after taking a body-blow to his ego. No, there’s something definitely fishy about this version, I added, in an earnest tone of reassessment; or anyway about this Desmond, this glazier.

“He’s no glazier. He’s a dodgy odd-job man spelled b-u-g-r-l-a-r. Damn him Cass!”

That’s the spirit. Don’t be down in the dumps about it. I was really impressed with your solution, and still am. *Really*.

“Really?”

Really.

He was looking a little cheered, I think.

And I particularly liked it ending with: Elementary my dear ...

“Cassandra,” he said.

Yes.

So that’s how it ended.

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Dave Slaney and the Case of the Missing Gargoyle

“I specialise in clueless bafflement. An—”

I know it sounded like a laugh but I really *was* clearing my throat.

“Analysis shows that there are only three crimes: jealousy, avarice, and speeding. The funny hat brigade are principally interested in the latter – it’s very profitable, and requires not a single electrical impulse to stir in the sea of tranquility that is the brain of your average gendarme. Speeding is the archetypal crime, *le creme par excellence* Dupin might say – if he’d ever heard of it – because it’s a complete fabrication. Invented by the state because, well, they *must* make up rules. Remind me: is going fast in a wheeled vehicle a tragic flaw in human nature that dramatists have dramatised from Shakespeare back to Isosceles? Not just that but it’s stimulated by its very criminalisation, like drug dealing. If we had instead, recommended speed zones, unenforced, wouldn’t sheer good citizenship prevail where before was a coercive battleground? Yes, you’re right, some would flout it with impunity – so where would be the difference? They already do. I know ...”

I thought of saying nothing, but instead I said I said nothing.

“You don’t like me criticising our boys and girls in silly hats.”

I don’t mind, but the reader might find it tiresome in large doses. No one likes listening to axes being ground, it always grates.

“You have a flare for literature, for expression, I’ve said it before. It should be you writing these stories.”

I thought it was, I said.

He laughed, slightly. “No, you’re right, I’m off the tangent. What we’re left with, we ratiocinating detectives, after speeding, are *merely* the consequences of the two universal, fundamental, incurable negative traits in human nature. All non-invented crime, crime that’s crime in anybody’s book, crime that started in Eden and went where mankind trod, stems from the janus-faced spectre of jealousy and avarice that haunts humanity. What murder, that isn’t traceable to a motive somewhere on the jealousy-avarice spectrum? Vengeance you say.”

I shook my head.

“Born of jealousy of the impunity of whoever wronged you, sustained by avarice for satisfaction. Sheer undiluted sadism I hear you suggest?”

Well that's a form of greed obviously, an appetite for a perverse gratification. Political assassination then? If you're a hired hitman, it's the money; if you're a crazed enthusiast, a terrorist, it's back to jealousy again, for the politician's in power and you're not. And so on. You sigh with relief at writing the squiggles that stand for And so on."

I just smiled (possibly with relief), I really said nothing this time.

"You are forgetting to remind me that I also believe in randomness, and that that in some degree distinguishes me from my colleagues in ratiocination, my immortal peers like Holmes and Dupin. Then there's the frequent inadequacy of the evidence that informs and nourishes our ratiocinations. Did Agatha Christie ever fail to solve a case? Yet I am prepared to allow the possibility. Not because our process of analysis is flawed, but because it can only analyse the materials made available to it for analysis. Indeed I make unsolved cases my speciality, dead-ends my starting point, cluelessness my cue. I enter the frame when the other actors are standing around baffled. It is the business of analysis to start from doubt and reach for certainty through the power of thought. It is the business of a speed-cop to point a gun at you, and read off how fast you're going."

■

I nodded my head when he stopped.

"What?"

Nothing. That was good, your usual ... philosophical preamble.

"You weren't agreeing then?"

It's not my job to agree. But it sounded good, I'm sure it'll be fine.

"With a bit of pruning on the speeding front."

I didn't say that. It'll be entirely up to you, when we go over the print-out. The spoken word tends to be long— fertile by comparison to the written. I think we made sensible revisions to the others.

"I couldn't gauge if your lack of interruptions was agreement or bored resignation."

I'm just your typist Dave, don't put too much on me OK. I'm sorry if I didn't interrupt enough this time, and/or if I did it too much before.

"You're probably misunderstanding Cass. I like it when it's a dialogue. I want you – *Andra*, Cassandra. I want you to feel involved, or feel free to be. I thought ... I thought we might go for a walk later ..."

I must have just stared at him, I suppose, though I'm sure my expression was neutral enough. I wasn't meaning to discourage him.

"All right, it's just a thought, it's not compulsory. It'd be for today's case, that's all: a sort of scene-of-the-crime visit, a sally forth from the armchair. But anyway, it doesn't matter if you don't care to. I mean I don't mean it doesn't matter, I mean, it doesn't make any ... You're writing all the time I speak."

It's just habit. A kind of reflex really, I shan't put it in. I turned a page back. You'd started from doubt and were reaching for certainty, with witty comment on speed-guns. That's where we are.

"Shut up Dave and talk. Damn, I missed out the name thing – I still can't come up with one. I've been toying with anagrams, but neither Evadne Slay nor Ena Sly quite capture what I'm looking for, while Eve Sanlady has to be something I definitely wouldn't buy at the chemist. Granted Vanya Leeds is better, though it's queer why they all come out female ... Add That's me, Dave Slaney (for the time being), the guy who points a gun of logic at the clueless. We'll tidy it up tomorrow."

It sounds fine Dave.

"The matter to hand is a gargoyle. Stolen – or so it was thought. Yet why? Local Plod managed his, or rather her – we've got a new Constable Sandra McSomething, community officer they're called now, keeps a low profile, though I'm told there's pictures of her on a web site – you'll have to look her up on your computer, that's the most you're likely to see of her. Except apparently she says her priority is to visit schools – so there's two percent of the community covered at a stroke ... Prompt."

Local Plod managed his or rather her – then you drifted off.

"Stock questions – they learn them by heart in the rigorous two-week training course at Coppers College. Whom do you think might have stolen your gargoyle, sir or madam? Do you have any enemies? When did you last see your gargoyle alive (delete as necessary)? Do you have any enemies? How much approximately is your gargoyle insured for? I suppose you can't do the accent, on paper that is."

