

Seven

I don't know how many there was. Let's say seven.

They was the same in appearance, but of markedly different heights. They allus stood there in a row outside their ship.

I used the word ship an they thought it were odd, they denied it were a ship. I explained about space ships an all that. They said it weren't one o them neither. They couldn't seem for grasp why summat as flies should be called a ship.

I felt like Margery that time she tried explainin Methodism to em. An bringin in 'Primitives an New Connexion on top o 'United Methodist Free Church an all, well it only confused th'issue.

If they can't understand summat as obvious as 'difference twix Anglicans, Nonconformists, Dissenters, an Unitarians, how could they ever grasp why Hecumenicalism is one o 'fundrimental things as marks us out as Methodists? Margery said.

I don't reckon it's worth botherin really, meself. I said, I don't reckon it's not worth botherin really.

But Reverend Lund were sure they could be converted, eventually. If I can save Old Renshaw up at Staveley Bottom I can sure as muck stinks save a bunch of Occupants, he said.

Won't God be surprised, when he gets first Aliens i'Heaven, said Margery.

I tried explain how God shouldn't rightly be surprised by owt, much.

Tell that to that Geordie girl that time, Margery quipped.

An come think, if *he* didn't mek em who did? said I. Geordie girl were all right—

One o 'small Occupants interrupted for ask where Staveley Bottom were.

Anyroad, I were sayin about ships.

So what do you call a vehicle that goes through colours? they said.

I give up, said I.

They was keen on seein a ship, so I took em down 'pub in me van, an showed em 'sign. So this is the Ship, they said.

It is, said I. An for all I'm teatotal, they does a right gradely ploughman's I must say.

They wasn't hungry. But they was interested in knowin more about cheese.

It reminded me o 'time Our Valentine came back from Olland wi that guey stuff. If this is cheese, I'm a Dutchman, Uncle said.

Reverend Lund knew a Dutchman in 'War. A flyer he were. He had one o them here near death headsperiences while his plane were crashin. Made him a Methodist o'ernight, apparently. Ended up at Conference.

Yet he swore till his dyin day it weren't a German shot him down. Were it an Alien? I asked, as you would.

An Aboriginal, said Reverend, noddin. Saw him clear as lemonade in his cockpit, an it were a fuzzy-haired Australian Aboriginal as ever was, right down to 'spear an long-johns.

Ooh Minister, pipes up Aunt Warburga.

No, you can say long-johns these days Auntie, says Margery.

Reverend Lund nods, like he does. I only put em on him for mek story decent, he says.

Anyroad, I were sayin about cheese ...

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Funny how you couldn't rightly count em. Margery noticed an all.

I'm sure I set enough places, she said, but there was two more. By the time we said Nightnight they was back to seven an one short. D'you think I should have a look for him? she said.

I shouldn't, said I.

I couldn't help thinkin o them stones under Peddlebin Bent. Legend tells as how they can't never rightly be counted. We used go blackb'rryin, an Our Audrey an me, we'd count em a dozen times a time. There was never neither more nor less in neither direction. We couldn't understand why 'legend didn't work for us.

Happen yer charmed o 'fairies, Uncle Wilberforce used say. He weren't a real uncle mind. He were Our Mam's boyfriend. No, you can say that now, nobody's bothered no more. Gentleman they'd used say, that time o day, an even that were a bit riskew.

Our Evangelist, he were allus 'cheeky one, asked him once what he saw in Our Mam. He said he liked her fritters.

I don't know how it got about – well I do. Our Evangelist were true to his name, he couldn't never hold his information. I ended up fightin Franky Broadbent, an we was both caned at after.

It had better be a good excuse, that Mrs Hardcastle said. An it weren't.

Please Miss, said I, Franky Broadbent made up a rhyme about me Mam's fritters.

It weren't even a proper rhyme neither. Anyroad, I were sayin about countin em.

There were a little un as I felt sure were littler than I'd seen afore. I asked him if he were new, if he'd just beamed down or summat.

He swore blind he'd bin with em all along. An for prove it he said: You are the Human who showed us the Ship; you are in command of a mechanical transportation device which you invented and named a Van; you live in reproductive symbiosis with Margery Craddock—

All right there's no call for gettin smutty, said I. Perhaps yuv just shrunk.

We are one, said the second tallest, who usually seemed to be 'spokeston, though they swapped that about a bit an all.

