

HAMSTERS!

HAMSTERS!

(OR: WHAT I DID ON MY HOLIDAYS
BY EMILY MURRAY)

BY

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For Lily, who made me do it.

PART 1

W*e have been given this voice, in a language that is not our own, with which to tell our story. Yet what is our story? And where does it begin?*

We little thieves, we burrowers and boarders, we numberless menace to the farmer, we victims in a world of predators; generation after generation, from mother to blind suckling child, our history has been told - but we must accept that we do not own our story, that events beyond us have shaped it, that we cannot choose it and that it does not belong to us. That it is not even ours to tell.

CONCERNING BILLY BONES

I will begin by describing my employer, Billy Bones.

In order to describe Billy I must describe his mother, and in order to describe his mother I must tell you a little of his maternal grandmother. So bear with me.

Billy's grandmother, Eliza Moore, married Harvey Bones shortly before he went away to fight in the Second World War. Not long before he left she became pregnant and the baby was born while he was fighting in Egypt.

Harvey longed for a son to carry on the family name and talked of little else in his letters home. Yet, when Eliza gave birth, it was a baby girl that was handed back to her by the midwife. Unwilling to let her husband down Eliza lied in her letters and told him that she had given birth to a bouncing baby boy. She named the boy Ambrose after Harvey's deceased father.

The lie became easy because Eliza had convinced herself, perhaps in the throws of maternal hormones against the background of the current bombing campaign over England, that Harvey was sure to die from a German bomb in Africa, having, she said, 'no place to hide in the desert.'

Inconveniently, the Germans failed to bomb Harvey Bones and he came home in nineteen forty-five expecting to find an eleven month old baby boy waiting for him. Eliza, a nervous and timid person, chose to do what it would have been many nervous and timid people's first reaction to do. She continued in a lie that had been working up till then in order to avoid the embarrassment of owning up and explaining it.

And so little Ambrose was brought up a boy until, when she was fifteen, her father finally conveniently died of a heart attack.

Eliza, it seems, assumed that once the pretence was unnecessary Ambrose could and would simply resume life as a female in much the same way as if she had always been brought up as one, discard her football magazines in favour of lipstick, her trousers for dresses, her short cropped hair for pigtails and ribbons, the name Ambrose for something more feminine. Ambrose, of course, had no such plans.

She continued to live as a man, very soon after running away from home to London, and then to America where she lived with a hippy commune for a while, and then India, and then, it seems, pretty much everywhere, as both man and woman, long-haired, androgynous, and fiercely independent. Until, one day in nineteen seventy-five, she turned back up at her old mother's door and announced she was pregnant.

Who Billy's father was Ambrose never divulged. Guesses as to his nationality have been made based on Billy's swarthy complexion and the tendency of his features to suddenly and unexpectedly take on a curiously lissom eastern elegance from certain angles and in certain lights; but Billy's true paternal lineage remains a mystery.

So Billy Bones was brought up without a father. Instead he had a doting grandmother, relieved that her deception had paid off and her deceased husband finally had a male heir to carry his name, and a mother who careened unpredictably between gender roles.

There is not much more to tell of Billy. He had friends, he did acceptably at school, he dropped out of an engineering degree but learned to play the guitar tolerably well. He came back to Bedford after a brief spell trying to make it as a musician in London. He had jobs and lost jobs, he never had what you could call a career. He played in a medieval folk band. He drank too much at times and washed too little at times. He sometimes made a little spare change as a private investigator, which is what brings us to the story at hand.

But I have run ahead of myself already. Apart from anything else I have completely neglected to introduce myself. My name is Emily, I shall turn up later when we get round to my part in the story and I shall introduce myself properly then. I am not here yet you understand.

That is another thing that you should know. Everything I tell you about the events for which I was present is absolute verifiable fact, but everything else is compiled from second hand accounts and, well, I stand by what I write but I could not swear to it. That is all.

So ... where to begin?

CONCERNING HAMSTERS

At four in the afternoon, on Sunday, in The Three Cups, in Bedford, at the corner table in the lounge bar which is by the piano, Billy Bones sat down bearing two pints of Greene King IPA, one for him and one for Calvin who sat opposite. They nodded to each other and both took long thirsty gulps at their respective drinks, and then Calvin said 'I think I may have found you a job of work.'