I shook my head. Though it's better than your opening homage to Dick Van Dyke, your Northamptonshire Bogart.

"I wondered when you were going to editorialise on that. I don't feel much like dictating today, in any accent. I feel more like ... going for a walk." He said the last phrase in an imploring whisper, like a child.

Get us through the basics – who what where when – then ... It's from a church presumably, this gargoyle? I was thinking our clientele had taken a leap of faith.

“No, it was from this chap's shed. Built into the shed that is. The roof's caving in for certain now, seems it was holding the whole corner up. You won't believe it, you'll think I've got it straight from Miss Marple, if not Terry Pratchett, but he calls himself Theophilus H. Forecastle B.A. – always puts the B.A. after his name and the aitch in the middle. If you can picture a sort of TV vicar – remember Roger Royle? no, well anyway. Forecastle's a music teacher, private now, retired from Slough School, though he's not all that old.”

Was that Slough?

“Stowe. Reverend Slater's recruited him to re-form the church choir. So he's not a nutty recluse or anything; but he is rather aloof, and lives alone. Gargoyle House peeps over a sea of rhododendrons and old-fashioned pebble paths, and beside it a range of dilapidated outbuildings – stables and sheds. It's to one of these that our gargoyle but lately clung. Although the house was rebuilt in Victorian times, the outbuildings are original, dating back to the sixteenth century, various carved stones built into them, rescued – plundered rather – from the ruins of an abbey after the dissolution of the monasteries. Anyway, the gargoyle was visible from the road, so it's a kind of local landmark. A grotesque face, it looks like, though rather worn: bulging blind eyes, wide snub nose, and a great gaping toothless open mouth. Disused for as long as anybody remembers – the shed I mean – and the roof always sagged; but it's noticeably caved in since the stone disappeared. Forecastle doesn't mind, doesn't seem to. He's never lifted a finger to prop up his tumbling outbuildings. I think he'd be glad to see gravity claim them and sell off the stones – or make a rockery. Yet he makes out he's fond of the gargoyle, and plays the grieving victim since it went ay-wol. Joins Councillor Pat Hensch in a chorus of Oh tragic loss of heritage. Which is why the virtual constable materialised – Pat's big on committees. Like to see the crime scene?”

■

The lane by Dave's house leads down to the village green, a huge open space with several tall trees in the middle and old houses of various shapes and sizes dotted round it. On the near side I recognised Primrose End, up on a slight bank like a birthday-cake iced in clematis, a yapping coming through the chinks of the closed gate. Opposite, across the green, the shop and post office – Walsh & Daughter it says – and next to that the little village hall, with its notorious incident room, an incongruous brick building amongst all the old stone. From the far corner of the green an unpromising narrow lane called Low Street is really the village high street – more houses, ancient and modern, a church and a chapel, a cobbler's shop, and the Dog and Partridge.

“They call it the Cat and Canary,” Dave said. “Because of how badly painted the sign is.”

It was, it was dreadful, it looked like Peter the diminutive terrier sloping home with a feather duster in his jaws. Apparently they can’t replace it because it’s a conservation area. Almost opposite – I recognised it from the description – was Gargoyle House and its famous gargoyle-less shed. The pebble drive skirts the rhododendrons, clips the shed, and then turns towards the house. Bursts of hesitant and badly-aimed piano bashing indicated either a beginner’s lesson in progress or that the music teacher’s credentials were suspect.

“No need to disturb him. He won’t mind us sniffing around.”

Have they searched among these stones? The pointing’s so completely gone it could just have dropped out, and broken in pieces. There’s all sorts of rubble down here. I was looking down the side of the shed; then I put my head through the door.

“Don’t go in”, he said, “roof’s very precarious.”

Part of it was precarious, the rest of it was already on the floor. The walls were thick and solid though, it was quite a sturdy little building – pointing and a new roof was all it needed.

It’s called a kneeler, I said, the stone that sticks out at the corner of a gable – I went to a lecture on architecture once. The one on the other corner’s plain – or ... d’you think it’s been broken off? It looked a bit jagged, just as the light was catching it from my angle.

He stood on the garden wall and looked closer, and agreed it was broken off, though long since.

“It’d be Mister Polly,” he said, improbably. “Big nose and all. Did I mention the gargoyle’s nickname was Yawning Polly?”

I hadn’t thought of it as a woman’s face.

“No, well, yes. It’s ... mmm. Some people say it’s rude.”

Yawning without putting your hand over your mouth.

“Something like that.”

I wandered into the yard behind the house. The other outbuildings were indeed a kind of patchwork, but I hadn’t time to more than glance at them. Dave’s body-language, even with his hands in his pockets, was beckoning me back and down the drive.

Why would anyone steal such a thing? I said, and then remembered. You said So it was *thought* – meaning you don't think it *was* stolen.

“It's about planning: conservation areas and listed buildings. I think Forecastle's got it. That's why we're clueless – it's an inside job. No clues, just logic and public opinion. Pat, who's in charge of public opinion for the ward of Cottiscot with Worbury, and also on the conservation area committee, makes out she's sure it's been stolen.”

Makes out she's sure?

“Yes. She protesteth too much. It's a smokescreen.”

She's covering for whoever's stolen it. Or—

“For whoever's *not* stolen it ...”

We were in the doorway of the Cat and Canary by now, of which the same Councillor Pat Hench is landlady. She served us tea, or rather a drink and a toasted sandwich, without protesting once about stolen gargoyles. She was very friendly in fact, though Dave seemed a bit off-hand with her. Has he tried roping you in to his investigations yet? she teased. Our local amateur sleuth, is Dave. I waved my notebook indiscreetly and nodded. Aha, anything you say may be taken down, I get it, she said. And then in a whisper: Thinks he's Poirot and we haven't the heart to tell him – the accent's all wrong. I laughed and nodded again. She thought I was his girlfriend of course.

We settled in a distant corner, out of ear-shot (I hope).

“The milkman noticed the gargoyle missing. Rang Forecastle's door: Gargoyle's gone guv'ner. But it was Pat reported it to the man. Or woman, as it is now. Forecastle was reluctant to report it.”

Aah.