Well I've settled on seven, I quipped. Though I have counted as many as eleven. Oh an, when I said 'van were all me own work, I only meant 'paint-job.

Reverend Lund came in just then so we started 'Prayer Meetin.

Funny thing were, there weren't no sign o 'chatty little un at after. Where's tich? said I to beanpole.

We are all here, we both said in uniform – I were teasin, I knew what th'answer wouldn't be by now.

It's some kind o Prussian doll trick in't it? I said. I'd seen this here Prussian doll at Mother Plato's, Reverend Lund brought it back from 'coach trip. You open it an there's a littler one inside an you open that an there's a littler one inside. You could have em standin in a row, or

you could have em all together just one, yet there'd still be the same number. Reverend Lund shownd us that.

How many dolls are there now? he'd say. One, I'd reply. He nodded his head an said No.

We should like to see this Prussian doll, said beanpole.

Ah well, thereby hands a tale, I replied. Yer see, it went wi that Geordie girl that time, what lodged here four or were it five year ago. I'll ask Margery.

Margery thought it were four if not five. Her were all right though, Geordie girl, her were like one o these here juvenile delincreants as was bein reformed by 'Methodists. Her were all right, her were reformed enough I should say, an forward with it. Her didn't tek much, but there was 'doll an a towel an a couple of other things, all her clobber an some brass, oh an them things out o 'Chapel, an 'toothbrush.

What is a toothbrush? said one o 'little uns.

Well it were probably hers rightly, I said, I mean, Reverend Lund bought it her cause her hadn't got one, so her like as not thought he meant her keep it. I shouldn't count 'toothbrush meself, I reckon it were a misundredstandin. Only Margery allus counted it.

They'll think I'm a stickler, pipes up Margery, who'd bin overhearin.

No, I've already told em yer a Growcott, I quips. One thing about Occupants, they do have a sense o humour. Sometimes they'll laugh so much it meks yer wonder if they don't mean it.

It put me in mind o that time Petula Sidebottom were sick in th'organ. Come Sundy Service me an Frank Slaney an a few others, who'd bin in on it, we couldn't control us-selves. Nobody else thought it were funny, for some reason, all them squelchy notes.

Do hugh knew, hay wondered where the smell were coming from, said that Mrs Frawley-Wilkenshaw.

I'm surprised her said smell, come think, that were fair outspoken for her. Definitely an odour-n-aroma one, that Mrs Frawley-Wilkenshaw. An reckoned herself nigh virtuous on that here organ.

Peddlebin Bent? says shorty.

Well that's what Our Mam allus called it. Anyroad, I were sayin about toothbrushes ...

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Obviously it were a problem once they started Schooh. Yer couldn't rightly call 'register.

Not just em not havin no names, but yer knew they'd swear blind they was there no matter how few yer counted. I don't reckon that Miss Fish grasped it really. Easy flustered her were.

Then when her tried give em names, like nicknames yer might say, they had to go through the sex thing first. No, you can say sex these days, honest, it's bin on telly. I don't know why Reverend Lund hadn't explained it to her, poor duck.

You mean ..., said Margery.

Her weren't hardly headsperienced really, I'm surprised they made her Actin Head at all. I mean, nice girl an all that – Our Valentine fancied 'knickers off her (no, you can say knickers an all, only you has call em pants) an her frocks was nigh short enough for th'whole class to know 'colour – but her were easy fumigated.

You mean Reverend had tell her about ... about ... about, yer know, said Margery in that way of hers.

Sex, said I.

Ooh Our Bentley, pipes up Aunt Warburga. If you was forty-two years younger I'd mek yer wash yer mouth out.

Old fashioned is Our Aunt Warburga. Deaf usually an all, just certain words her can hear. Seemingly.

No Margery, says I, to Margery I mean. Her just needed know if they was lads nor wenches, so her could give em Earth names appropriate an tell em which side o 'classroom for sit, an which lavvy use.

Funnily enough I were minded o 'time Our Audrey stood up in Sundy Schooh an asked what Begat meant. Her had a rough idea, but it were a dare.

Don't look at me, it were them girls, Florrie an Flossie Whatsername, an that Petula Sidebottom again. Her gave her Mam some stringy-bacon that one.

Teacher that time o day were one o these here students. Like a nun bart clobber, whatever Methodists have.

Only Methodists I know wi no clobber are yon Occupants, Margery quipped. Less yer count that Geordie girl that time.