'Oh yes?' said Billy.

'Yeah.'

There followed a pause.

'What is it?' Said Billy.

Calvin said 'my neighbour has lost a hamster.'

'A hamster?'

'Yeah, a hamster.'

'A hamster?'

'You know, small, fluffy. Hamster.'

'I know what a hamster is.'

'So what's the problem?'

Billy took another gulp of his beer and asked 'what is it that you think that I do?'

'You're a private detective.'

'Investigator.'

'All right, a private investigator, investigate this.'

'A lost hamster.'

'Yes.'

'It's a little beneath me don't you think?'

Calvin thought for a moment, sucking at his pint. 'That's up to you,' he said eventually, 'but she'll pay well.'

Billy looked up.

'She's desperate,' added Calvin.

'Really?'

'It wasn't her hamster.'

'No? Who's hamster was it?'

'Some little girl in her class. She was looking after it while the the girl was on holiday. It was a position of trust.'

'Some girl in her class?'

Calvin nodded.

'I thought your neighbours were quantity surveyors.'

'They are,' Calvin said, 'this is the other one.'

'The other one is a laundrette.'

Calvin looked confused for a moment and then said 'no, not the other side, the other neighbour. They have a lodger, Anne.'

'And Anne's lost the hamster?'

'Yes.'

'And Anne's a teacher?'

'Yes.'

'And she'll pay.'

'She's desperate, it was a position of trust.'

Billy pondered the information for a moment, sitting back and drumming his fingertips together. Then, without a word, he sat forward and began to rapidly gulp down his pint.

'What's up?' asked Calvin.

'Come on,' said Billy, gesturing to Calvin's drink, 'we need to get going.'

'Aww. What?'

'First rule of an investigation Calvin, start as soon as possible.'

The pair drank their drinks quickly and walked to Calvin's neighbour's house, which was only a ten minute walk.

I write walk but Calvin more rolled on account of him being in a wheelchair. I shall describe Calvin properly later on because right now I want to get the story going and I'm already in the second chapter and we have not even met Anne yet. All you need to know about Calvin at this point is that his is in a wheelchair and is big and strong, well ... his top half is big and strong. Oh - and he talks with an American accent. Possibly I should have mentioned that before I had him start talking but it's too late now and I imagine you'll cope somehow.

Anyway, Billy and Calvin were about to arrive at Calvin's neighbour's house. Shortly before they arrived there Billy said:

'It's probably underneath the cooker. When I kept hamsters they always seemed to end up underneath the cooker.'

Calvin just sort of grunted.

'Is she pretty,' asked Billy, 'the Quantity Surveyors' lodger.'

'Matter of opinion,' said Calvin, without having to think about it.

He wheeled himself ahead of Billy and up the path where he knocked sharply on the door, being unable to reach the bell. Billy hung a couple of feet behind out of habit, Calvin did not like people towering over him from behind and was liable to roll his chair back hard into their legs without warning, especially after he had had a drink.

The woman that opened the door was not a quantity surveyor.

A sensation struck Billy that he could not account for. He had been around a bit in his thirty-two years on earth and had fallen in love with women before, and this was not that, yet that was the nearest thing to what this was. What it was, was a fascination. Neither attraction nor repulsion, but interest. The not a quantity surveyor that answered the door aroused in Billy an immense curiosity.

I shall pause to describe Anne at this point so as to avoid any snafus like the one we had with Calvin. Anne is not in a wheelchair, she is not big and strong, top half or bottom, and she does not speak with an American accent. She is tallish, she has mousy brown hair clipped back behind her head, because she wasn't expecting visitors she has her glasses perched on her nose rather than wearing contact lenses - Anne is vain about her glasses. She is wearing a cardigan over a purple blouse and a faded old red cotton skirt. I already mentioned her nose as supporting her glasses but it deserves a second mention. It was a big nose, not comically big but imposingly big, it was thin and slightly hooked, and it was striking rather than ugly, in fact it set the rest of her face off rather well - or at least some of us think so.

Anne said 'Calvin,' and 'hello.' Not necessarily in that order.