“But as watchdog of the conservation area Pat said she had to. Constable Sharon McWhatsit was sharp enough to ask him why he hadn't. He said a stone missing from a derelict shed wasn't worth troubling anyone. Funny, fuzz thinking: when you waste their time they fine you; when you don't, they suspect you. However, that wasn't what brought the zed-car and the forensic man – it couldn't conceivably have justified it, even though they didn't stay long. My theory is, now they've got their pictures on web sites, they see if the female fuzz who's called it in is a beat-babe or Barlow in drag before deciding their cost-effective priorities for the day. It's that high-tech policing we've heard about with baited breath, P.C. 49 in the twenty-first century. And *they* searched the stones lying about, even under the shrubbery, along with an archaeologist from the council – so our dirty work was done for us. I'm sure they thought there was something fishy

about Forecastle. But there was no sign of it and no clues, and P.C. Shona's a born-again morris dancer, so they soon lost interest."

I thought you said her name was Sandra, this policewoman.

"It's not any of them, but it's something like. They say she's put a picture of Polly on her web site: Wanted, dead or alive. So ..."

You suspect him, yet you're down on the police for suspecting him.

"Well, they suspected him for the wrong reasons. He can't steel his own gargoyle. But the shed's a listed building *because* of the gargoyle, even though it's neglected. Forecastle's been under pressure to spend money restoring it, solely because of the offending stone. Gone, he can get it de-listed, presumably. So there's the motive. Puts socks on his ladder, kidnaps Yawning Poll as she sleeps, hides her in his attic. Crafty bast ... To protect him Pat makes like she's his enemy – if only he'd restored his shed, such a loss to South Northants heritage – but swears it's been stolen by architectural antiquity smugglers."

I laughed, but he wasn't joking.

"They'll take whole fireplaces and staircases, panelling, plasterwork, doors, whole doorways. But that's what makes it improbable – one stone's small fry, the market's for bigger things. And grab the gargoyle while leaving the guttering? Big market for lead."

So you're saying – I hushed my voice – you're saying Pat's bluffing to protect Mr Forecastle? Why?

"Her name before she married Charlie, Charlie Hensch, was Haselcroft. Old local family, I've known Pat all my life. But they sort of skipped a generation: her father moved away, and years later a young widow and little Pat turned up and lived with the grandparents. Like I did – not Pat's of course, mine (leave that bit out). The father's life stayed a mystery, he was either a spy or an accountant, though rumour was he'd had several wives and children. A few years back Gargoyle House comes on the market and this Theophilus H. Forecastle B.A. turns up from nowhere and starts giving piano lessons. Pat, a vivacious spinster lady in her forties, is immediately chummy with the newcomer, so much so they're thought to be romantically entangled – in spite of being chalk and cheese, except she's a soprano. Then out of the blue she marries Charlie, fifteen years her junior, and has a baby called April – wait for it ... in January."

He stared at me and I stared back. Then he took my notebook and wrote the word 'FORCASTLE' in capitals. Then he drew lines from each letter and made 'ASELCROFT'. Then he wrote in front of it 'Theophilus H', breathing the words: "Theophilus Hhhhaselcroft".

Bigamy, I said, quietly and wide eyed.

He shook his head. "Incest."

On the way out, almost as if showing off, he leaned on the bar and said: "Hhhhappen to know what the hhhaitch stands for in Theophilus H. Forcastle?"

Humphrey, said Pat, with a completely straight face, and shrugged.

There was another call he wanted to make on the way back. A track between a couple of rather posh houses took us to a clump of trees which shaded one of those old railway carriages used as a shed. Or in this case, as a bungalow.

"Mel is the village ... err ... she's a ... well, she's ...," he explained on the way. "You can never tell whether she's in a frock or a nightie. She's ... well I suppose she's ... she's not a witch exactly, but she ..."

She was really nice, and the inside of her shed was gorgeous. Sumptuously arrayed in colourful throws and cushions, cosy and clean. A few candles and crystals suggested her interests, and possibly the pictures of fairies, but it was by no means a witch's den nor even – new-age hippy as she obviously was – outlandish at all. My gran lived in a little prefab that was quite similar inside.

He hadn't introduced me to Pat. But he did to Mel, with commendable economy: "Melinda – Cassandra."

I love that name, she said, and kissed me. I'm Mel.

His pretext for the visit was for her to show me pictures of the gargoyle. She had several excellent black-and-white photographs. It was much as I'd imagined, the ridiculously wide-open toothless mouth, a broad stubby nose above it, two bulging blind eyes above that. The one difference was that I'd been picturing the mouth as wide-open horizontally, like Wallace and Gromit, whereas it was vertical, taller than it was broad. Which makes sense, if she's yawning, it's how a yawning mouth would be.

Dave's too shy to explain it to you Cass love, she said, knudging him as he looked away. It's a ... I don't know what the word is, a double-take, a visual *double entendre*. These (she pointed at the bulging eyes) are the goddess's boobs, this (the supposed nose) is her belly, and this ... She laughed. Yawning Molly, we called her as kids, without thinking. The gargoyle's a form of shelagh-na-gig; it's a *yoni*.

I was momentarily lost for words.

She's ever so special Cass, to my way of thinking, a sacred stone, honouring the mystery and miracle of human life. We suspect there was once a lingam, a male stone, on the other corner.

"It's still there", said Dave. "Cassandra spotted it." I thought I detected a slight note of pride in his voice. "Broken off though, long since, but originally it probably did ... it evidently did stick out."

They're found in Hindu religion, she said. But they turn up on buildings all over the world, sometimes blatant, sometimes hidden; they keep off fire and lightning, as well as evil spirits. That's what grotesque gargoyles on medieval churches and abbeys did, warding off evil. So these stones link us to that universal spirituality that all humanity once shared, before the fragmentation of religion, before Christianity etcetera, and modern life, broke it all up.

We talked about it for a while, including Dave, who didn't seem too embarrassed. It was really interesting. She wasn't claiming the stones were any older than the medieval abbey, nor magical or anything; just that early architecture incorporated what she called symbolic memories of our timeless spirituality, that's since been lost from our natures.

Not from yours, I said.