No you know what I mean, said I. Reverend Lund were a big Sound o Music fan, only he doesn't mention it no more. So he got one o these here student novices like, from 'Circuit. That Geordie girl couldn't help it, her were from 'slums.

Her were a walkin jumble sale by 'time her scarpered, said Margery.

Her were all right. Anyroad, poor girl, I were sayin about her sayin what Begat meant. Sundy Schooh teacher I mean. Her said summat about havin a baby an Audrey said Abraham? had a baby Miss? an waited ...

Well he had to like ... *make* it, 'girl said, an went all red. Like a beetroot. An all us lads laughed.

It felt just like that time in 'marquee after Biseptenary, that wrestler when his trunks came down (no, you can say trunks, only yer not supposed tek em down till yer back in 'dressin room). Petula Sidebottom an 'lads just fell about.

Well yer must admit it were funny, says Margery.

No I mean Our Audrey mekkin 'student novice girl go red like a beetroot. I felt sorry for her really.

You fancied her, Margery says.

I never did, says I.

You di-id, says Margery in that way of hers.

Well it were afore I knew no better, I says, an gives her a wink.

Course there wasn't no short frocks in them days. Anyroad, I were sayin about Abraham havin this here baby ...

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I were surprised how keen they was on comin to Our Audrey's doo. Only asked em as a hafterthought—

That were good o you, pipes up Margery, sarcasmic.

Margery's idea Margery's idea, says I, credit where no credit's due. No but they was right keen, once I'd done explainin. They said they was a bit partial to plastic ...

I don't know about plastic but there's likely be currant bread, said I. Can't beat Our Audrey's currant bread, for my tuppence-ape'ny. An

little beef-paste butties cut in triangles, an gallons o tea. Or for them as fancies summat stronger there'll like as not be oveltime. Allus did like a bit of a doo, Our Audrey.

Reverend Lund said it were 'best tupperware party he'd ever bin.

They wasn't hungry, none o th'Occupants, but true to the word they was fair percolated by 'tupperware. They'd a bought it all if that Hilda Brocklebank an them women from Bright Hour hadn't a bin there. An if they'd had 'brass.

I were tellin em as how they don't have buy none there an then cause there were like this here Christmas Club, so yer could put summat down regular an not be bothered wi not havin owt till, well, Christmas – then yer could give it somebody as a present.

They was keen on knowin more about 'Christmas Club.

It were Margery pointed out as like as not they'd not have none, brass I mean, like that Geordie girl that time.

No nor not no pockets for keep it in neither, I quipped. Or if they *did* I'm not so sure it would'nt be regal tinder. Geordie girl were all right though, her couldn't help comin from a depraved background.

But where they kept comin up wi them here postal orders from were a right mystery.

I thought o Margery that time she were tryin explain Oddfellows to em. No, nor it didn't help none, bringin up that year we got in tangle wi 'Foresters outside 'Co-op. Bobby Micklewright were no use neither.

Oh well he were a Forester, all Micklewrights was, said Margery.

Well he should a known better, said I.

What is a Micklewright? said a couple o th'Occupants.

Oh they was from t'other side Fyle, all Foresters as wasn't Shepherds o'er there, said I. But you expect a Bobby for be what they call impervious—

Like a referee.

Like that, Margery's not wrong. We could a done wi one. Yer see, we was all Oddfellows up this end, an if it weren't bad enough Cedric Motterstall defectin to 'Foresters wi his euphonium, that day they has to set out same time down Free Trade Bank. Same time as us set out

from Oddfellows. Anybody could see there were goin be a pile-up when we reached Co-op Corner, or a barney whether or not.

A right barney as ever was. Anyroad, I were sayin about tupperware.

Didn't he marry one? pipes up Aunt Warburga.

One of who? says I.

A Forester from t'other side Fyle.

Micklewrights was all Foresters, says I. All Foresters as wasn't Shepherds o'er t'other side Fyle.

Oh Our Bentley shurrup, says Our Audrey, she means Cedric Motterstall.

Cedric Motterstall, I laughs, Cedric Motterstall had as like marry anybody as Aborigines tek o'er 'trouser mill – he were bent as my startin handle.

What, you mean he were a ... were a ... were a, yer know, says Margery in that way of hers.

He were one-a-them, says I.

Ooh Our Bentley, says Aunt Warburga.

No, you can say one-a-them nowadays, they've had em on 'wireless, only you has to pronounce it those. It allus reminds me o that here 'to-doo we had wi Slatterdike's pig—

I were sure he married a Micklewright, says Aunt Warburga.