'Hey Anne,' said Calvin, 'this is the guy I told you about.'

Anne looked at Billy for the first time. I already wasted a whole paragraph describing Anne and it occurs to me that I never got round to describing Billy, not physically at least. I shall suffice to say that if Anne was not dressed to make much of an impression because she was not expecting visitors, Billy dressed that way as a matter of course and it showed. Especially that Sunday.

'What guy?' said Anne.

'The private detective.'

Anne looked blank.

'For the hamsters.'

'Oh yes,' said Anne, 'I forgot.' She looked at Billy again and said 'are you really a private detective?'

'Private Investigator,' said Billy. 'Billy Bones at your service.'

'I never knew there were such people.'

'We are few and far between.'

'What sort of work do you do?'

'Missing people mainly, long lost relatives and that sort of thing, the occasional lost pet.'

'Not bursting in on cheating husbands with a camera?'

'I try to avoid it if I can.'

Calvin coughed before the two could say anything else to each other, they had, of course, been conducting their conversation over the top of his head.

'Why don't you come in,' said Anne.

They walked into the kitchen where, on the sideboard, sat a hamster cage in which sat only one hamster. At the bottom of the cage where the hamsters could not chew it, was stuck a label on which was written, in purple felt tip highlighted with glitter, the words *Sniffles And Snuffles*.

Billy leaned in to examine the solitary hamster who looked back, disinterested, at Billy.

'Is that Sniffles or Snuffles?' asked Billy.

'I have no idea,' said Anne.

'Have you tried looking under the cooker?'

CONCERNING SNIFFLES, OR WAS IT SNUFFLES.

Billy continued to stare hard at the hamster in the cage, be it Snuffles or Sniffles. He was chewing gently on his thumbnail. The hamster turned and, as if it were the greatest effort in the world, slowly moved a few inches away from Billy's looming face and sat there instead.

'He looks more like a Snuffles than a Sniffles,' said Billy.

'Who knows,' said Anne, 'would you like a cup of tea?'

'A beer would be nice,' said Calvin.

'We haven't got any,' said Anne, 'I know on account of I wanted one last night and there wasn't any.'

'Tea would be great,' said Billy, 'when did Sniffles go missing?'

'Yesterday afternoon,' said Anne, 'while I was out.'

'How did he get out?'

'I have no idea.'

Billy turned around and looked at her. 'Really?' he asked.

'Both hamsters were in the cage when I left and when I came back there was only one hamster. The cage was still shut.'

'This cage?'

'Yes of course that cage.'

Billy turned back to the cage and examined it closely, first contorting his body so as to view it from all available angles, and then testing each bar with his fingers, and then carefully opening and closing the little hatch at the top, testing the snap-shut latch on it. Behind him the kettle clicked off.

'Milk and sugar?' asked Anne.

'Lots of both,' said Billy, not turning from the hamster cage.

Snuffles, or was it Sniffles, took a marked dislike to the attention and hid in a half chewed toilet-roll tube.

'You sure you haven't got a beer?' said Calvin.

'Sorry,' said Anne.

'Don't you apologise, it was him that dragged me out of the pub just as I was getting started.'

Billy sat down at the table and took the cup of tea that Anne placed in front of him.

'Enough sugar?' asked Anne.

'Nearly,' said Billy, 'before I get to work we had better discuss my fee.'

'Oh,' said Anne, 'I suppose so.'

'Calvin says you are desperate.'

'He does, does he?' Anne shot Calvin a look that Calvin wisely chose not to face, keeping his eyes locked on the contents of his teacup.

'And you should be,' continued Billy, 'something extremely strange has happened here, something that, at the moment, I cannot account for.'

'Mister Bones,' said Anne, 'I teach small children and trust me, their hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, rabbits, white mice, and rats are forever going missing. I know because they won't shut up about them when they're there and they really won't shut up about them when they're gone.'

'Yet,' said Billy, jabbing the air with his index finger, 'how does one hamster escape a cage while another does not?'

Both Anne and Calvin looked at him, Calvin with a sort of weary amusement, Anne with more of a condescending contempt.

'In fact,' continued Billy, undaunted by either look, 'how does a hamster escape from a shut cage - you said yourself it was still shut when you got back.'