But she spoke of herself as a mere middle-class drop-out who'd ditched modern assumptions to try and recapture something spiritual. Still too much of it has to be read in books, she said. You just work at it though, hoping you'll perfect yourself in time to return to the stars.

Dave looked at her with a kind of melted longing in his eyes.

I said: You make us feel really complacent, I mean, that there's no hope really – for *our* spiritual perfection.

She shook her head emphatically. I wouldn't write a prescription for someone else's life if they begged me, she said. Each has his or her own way Cass love; we all do our best. If there's a loving God he'll accept that, surely; if the whole of nature is divine, or imbued with spirit, as I believe, then we aren't judged at all: we're each perfect as what we manage to be.

"Mel thinks Juliet Bravo suspected *her*. This woman constable – what's her name?"

Shauna, Shauna McQueen. She's a lovely girl bless her in completely the wrong profession. Beautifully Scottish and freckly; country dancing, cookery, and three cats.

“Came here asking Mel if she knew anything about it’s disappearance – said she was asking from door to door. But it wasn’t true, she only came here and to Danny Cox – does odd jobs and building repairs.”

So what do *you* think happened to it? I said to her.

I think Forcastle’s twigged. He’s seen her as I see her, realises what she is and is embarrassed at her yawning at everyone who comes up his drive. But because she’s protected as a historical monument or whatever, he can’t remove her. So, one night he takes her down. But I don’t think he’ll have destroyed her – I hope he hasn’t.

■

As Dave slinked off down the track she held me back, and whispered: I’m so glad Dave’s come to his senses and found someone. You must come on your own sometime and tell me how you hooked him. And she kissed me again.

He was quiet on the way back, he only said one thing. A fat boy on a kind of butcher’s bike came down the lane, and stared at me. “They think you’re my girlfriend,” he said. It emboldened me to contemplate slipping my arm through his as we walked; in fact I might have been on the verge of doing it, when he made a kind of dismissive laugh.

Back indoors we settled as if for more dictation – but none came. Mel’s drawn the same conclusion as you, I said, encouraging him: that Forcastle has the stone – but for a different reason.

“Well it’s a plausible alternative. Mel’s not the nutcase people think you know, she’s very intelligent.”

I could see that, I wasn’t—

“It’s good for another mind to work on a case. If they follow the same process of reasoning and reach the same conclusion, independently, they’re bearing each other out. If the reasons *differ* but the conclusion’s the same – even better. Quod erat demonstratum. It’s a form of proof.”

You and Mel would make a great team ... He didn’t respond. Having been brave enough to broach it, something inside me didn’t want to let go. I say you and Mel ... you obviously like her a lot.

“She obviously liked *you*.” His tone was accompanied with an incomprehensible smile. If he meant to imply what I thought he meant to imply I don’t believe it ... not really. And what if she is?

You should team up, I said.

He did another of his dismissive laughs – he’s very good at them. (I might try Huh, it’s not perfect but it’s close.) “Huh.”

Seriously – she’d make a good detective’s sidekick.

“I’ve got all the sidekick I need,” he said without hesitation.

I opened my mouth, and then closed it. I couldn’t decide if I’d been paid the nicest compliment of my life, or dismissed as irrelevant.

So ... are we going to get a conclusion to our story, a climax?

“That’s the only time anybody’s seen this so-called community officer, harrassing the innocent over a missing stone.”

I thought she was there when Mornin the Paper-Girl was interrogated.

“There you are, harrassing the innocent again. Spends most of her time in the internet, on e mail and e bay, whatever that is.”

It’s – I realised he must be joking. You could probably sell a gargoyle of a yoni on e bay, come to think of it, I said instead.

“Pat said something like that, I didn’t know what she meant.”

They auction stuff off, all sorts of rubbish. Perhaps that’s what the constable thinks, P.C. Shauna. D’you think Mel told her it was a yoni?

“Mel likes everybody you know. She knew what the bobby-girl was about but concluded she was a nice girl in spite of it. I don’t think she saw any point in telling her. To Plod-in-panties a theft of a gargoyle’s down to either a looney or a builder, so she questioned Mel and Danny, then crawled back into her web site.”

And if Forcastle himself has it, then apart from listed building regulations, he hasn’t really committed a crime.

“Sindy Sargent might think he’s wasted police time. Crime isn’t my concern, as you know. The business we’re in is solving the unsolved by logical analysis – whether it’s a murder or a missing yoni.”

So how do we verify? Make him confess?

“You’re not listening – it doesn’t matter. Ratiocination is sufficient unto its own right, it doesn’t require confirmation.”

It’d be nice to know though, wouldn’t it? ... Don’t you think? It’d be nice for your stories to have solid, satisfying endings. (He was shaking his head.) It might even be nice to see the gargoyle restored to its shed – it’s only the roof and—

“I’m beginning to think it’s a weakness, a loss of nerve, to desire satisfying endings. Aren’t all these neat conclusions your average detective story must always have just a little too self-congratulatory, not to mention contrived? a tad burdensome on the old credulity query credibility? Real life isn’t like that Cassandra. Barely one-in-ten crimes actually get solved at all you know. Anyway, like Mel’s spirituality, or Jane’s whatsit, my detective work’s *more* than just a hobby. It’s like a religion to me. And in a religion, you’re not supposed to demand proof – you’re meant to have faith.”

So that’s that.

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Dave Slaney and the Case of the Overturned Bath

“I specialise in ice-cold trails. Whether it was yesterday or yesteryear makes no difference to an incident’s susceptibility to rational analysis, and thus to logical solution. The ratiocinating detective is like a time traveller: his casebook can embrace the unsolved crimes of the past, from Jack the Ripper to Stella Slaney’s biro. For the essence of—”

Who was Jack the Ripper then?

“I forget. It’s been on telly. I know who stole the biro though ...” He waited for me to seem interested.

You did.

“How ...?”

I shrugged. Guessy-o-sination?

He looked really irritated. I suppose I shouldn’t tease him really.

Is that your sister?

“Yes, no, auntie. But she was like a sister, well, no, not then, more like a ... I grew up at my grandad’s you know, mostly, on the farm.”

Sorry, I interrupted your flow again. You were saying about the detective being like a time traveller.