Well 'pig'd more like—

Auntie's thinkin of earlier generation – You're Thinking Of Earlier Generation Auntie, Audrey shouts – Cedric an Little Cecil's mother—

That's the one, says Aunt Warburga, Cecil, Softy Cecil Motterstall – turned down Florrie Sidebottom an went an married a Micklewright, an both lads turned out Oddfellows.

Anyroad—

What is a euphonium? says third from end.

Well it were his for do as he pleased with, I suppose, like Margery allus said. Anyroad, I were sayin about ... what were I sayin about?

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Now I've showned you in 'vestry, and Bentley here's had you in his van, and yuv all signed 'pledge and started collectin tupperware, what about a tour o 'disc? Reverend Lund said one Sat'dy.

I were surprised he said it, though I'd wondered meself if they wasn't never goin ask us in.

They was everso quiet for a while, all seven all in a row there as usual, give or tek. Then three of em, different sizes, all said at once, they said: You would disappear.

Reverend Lund nodded like he knew what they're on about. He's like that, he often nods just afore he contradicts yer.

I were put in mind o 'bus driver as disappeared that time, Alf ... Whatsisthwaite. What—

What, like that Geordie girl that time? pipes up Margery.

Yes. *No* – not like that. What were his name, that bus driver as disappeared? Alf ...

Misselthwaite I think, says Margery.

Geordie girl were all right.

Or Thistlethwaite.

Disappeared for three days an—

Or were it Brocklehurst?

When he got back, swore blind he'd bin up in one o these here flyin saucepans.

Were it driven by an Aboriginal? says Reverend Lund.

Course we didn't rightly believe in em in them days. I don't mean Aboriginals – though I reckon we was nigh septic about them an all – but these flyin saucepans an whatnot; we hadn't had none o them here close incounters o 'third crime by that time o day.

We all thought he were a bit potty, yon bus driver, Alf Braithwaite or whatever. All this wobbly corridor business an lights wi no bulbs an Aliens wi nobbut three fingers tekkin his clobber off an fiddlin wi his never-you-minds. No, you can say never-you-minds, nobody's that bothered these days, it's what's called an Euthanism. It were like telly when BBC first went colour, 'bus driver I mean.

An how could you undo buttons?

Quite right Margery, I says, to Margery I mean. Yer not wrong.
Whatever happened to him?

Who?

Sid Openshaw.

Openshaw, that were it. Cousin o that Silas Openshaw as fell in muck.

Whatever happened to him?

He wiped his face wi Mrs Fattock's hanky an carried on singin.
Blackpooh last I heard.

No not Silas, I mean 'bus driver. I haven't heard tell of him in
donkey's ears.

Oh. He disappeared, says Margery.

Reverend Lund nods.

Anyroad, I were sayin about visitin 'space ship.

Go on, Charlie Hazeldine said to th'Occupants, get away wi yer.

You would. You would disappear, middlesize said, I Elizabeth give
you an assurance.

Quite tekken to their Earth names they have. Only it don't suit em, an
that Miss Fish has a funny notion o tellin lads from wenches if y'ask
me.

We'd appear again when we came out though but, Charlie quipped, an
chuckled, an Reverend Lund nodded away. I were surprised he didn't
have owt intercede for hisself on 'subject, Reverend.

No, you would disappear forever, said this Elizabeth. For ever in your
time, said another, a shortish one. It is like your television at close
down, said beanpole, after the Epilogue there is nothing.

Telly's not real life though, I pipes up. Tek Coronation for a start ... An
I goes on explainin as how as soon as 'brass band stops they all start
talkin posh an callin each other duckie, that Elsie Tanner an all, an Len
Fairclough's nice as pie. Whole Street's in—

We should like to see this Len Fairclough, tich interrupts.

Wensdy half past seven, says I, or oh-seven-thirty in space talk. But like I say, th'whole Street's just in 'studio, even if it are cobbled.

Our Evangelist knew a woman who'd bin on a tour, all round Granada. An *her* didn't disappear.

Well it weren't no use, they was what Reverend Lund described at after as anadine, wouldn't budge on this here disappearin lark.

It's a rum do, Charlie said, we've let em come to Chapel an go to Schooh, an Reverend's had a Prayer Meetin for em, an we've all had em round for tea, an Bentley's had em in his van.