Anne waited to see if he had finished and then said 'suppose, that I had closed the hatch without snapping it shut and then, when the first hamster climbed out, it stood on the hatch and snapped it shut.'

'Excellent theory,' said Billy leaping up from his chair, 'I shall test it.' He grabbed the toilet-roll tube containing the remaining hamster and placed it on top of the hatch on top of the cage. Snuffles or Sniffles, whichever it was, poked his nose out of the tube to see what was happening. The hatch did not snap shut. 'And there you see,' said Billy, revealing the result of the experiment to Anne and Calvin with a flourish, 'the weight of one hamster is not sufficient to snap shut the hatch.'

Snuffles' nose, peeping out from the darkness of the tube, looked vaguely apologetic for this failure of its owner.

'I think Calvin,' said Anne slowly, 'that I'm not going to be employing this idiot.'

Billy returned the hamster, still in its toilet-roll tube, to its cage, and sat back down. The fascination that he had initially felt upon first seeing Anne renewed. He loved the way she could be so rude without a showing a flicker of

temper. He could also see a paying job just about to slip out of his fingers and he knew he had to act fast to save it.

'You won't have to pay me a penny,' he said, 'until I return Sniffles.'

'For all you know that is Sniffles sitting right there.'

'I think you'll find that that one is Snuffles. In fact I will go so far as to knock ten percent off the agreed price if I am wrong.'

'We haven't agreed a price,' said Anne, 'I have not even agreed to hire you yet. And it's not a matter of money. I just don't think I want you snooping around in my house.'

Billy smiled. 'But I won't be snooping around your house,' he said, 'there is no need. Sniffles is not here.'

'And how can you be so certain?'

'Because he was stolen.'

Anne snorted tea out of her nose, slightly dampening Billy's enthusiasm for her so far implacable demeanour. 'Calvin,' she said, 'where did you find this man?'

'The Three Cups,' said Calvin.

'Figures.'

'I've already demonstrated that the cage must have been properly shut when you left him, thus, therefore hence, ergo consequently, someone must have opened it, and it is only a short leap from there to say that that someone either has him or has a good idea where he is.'

Anne looked unimpressed.

'I won't snoop around your house,' continued Billy, 'I won't charge you a penny until I return with the hamster and that you have agreed that it is the right hamster, and when I do charge you it will be a very reasonable rate.'

'How reasonable?'

'Well,' said Billy, 'it might be a long job so I'm afraid it will have to be seven hundred pounds. And that is cheap.'

'One hundred,' said Anne.

'Five hundred,' said Billy, 'I could maybe do it for five hundred but I risk ending up out of pocket.'

'I'll pay two hundred,' said Anne, 'and that's all, if you don't like it you can go back to the pub.'

'Good idea,' said Calvin, but he was ignored.

'Two hundred and fifty,' said Billy, 'plus expenses.'

'Two hundred plus expenses,' said Anne, 'but you call me to okay every expense before you pay it or I won't honour it. And I still don't pay you a penny until I have the hamster.'

'Done,' said Billy, and reached his hand across the table.

Anne looked at the hand, and then shook it.

'Excellent,' said Calvin, 'I suggest we all go to the pub to celebrate.'

CONCERNING ANNE THROPE

From an early age Laura Bosthwaite-Banks was considered to be one of the jewels in an already great family; unusually striking in appearance, accomplished and personable, academically gifted, great things were expected of her. It was therefore something of a surprise when, in 1970, at the age of twenty, she abandoned a degree in art history at Oxford and married Mordecai Thrope, a lowly electrical engineer.

Her uncle, Bosworth Barnes-Banks, who was at the time well thought of in important circles and, being the sole owner of the Brown-Banks Book Binding Company, effectively in control of the entire family fortune, and consequently was of the opinion that this meant he got a veto on anything the family did, in particular disapproved. He caused a scene at the wedding by refusing to turn up and then sending a telegram describing, in terms with no room for misinterpretation, his disappointment at the union. Her father, ever in the power of his older brother, read the whole thing out loud from beginning to end at the reception. Her uncle had not scrimped on words and by the end Laura's mother was in floods of tears and many of the guests were mortified. Laura alone, it seemed, was

unconcerned, and sat through the whole experience looking rather bored.