He thought for some moments. “I can’t remember now. It was probably the usual rubbish. It’s an interesting case though, the one I’ve been working on. I thought you’d like it, I wanted ... I thought I’d take you back to my childhood. It’s like a different century Cass – and was. In those days the local bobby came on a bike, yet you saw him nearly every day, at some point, Bobby Todd. Genial old chap – seemed old to us kids anyway – he’d stop and have a word and you’d offer him a sweet, *and* he’d take one. I don’t think anything more serious than somebody dumping an old washing machine on the green happened in those days. Except, of course, that day of the power cut. It was me and Charlie and Dick – and Jack was in the gang too, Jack Digby, but he had to work Saturday mornings. And we can bring in Stella as well if you like, a cameo role. She was in a good mood that day – funny how you remember things like that. Jane *had* gone around with us when she was a tomboy stroke cowgirl, but she was just coming out of that into her tight clothing phase ... You remember me telling you about Jane, Jane Digby as she is now.”

I remembered.

■

“Well anyway, the trail can’t get colder than a case you took on when you were twelve, now can it? It’s one of those days that’s always stuck in my mind; and the other day Charlie mentioned it, Charlie Blood, so he’s remembered as well. It got me looking back at my diary – I don’t know why I’ve even kept it – it’s all there, all the details, the times and everything. We were detectives of a sort even then – Charlie was Wyatt Earp and I was usually Doctor Who, who’s a ratiocinating detective in his way. *And* he has a girl assistant ...”

He gestured towards me, and for some stupid reason I felt really flattered.

“It *had* been Jane, Sarah Jane, but as I say, she was discovering new pastures. Dick – Dick the Shepherd Mr Garside used to call him, from Shakespeare – was Regan or Dirty Harry, or an amalgam of them; so he wasn’t big on the detective part, he concentrated like most cops on directing traffic and shooting people. What happened that day, at the time, we thought we’d solved, but of course the childhood solution won’t hold up to mature scrutiny. Like randomness – though with more cause – Holmes and Watson, even Regan and Lewis, simply can’t fall back on explanations like: extra-terrestrials from an invisible UFO did it and flew off – though Doctor Who and Sarah might, and the Brigadier. Our solution was basically *that*. The mystery was this.”

Did you mean *Morse* and Lewis? (He shook his head.) Regan and Lewis you said.

“Carter – Regan and Carter ... You know, sometimes, there are days when everything that happens seems all interrelated in some peculiar, sinister way. Children are more receptive to it, more easily mystified by the movements of vans and the appearance of a stranger in the post office. There was an early-morning power cut, Digby’s Farm and all that side of the village. The usually quiet lanes saw unaccustomed vehicular toing and froing, mostly electricity vans though some were unmarked – they’d be the ones from Unit, or its real-life equivalent spelled blank, the Bureau With No Name. A proper panda car was also seen at one point, an almost unheard of thing in Bobby Todd’s day. It all seemed to centre on one of Uncle Frank’s fields – Uncle Frank Digby, he wasn’t my uncle but everybody called him Uncle Frank, still does. Some men were up ladders at a transformer, and soon after we got there – me and Charlie – Uncle Frank turned up to have a word with them. Charlie of course thought it was something to do with the Clanton gang, though I was already inclined to suspect it was the beginnings of an invasion – from outer space I mean. We hid behind the hedge and overheard snatches of what the electricity men were

saying to Uncle Frank. Everything blacked out suddenly at four minutes to seven, they said, and sparks were reported from the big field over the rise. There's something wrong with this transformer, but we don't know what caused it. A similar thing once happened in Yorkshire. These things are bastards. The big lorry will have to come with a replacement; whether we can restore power before lunch-time I have my doubts, the man said. We went up the lane past the Old Dykes to the top of the rise and looked down over the big field they'd spoken of. There was a bare patch with no grass; we thought it would be a perfect landing site, and the bare patch proved it. Then we noticed a small dark distant figure walking across the field, towards us. Nothing could stop him, neither Charlie's bullets nor my sonic screwdriver; we radioed Captain Kirk to send a landing-party but he was busy with Klingons. So we retreated down to the village to fetch Dick. Parked the Tardis next to the ordinary phone-box, as usual, and sniffed the air. Something was definitely not quite right. We went very gingerly up that side of the green, peeping and then running past every opening and driveway, in case of Cybermen. At the top end we sat on the seat that used to be there, before it went rotten, and watched the bus stopped for far longer than normal at the bus-stop. We realised it had been paralysed by a death-ray fired either from space or from Digby's Farm. Eventually he went to the phone-box – the bus driver that is – and as he came out we ran down the green and asked him if he'd sent for reinforcements. Yes, he said. Will they send a great big truck? I shouldn't think so, he said. But they did, and the chap took one look at the engine and towed the bus away. He switched on all his orange flashing lights, and drove very slowly round the village green (having to ask Mr Townsend to move his big blue Mercedes) because there was nowhere to turn round. After a while another bus came, and picked up the three women. Miss Israel had already gone home."

Miss Israel?

"R-a-h-no-y-h-a-double-l, Mrs Rayhall ... We called for Dick, got some jelly babies from Walshes, then went to Charlie's uncle's to tell Jane. They had no electricity but plenty orange squash. She didn't want to come with us to shoot at the man in black and check on the transformer. She said she had some new things to try on, they'd arrived by mail order – we could stay and watch if we— We had to dash, but delegated her to keep an eye on things down the village. When we got back, the men and vans had increased but they were just hanging around. We heard some more about what had happened in Yorkshire, including an engineer getting fried, so we decided it must be a two-pronged invasion, Yorks and Northants. The strange man was nowhere to be seen, but Dick shot at nothing down the big field and said his bullets bounced off an invisible force-field. As nothing was happening, we went to see what Uncle Frank was up to. He said the cows were restless for some reason, perhaps they'd seen the sparks. Cows are very sensitive to Cybermen, I said. The biggest mystery to me, he said, since you lads like mysteries, is how that old iron bath got overturned.