An tekken em to 'Ship, I added.

When yer say, all had em round for tea ..., says Margery in that way of hers. I might have known she'd stick him up on it.

Oh well yer know how Mother keeps knockin an all, Charlie says. I swear if her'd stop gettin better we'd have em.

I looks at Margery with one o me looks, so she don't say it. I didn't want her startin no argybargy.

That Cissie Whatmuff would have Occupants round for tea if Old Obadiah Hollinshed's tricycle wi them cardboard wings flew, never mind Aborigines an saucepans, nor not no minute an a half sooner, I don't know why Charlie Hazeldine married her, Margery says at after.

I do, I says, an gives her a wink. Anyroad, I were sayin about Coronation ...

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Margery knitted em socks as a goin away present. I'm sure she'd noticed they didn't have no feet, nor wear no clobber neither, so I didn't say nowt. Seven pair her knitted. It'll have to do em, she said.

Oh I should't worry, said I, if they're all one they'll like as not share.

It were a sad occasion though, lined up by 'ship as usual, for 'last time. Reverend Lund made out he had a speck o dust in his eye.

Do not despair, said beanpole an one o 'middle-sized uns. We go back into the colours we came from, as you go back to dust.

It sounded nigh worse than I thought actually.

I tried sayin Yer not losin Occupants yer gainin seven seats in Chapel, to 'Reverend later, but it didn't come across as I'd meant it. It's not as how we're all that short o seats really.

He'd made good headroad with em, in my book, even got em singin All Things Bright And Beautiful. But he weren't sure they'd stay Methodists when they got back to that here other dementia they said they was from.

Course they will, said I.

I felt like Margery that time we tried explainin bullybeef to em. It were bad enough not bein able find Argentina on 'map. Goin on about divvy just confused 'socks off em.

I don't understand why nobody can't understand how summat as simple as a tin o meat comes from 'Co-op, she said.

No well I know yer don't, said I, but Occupants don't understand things like divvy an Green Shield stamps.

One o 'little uns wanted know where tin comes from.

Our Valentine did a project on that at Schooh, when he looked like he were goin be clever. They used let yer do projects if yer looked like yer was goin turn out clever. Cornwall, I said, cause I remembered Our Valentine goin on about it.

But Gertrude we just milk, I added, so there shouldn't be no confusion. Anyroad, I were sayin about socks.

They all said goodbye in their nice polite way – not like that Geordie girl that time, as just bundled off one night; filled her bag an went; her were all right though – an they stood there wavin their socks. All in a row, all seven, give or tek.

I'd swear 'little un had a tear on his nose. Goodbye Bentley Craddock, he said.

I felt like huggin him, but I just said Goodbye Tich.

I felt like huggin em, Margery said at after.

You daft ape'eth, said I, an wiped me nose.

That's a nasty little cold yuv got there Our Bentley, Our Audrey quipped, an gave Margery a wink.

Well, they was as decent a bunch of Aliens as yull find, this side o Clitheroe, said I, I'm not sayin they wasn't.

It were for all 'world like 'time we had them Morons, from America.

Ooh Our Bentley, pipes up Aunt Warburga.

No, you can say Morons now Auntie, they've had em on Terry Wogan. Saturday Saints, *they* said they was – I don't know what they was other days o 'week. They all had to hug an kiss us all afore they left, an sniffled an blarted summat rotten.

Except we was glad see em go. Well I were.

Reverend Lund said God moves in mystremious ways. It teks all sorts, Margery said at after. Another day an I reckon I'd a gone United Reformed.

I said, Another day an I reckon I'd a gone United Reformed. But I didn't mean it. I'd a probably gone Baptist.

Reverend Lund says Uncle Smallbrook knew a Moron durin 'War, another o these here pilots. Well he weren't a pilot ezactly, but he spent most o 'Duration sat next to one. A co-pilot were he then? yer supposed say. No, a pile-o-taters, Reverend Lund says Uncle Smallbrook would say. Sat next to a pile o taters – peelin em like.

The stories your Uncle used tell, Reverend says, how we laughed in them days. An then he laughs to hisself, rememberin.

So why d'yer reckon they chose Thither Cloughthwaiteside, of all places? says I. Of all places on 'planet.

God moves in mystremious ways, says Reverend Lund.

No I don't mean Morons, I mean Occupants, I says.

Now that we shall never know, he says, noddin his head.

Anyroad, I were sayin about havin a cold ...

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