The unfortunate Mordecai Thrope, offended by the snub, soon abandoned his job and, together with a good friend, founded a small company of his own manufacturing calculators and then later parts for home computers. Fifteen years later this company, Thrope-Wilson Electronics, was bought by Amstrad Computers for thirty million pounds, which, at the time, valued it roughly twice that of the Brown-Banks Book Binding Company.

Sadly Mordecai did not live long enough to enjoy the triumph over his wicked step-uncle. Ever devoted to his wife he was at her side in the delivery room when she gave birth to a baby girl in 1978. Thrilled, Mordecai rushed across the room to see his daughter, slipped on the afterbirth and knocked his head on the corner of the table. He was dead before he hit the ground and thus became one of the few fathers ever to have died in Childbirth.

It was assumed by many that Laura married Mordecai for love; indeed, unless she was astonishingly prescient concerning the future popularity of home computers there could be little other explanation. Yet, if it was love, and we must assume that it was, she showed pitiful little sign of it either before or after Mordecai's death. She was, in short, a cold woman.

Wealthy off the fifty percent stake in Thrope-Wilson Electronics, and then later positively rich after its sale, Laura Thrope led a life of impassive leisure, raising Anne efficiently and with a very keen interest but, again, with a definite lack of affection. She died of lung cancer in 1996 when Anne was nineteen. In her will she bequeathed Anne a sum of money sufficient to see her through university, where Anne was studying chemistry, and nothing else. The rest of her fortune went to founding a sculpture wing at a local art gallery, a subject she had never taken any particular interest in during life.

Anne was advised to challenge the will but instead dropped out of university and went traveling on the money. Three years later she returned almost penniless and picked up the course exactly where she left off, this time funding it herself through part time jobs and massive student loans. After graduating she went to work at a soap manufacturer but quit after two years, did a PGCE, and took a job teaching in a girls school in Bedford.

That was Anne, in a nutshell.

Unused to afternoon drinking, Anne walked back from the Three Cups feeling woozy and with the first muffled poundings of what was destined to be a very bad headache already beginning to drum at the back of her skull. She mulled over the concept of Billy Bones in her mind. Taken at face value the facts added up to nothing more than a man who she should feel repelled by, an unhygienic, work-shy, shaggy, scraggly, bristly mess of a human being; and indeed she was repelled, but there was something else as well, she was interested. That was all there was to it, just interested, nothing more than interested, but interested nonetheless.

He was coming over the following day to talk to her about the hamster business. Efforts to quiz her at the pub had not proved successful, Calvin was bored of the whole thing and made no secret of the fact every time they tried to discuss it, then later they were joined by another man called Russian Frank, who was in fact Ukranian, and who had distracted them further.

Whenever she and Billy had tried to talk just between the two of them the subject had wandered. She wound up talking to Billy about her time in India. He ended up telling her at length about his hobby as a musician, he played in a folk band, or was it a medieval folk band. Whatever they had never really managed to talk about the missing hamster.

Much as she would rather the hamster was found, Anne was fairly certain her two hundred pounds plus expenses were safe.

The first thing she noticed when she walked into the house was the silence. It was not an empty silence, it was the silence of people who have only just gone silent, maybe it was still the ring of an echo in the air, maybe it was a sudden absence of the conversation she had half heard outside the door, but there was definitely something sudden and unnatural about the silence in the house.

All Billy's crazy talk about hamster thieves came rushing back to Anne. In her defence she was a bit drunk, but she was genuinely worried that they had come to finish the job and take Snuffles, or was it Sniffles. She grabbed a full length walking stick umbrella from beside the door and, holding it like a sword, tiptoed into the kitchen.

Behind the table sat the Quantity Surveyors, David and Susan, looking to Anne for all the world like a hostile interview panel.

'Hello Anne,' they chimed together like a chorus of singing Disney mice.

Behind them, Snuffles, or was it Sniffles, kicked some sawdust out of his cage with such force that it cleared the plastic tray and landed on the floor. Anne noticed that the Quantity Surveyors were almost certainly holding hands beneath the table. She grunted hello, put down the umbrella, and headed directly to the kettle. David and Susan already had full cups of frothy coffee from their frothy coffee maker in front of them so Anne did not even bother asking if they wanted tea.