He gestured towards the near field, and told us how he'd found it like that only this morning, shortly after the power cut. He felt sure there was a connection. We decided to take the case, and ran off to where this old bathtub always stood, near a gate that led into a track that was a short-cut to the big field over the rise, and in the other direction to Castle Woods. It would be the perfect place for an invasion. The cows used to drink from it on their way to be milked – the old bath that is. It was lying on its side, its rusty underneath towards us, as if somebody had simply tipped it over. But as Uncle Frank had said, it was too heavy – it was one of these Victorian cast-iron jobs standing on feet shaped like lion's paws, Uncle Frank said it weighed a ton, though I suppose that may have been just an expression – anyway, it was so heavy he could scarcely budge it on his own; so how it had got tipped over in the first place, when it was full of water, was a mystery to him, he said. Only someone or something of *superhuman* strength could have done it ... You're very quiet."

So is this the case? Who overturned the bath?

"The bath's at the heart of it. But there's more to it than that – and more to come. I'm implying that everything that day seemed interconnected, all the strange things that were happening, like strands of the same mystery ... Doesn't it come across? I thought you'd like it."

I do. You've got the child's perspective perfect. I remember how exciting a breakdown lorry with flashing yellow lights could seem. But it's different from the others isn't it? We've moved into autobiography really: Young Sherlock Whatsisname, emergence of the ratiocinating detective ... Sorry, perhaps if I shut up ...

"We went to grandad's for lunch, as we'd got electricity and Stella was in a good mood, for once. Where's Calamity? she said. She doesn't come with us any more, was all I said. But Charlie said: She's trying her new *brar* on, and snorted into his soup. After lunch, Bobby Todd was taking charge of the situation on the village green, and had phoned for an emergency chip van, because half the village couldn't cook. We were sorry we'd just eaten: chips from a chip van sounded very exciting. Are they giving it away? we asked, thinking of cadging some anyway. They weren't, and anyway there was a queue. We hung around till Bobby Todd had time for us. I told him about Uncle Frank's bath and asked him if he had any theories. It was a mystery to him too, he said, but he thanked us for reporting it. Do you think it's connected with the power cut? one of us said. I shouldn't think so, he said. Unless perhaps the cows pressed against it, if the sparking rattled them. A stampede! Charlie said, as he was our resident cowboy, and used to be Doug McClure before he was Wyatt Earp. It was our first sensible theory. We promised the constable we'd look for clues and let him know. Before going back up to Digby's Farm we went to see if Jane had anything to report, and looked any shapelier, and she *did*, it was a good job we went. She said a strange man, dressed entirely in black,

had come into the post office at thirteen minutes to one – someone that neither Mr Walsh nor Miss Walsh – funny, we called her Miss Walsh even then, though she was only a few years older than us, but she never mixed with other children at all, she just served in the shop and gossiped. Still does. There was never a Mrs Walsh – well obviously there was, there must have been, but she was never mentioned; it's another mystery. And another – how, years later, in her thirties, she suddenly had Norris, out of the blue. Nobody knew anything about it, and except for that there's no evidence anybody's ever laid a finger on her, nor ever wanted to. Very strange girl Priscilla Walsh – went straight from being an infant to being an old maid. Yacks non-stop, about everybody's business in Cottiscot except herself. We should make that another case one day – who begat Norris. Nobody owned up. I've drifted off ...”

Strange man in post office, that neith—

“Either Miss Walsh nor Mr Walsh, the Postmaster, had seen this man before. He cashed a postal order and with the money bought some oil, a can of oil like you'd oil a squeaky door with. Miss Walsh was telling everybody; but Jane saw him with her own eyes. His face was like Fagin, out of *Oliver Twist*, or else Basil Rathbone. Do you think they'd be able to get postal orders, aliens? I said. Jane didn't think it was very likely, but it depended where they'd come from. Possibly Yorkshire, I said. She seemed impressed. We were convinced, you see, that this man in black in the post office was the same dark figure we'd seen coming across the big field out of the invisible UFO – we were more certain than ever that it was parked in the field in front of our very eyes that morning, but camouflaged by a bullet-proof invisibility shield. He'd have come down to the village the long way round, to avoid the electricity and Unit people, and us. In fact, shouldn't we be following him back – we were wasting time. So off we went, phasers on stun. But we forgot about him almost instantly, for *there* was the huge transformer lorry, its orange lights flashing, crawling up the lane ahead of us – we were actually catching it up at one stage, it had to go so slow at the bends. We followed it into Uncle Frank's field and watched the new transformer being winched into place in the poles, and wired up and worked on by the men. Then there was more excitement as the lorry came to go and its wheels just went round and round – it was so heavy it had sank in the soggy grass as it stood there. Uncle Frank and Jack, T'other Jack his son, had to be fetched with their big tractor, and towed the lorry out of the field. By the time we'd watched them doing that – envious of T'other Jack as ever, because he got to drive tractors, even though he was only a couple of years older than us – by the time we'd watched the lorry being rescued the transformer was fixed, and the electricity was back on – three forty-seven it came on. And soon we were all having tea at Uncle Frank's, and everything was back to normal. Except for the old iron bath.”

I made a concluding facial expression. But it wasn't over.

“Jack arrived just in time to see the rescue – Jack Digby proper – did I mention he worked with his dad at the saw-mill Saturday mornings? He’d had his lunch from the chip van, then rushed up to see what had been happening about the body in the bathtub. Body? we said, of course. He noticed it was tipped over, but why wasn’t it cordoned off with homicide tape and a rozzar on duty? *Body?* All this commotion, the men and the vans and the Special Branch, he said, we were told it was the body that had been found in the old iron bath. We scoffed at such a silly rumour. It’s no rumour, Jack said: Harry Meesham saw it with his own two eyes when he was coming back from the poaching, and told us all about it over elevenses. A few chaps in those days – I don’t think it happens any more – used to go poaching in Castle Woods, mostly rabbits; they’d cut across Digby’s Farm, it was a sort of local tradition, Uncle Frank turned a blind eye and it was a long time since the Earls of Stranraer (who lived in Scotland) had employed a game keeper. Harry was on his way back at around seven in the morning and distinctly saw a body in the bath. Dead, he presumed, being under the water, though obviously (he’d said) he didn’t fancy it enough to give it the kiss of life. It was a sort of dwarf, with a big head and small feet and a rather indistinct in-between – he couldn’t tell if it was naked but featureless, or had a pale tunic on. Since he was out poaching and trespassing he didn’t bother reporting it, he felt sure Uncle Frank would spot it before long; and when news started reaching the saw-mill of strange vehicles coming through the village and men up at Digby’s Farm, he assumed that was what it was about. When people said there was a power cut Harry said it was a smokescreen. For if the dead dwarf was an alien, it’d obviously be Top Secret. They’d make out it was a power cut and all come disguised as electricity men – Special Branch and Bureau X and Alexandra Bastardo and so on. It was a brilliant theory – except that none of the electricity men looked anything like Alexandra Bastardo. And I could just picture this body in the bath: It sounds like a cocoon Cyberman, I said, and the other lads agreed that’s exactly what it sounded like. Of course there was the slight problem that we’d witnessed much of what happened, and eavesdropped as they talked about power surges and Yorkshire and engineers getting fried, and heard no hint of a body ... Funny though, that the electricity men should be on about Yorkshire, in a completely different electricity board area. You couldn’t help wondering if there was something in Harry’s theory. After all, somebody must have made off with this body – and tipped the bath over – and it all fitted uncannily with our invisible spaceship and the man in black with the mysterious postal order. So there you are: the strangest day in the history of Cottiscot.”

■

“That was very nice. Almost as nice as the Yorkshire Tea cake.”

I ... I made it myself, I said. I hadn't really decided whether I wanted to admit it. Not because it wasn't as nice as the Yorkshire Tea cake, but in case he thought I was silly.

"It's very nice ... I didn't mean it wasn't—"

You can't really compare them.

"It's lovely Cass, thanks for bringing it. *Cassandra* ... I noticed you didn't mind Mel calling you Cass."

It's different, with someone who's kissed you, I said, and instantly felt really embarrassed. Luckily he let it pass, or didn't hear.

"So what we decided had been going on was this. Dick went home by the way, but Jack stuck with us and Jane came round. She'd spent the day making herself look beautiful – which wasn't hard, but like I've said she'd just turned from being a tomboy and discovered clothing. Stella was flabbergasted, and it was certainly the shortest, tightest mini dress I'd ever seen, outside Top of the Pops. I'm not sure I should leave you unchaperoned, with three lads, looking like that, Stella said; a couple of years later she'd have been right. Oh she was stunning – I think that was the day we noticed her, me and Jack, I mean noticed how she could affect us ... That shouldn't go in – nor the Miss Walsh stuff, obviously."

Obviously.

"Well anyway, this is what we decided. Obviously, the aliens had landed in Yorkshire, that we took as fact. They're capable of assuming human form, they must be, because nobody was reporting an alien invasion. It doesn't mean they aren't Cybermen – the ones sent out as scouts would be immature ones, or drones. They'd spread out, and this one had come from Yorkshire to colonise Northamptonshire; but he'd run out of Auntie Maggie's remedy and the effect had worn off, returning him to a dwarf with a blank middle. Also, they can't survive in our atmosphere without it. So he'd put himself in suspended animation in a trough of water, waiting to be rescued. One of the invaders' spaceships had come for him and landed in the big field, beaming him across from the old iron bath, sort of sucking him up. The anti-gravity vortex created by trans-whatsitting him had overturned the heavy bathtub. Presumably caused the power cut too – perhaps the transformer got in the way. Or maybe the radiation or force-field from the UFO did that. That in turn must have had something to do with the UFO's engine problems. The bus breaking down, by the way, might have been a coincidence – we couldn't decide for sure, but it's unlikely the bus would have been deliberately targeted. The UFO managed to maintain its invisibility shield, but needed oil. So one of the aliens took some remedy, the medicine that allows them to breathe our atmosphere and assume human form, and speak English, and set off to the post

office. They didn't want to attract attention by stealing the oil or atomising Miss Walsh, so they forged a postal order – they hadn't got any Earth money, and it's easier to forge postal orders – and he cashed that to buy the oil they needed to oil the UFO and take off. Obviously the authorities, the top-secret government extra-terrestrial bureau, knew all about the Yorkshire invasion, so some of the men were secret agents making out they were with the electricity board; they suspected aliens were behind the power cut, but whether they knew about the body we doubted, because it had already been beamed aboard when Uncle Frank did his morning milking. So – we probably knew something they didn't. Whether to tell them or not was another matter. We told Uncle Frank the very next day – but Jane thought we should also tell Bobby Todd, and possibly Mr Walsh. After further discussions we did tell the bobby, a slightly edited version. He thought most of it was quite amusing, but said he'd check up on Special Branch activity in the village and listen out for reports of forged postal orders. As for the body in the bath, however, he said there was nothing he could do as there was no corpus depicti, and for that matter, *is* going voluntarily into suspended animation under water an offence under English law? The most he could do him for was being an illegal alien. One thing emerges in conclusion however, he said: you lads have solved Uncle Frank's mystery – for everybody called him Uncle Frank, and still does – you've explained what superhuman strength it was overturned the bath. I trust there's a reward. We were thrilled to bits by his conclusion, and of course told Uncle Frank – rephrasing the bit about the reward to suggest Bobby Todd had said there definitely ought to be."

And?

"He let us each have a go at driving the little tractor." He said it as if he were still a child, as if it had been the greatest thrill of his life. Which – had it not been for stiff competition from Jane Whatever in her first bra and mini-skirt – I might well have concluded it was.

■

"Do you know Cassandra," he said, "it sounds silly but I think that was the greatest thrill of my life – well, bar one – driving that tractor round Uncle Frank's field that day."

I raised my eyebrows as if in surprise, but restrained myself from asking the obvious question. Right: that was then, this is now, I said instead. So what really happened? Where does mature ratiocination take our time traveller from the twenty-first century?