'Anne,' said Susan.

Anne grunted again, not turning around.

'We've got some news,' said David.

Anne dropped a tea-bag into a cup and turned around. Not for a second did she think this might be interesting.

'You tell her,' said Susan.

'No you tell her,' said David.

'No you,' said Susan.

'No you,' said David.

'I'm pregnant,' said Susan, 'I mean we're pregnant. I mean ... We're going to have a baby!'

'Oh,' said Anne, momentarily startled beyond making a more appropriate response.

'There's something else,' said David.

They looked at each other. They were definitely holding hands underneath the table.

'You tell her,' said Susan.

'No you tell her,' said David.

'No, you have to tell her this,' said Susan.

'We're getting married,' said David.

They both looked at Anne.

'Which came first?' asked Anne before she could stop herself.

'Well it was a, err ... you know ... both together type of a thing. Well, you know ... when we knew for sure.'

They beamed.

'Congratulations,' said Anne, chewing at the word like it was too much dry meat. The kettle boiled and clicked off, she turned back to making her cup of tea.

'We're going to go out and celebrate with a meal,' said Susan, 'do you want to come?'

Anne, who wanted desperately to go and lie down on her own in a quiet dark room, said yes, she would love to. She reached up and opened the cupboard above the sink and fished about in search of the aspirin.

'I'm afraid,' said David, 'that we'll be needing your room for the baby.'

'Oh,' said Anne.

'Not right now obviously, but we want to redecorate so maybe next month, if you can find somewhere.'

Behind them Sniffles, or was it Snuffles, sucked noisily at his water bottle.

CONCERNING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF A HAMSTER.

The following morning Anne woke early and waited, listening, for the Quantity Surveyors to get out of bed and go to work. She realised, lying there, that she was anxious about the possibility of them meeting Billy. They would not approve of him, that was certain, but why should she care about that. They did not approve of the hamsters in the first place and seemed rather pleased when there turned out to be fifty percent less of them. If the world were divided up into dog people and cat people they were dog people for sure, they would want devotion, stalwart loyalty, and predictability in a pet. Anne would be a cat person, she wanted a pet that could look after itself and, if it loved her, would love her as an equal. Neither of them were hamster people. The Quantity Surveyors did not see the point in them and Anne resented the care they needed, but there was something - she liked the willfulness of Sniffles and Snuffles, their refusal to regard themselves as human, their

ability to take a lifetime's food and water and care and give back nothing but a limited placability when being handled.

Most of all Anne liked the hamsters because the Quantity Surveyor's did not, because the smell of the hamsters, and the rattle of the wheel at night annoyed them, and Anne enjoyed annoying them even before they had decided to chuck her out in favour of their own offspring. In favour of redecorating a room for their future offspring in fact. Despite all that it was only then, lying awake listening to them take turns in the shower, tracking their movement about the house by the sound of their footfalls, that Anne realised she did not actually like either of them and really did not like the pair of them together. She realised she wanted the hamster back because it had annoyed the Quantity Surveyors. And, with a beautiful clarity of mind, she realised that if she could trade either David or Susan for Snuffles - or was it Sniffles, she would.

Billy had said he would come first thing in the morning and turned up at half past eleven seemingly of the notion that he had kept his word at the cost of great discomfort to himself and his sleeping pattern. Anne considered not offering him a cup of tea simply because he was making such a show of yawning, but relented because she wanted one herself.

'Before we start,' said Billy, sitting down at the kitchen table with his tea and even more milk and sugar than the previous day, laying a notebook on the table, and clicking open a biro, 'we agree this is not snooping, right?'

'Oh snoop away,' said Anne.

'Really?'

'Things changed last night. I don't want to talk about it.'

'Okay,' said Billy, clearly a little confused, 'why don't you tell me what happened on Saturday, step by step.'

'What's to say?' said Anne, 'I went out, when I came back there was only one hamster.'

'Lets start with where you went and when.'

'I went to the garden centre, at about two o' clock.'

'How long were you gone for?'

'No longer than an hour.'