"I think in reopening the case of the overturned bath we can discount the bus breaking down – it must have been a coincidence. Odd – two big lorries with orange flashing lights flashing their orange flashing lights in the narrow village roads on the same day, for different reasons – but there we are, that's what coincidences are for isn't it. I think we

must also ignore theories about invisibility shields and camouflage and so on – if a UFO or spaceship existed, its existence must be deduced from evidence. The bare patch in the big field isn't evidence, not conclusive evidence – it could have been caused in ways other than by a spaceship landing there, and anyway, it could have been there for ages. The power cut and the blowing of an electricity transformer might I suppose be related to some sort of power surge or power drain, short-circuit or overload, some effect of the radiation or force-field etcetera emanating from (say) a spaceship. Though on the face of it it's more likely to have a more ordinary cause, a randomly occurring fault in the miles of complicated wiring and circuitry that constitute our beloved national grid. It's odd perhaps how the workmen seemed to talk about it as if it were a mystery; but I've noticed workmen tend to talk like that – when I had a plumber in, he gave every impression of being utterly mystified by what caused the leak. You'd expect one of the supervisors or qualified engineers knew what had caused it – the power cut I mean. If such things didn't happen, repair-men would be out of a job – but by the law of averages they don't happen often in the same place. So what of our man in black, or rather, men? I don't think we can sustain the assumption made on the day, that the distant figure seen in the big field in the morning was the same person as the stranger seen in the post office at thirteen minutes to one. The link is tenuous, the cumulative circumstances of the day misleading our lads on the scene into an overly integrated interpretation."

Impressive.

"Well don't you think so?"

I meant the phraseology ... I thought it was a really good phrase.

"Mmm. Let's say they were two different men. The one in the field was thus an electricity man, going round checking wires and telegraph poles – because sparks had been reported from that field; and because if something blew the transformer, presumably they have to check the wiring in the vicinity. The man in the post office – well, a stranger in the village could have been a stranger in the village, another coincidence; a stranger has as much right as anybody to cash a postal order and buy oil. I'm not aware that it turned out to be forged, and nothing particular about him suggests he was an alien disguised as a human, even if he did look like Basil Rathbone. Admittedly, strangers using village post offices were rare in those days – they're rare still, though so are village post offices now. On such a day, a stranger will turn out to have been a supervisor of the electricity men, a goon from head office come to check up. Or he might, just possibly, of course, have been a G man, the man from the Ministry, the Bureau With No Name – all the day needed to make it complete was Steed and Emma turning up (speaking of sidekicks, as we weren't), or the Doctor and Whatsername – wondering like us, and like Harry Meesham, if the power cut was the tip of a sinister iceberg. The Bureau has to verify all

suspected alien invasions – but if it had actually been one we’d have heard about it by now, the alien infiltration would have reached the point of no return. It hasn’t happened. If he was checking, just in case, I expect he reported back in the negative: matronly frump yacking non-stop in shop, stunning twelve-year-old tart loitering outside, green chip van on village green, blown transformer on Digby’s Farm, otherwise nothing suspicious, Earth safe – P.C. Todd has everything under control. Which leaves us with the body, and the overturned bath.”

Or back to square one.

“Not quite. The body in the bath could still have been what our intrepid investigators on the spot thought it was – there just wasn’t an invisible UFO come to rescue it. It might have been rescued remotely, beamed up from space, the burst of unearthly power overturning the bath or scaring the cows – and possibly affecting the electricity. Or, the poor little alien or cocoon Cyberman could have gone unrescued. Perhaps if they don’t get rescued by four minutes to seven they self-destruct, explode into untraceable elements, atoms and molecules, the force of the explosion overturning the bath—”

That’s ingenious, I’ll say that much.

“And blowing the electricity. Or perhaps they just dissolve into the water, and the restless cows overturning the bath destroyed the evidence. Alternatively, since there’s no what we detectives call ay prioriti evidence of alien invasion at all – in fact there’s not a great deal of ay prioriti evidence of aliens even existing ...”

I’m really glad you said that.

“Why?”

I hadn’t expected the question, so I sort of shuddered.

“You find the idea scary?”

No Dave. I find the idea that you’re a die-hard believer in such things scary.

“I used to be, you’re right. But logical thinking has made me sceptical. I was going to say, as an alternative, the body in the bath could have been an ordinary dead dwarf, obviously. I don’t know exactly how many unsolved cases of missing dwarfs there are, but nothing of the sort’s ever been spoken of round here. And surely Bobby Todd will have checked. We’d still have to assume somebody – the only suspects would be Uncle Frank and Harry Meesham – moved and disposed of the body before lads or electricity men arrived on the scene. But why? It’s so improbable and motiveless as to be discounted. The most likely explanation that the evidence – or lack of evidence – points to is an

optical illusion. Perhaps what Harry saw, in the pale light of dawn, weary from his early-morning poaching, was a trick-of-the-light from the water, or a reflection, a cloud perhaps, and he didn't actually look as closely as his later narrative implied. Or something like a rag or an old newspaper, in the water, could have looked from a distance, in imperfect light, for all the world like a drowned dwarf with no middle body details. I think Harry was deceived by something of the kind, and elaborated on it later as a good break-time story."

I nodded. Or made it up entire.

"Do you think so?" He said it with surprised earnestness.

I gave a short imitation of his own dismissive laugh. It's a tall story from an unreliable source Dave, I don't really believe it.

"Not even a trick of the ...?"

I shrugged and tilted my head.

"Well ... It's true he was a bit of a rogue, old Harry – did I mention he's in prison? Well ... It leaves us with the original mystery, the one we were retained to solve in the first place, all those – grief Cass it's thirty years ago: Uncle Frank's head-scratcher of how the old iron bath got overturned. It all boils down to that, in the end: that one trivial incident, that one abandoned case, that one clueless ... The busiest, weirdest day in the living memory of Cottiscot, and we're back where we started – up on Digby's Farm looking at the rusty bottom of a cast-iron bathtub lying on its side, wondering how on earth it got tipped over like that."

And?

"I have absolutely no idea Cass ... *Andra* damn it! Cassandra."

You know Mister Smith Goes To Washington? You mentioned it the first time I came. (He was nodding.) I thought you meant you didn't like the name ... But it was Clarissa. In the film, the name was Clarissa, not Cassandra.

"I never said it wasn't."

Oh. I thought you meant ... I thought you didn't like it.

"It's a lovely name. But I wish you'd let me call you Cass, like Mel did."

I wish you'd kiss me like Mel did.

"What?"

I don't want you to call me Cassandra Dave, I've changed my mind.

“What do you want me to call you?”

Darling.

So that's what he calls me.

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