Billy made a note. 'And the Quantity Surveyors?'

'You call them them that too?'

'Calvin calls them that.'

'They had gone out before, at about eleven, they were planning to buy lunch in town and do some shopping.'

'So you had lunch here and then left.'

'Yes.'

'What did you have?'

'Some salad and cold leftover chicken pie. Is that relevant?'

'Who knows,' said Billy, 'how do you know both hamsters were in their cage when you left?'

'I refilled their water bottle shortly before, I would have noticed then.'

Billy made a note on his pad and then, apparently losing his train of thought began idly doodling. Anne looked over, it was a reasonably good drawing of a hamster, for some reason it was holding a camera.

'Not bad,' she said.

'What?' said Billy said, 'oh sorry I was thinking. How do you tell Sniffles from Snuffles?'

'I have no idea.'

'Are they siblings?'

'Presumably.'

'Hmmm. Who are you looking after them for?'

'Emily, a girl in my class.'

'How old is she?'

'Eleven. What has that got to do with anything?'

'It's hard to tell at this stage.'

Anne put her mug of tea down on the table with a bang. 'How many lost hamsters have you found Mister Bones?' she asked.

'Hamsters,' said Billy, thinking and counting on his fingers, 'none so far. Including this one.'

'And how many pets generally?'

'In a professional sense?'

'Yes, in a professional sense.'

Again Billy muttered to himself and counted off on his fingers. 'Including zoo animals?' he asked.

'If you like,' said Anne, leaning back in her chair and sipping on her tea.

'Also none,' said Billy.

'Hmm,' said Anne.

A lot of weight can be put in an *Hmm*. A lot of meaning. I myself have been on the wrong side of many of Miss Thrope's *Hmms* and let me tell you it can be a pretty deflating experience. What this particular *Hmm* meant is, perhaps, not obvious in the course of the conversation; you should have guessed that it expressed a certain disapproval, a certain disappointment. It did both of those things. You might also think it served a thoroughly damning judgement on Billy Bones' potential as a discoverer of disappeared hamsters but you would be wrong, for, though by no means a positive *Hmm*, it was a *Hmm* that reserved judgement.

Miss Thrope, let me tell you, was not a person generally given to reserving judgement for very long.

Billy, in the face of the *Hmm*, coped admirably. He put down his pen and his notebook and laid his palms flat on the table. He paused. Billy could not use a pause the way Miss Thrope could use a *Hmm* but, in this case, the pause was all he had to hand.

'Anne,' said Billy after the pause was done. Note that he addressed her by her first name while she addressed him as Mister Bones - an uncomfortable familiarity was a

weapon Billy could wield with ease that Miss Thrope had no access to at all.

'Anne,' he said, 'remember that Snuffles has not run away, he has been stolen. Recovering stolen items is a speciality of mine, I am particularly successful at it.' He picked up his pen again and poised it over the notebook. 'With that in mind,' he said, 'was there any sign of a break in on Saturday.'

'No,' said Anne, 'of course not.'

'Think back. Anything unusual, any items out of place.'

'Other than the hamster?'

'Other than the hamster.'

Anne went as if to quickly say *no* but then stopped. Behind her Snuffles, or was it Snuffles, crept from his nest of torn up newspaper to his water bottle and sucked at it noisily. 'There was one thing,' said Anne, 'the door was deadlocked when I came home. I didn't think I would have done that because I wasn't sure if the Quantity Surveyors had taken their key - but I suppose I could have done it and forgotten. It proves nothing.'

'It's enough,' said Billy, making a note in his book, and then, muttering to himself, 'scary.'

'What's that?' asked Anne.

'Nothing.'

'It wasn't nothing, it was something. You said something.'

'No I didn't.'

'Yes you did. You said "scary." What is scary?'

'The implications are scary. But then they always were if you thought about deep enough, but I didn't, I just thought about it cursorily, I just thought about the surface not what lay beyond and now I've already lost a day because I am so stupid.'

'I don't understand,' said Anne.

'Why steal a hamster?' said Billy, 'and if you steal a hamster, why only steal one? The implications, when you think about it, are terrifying.'

Anne looked blank.

'Even without the fact that they had keys to the house and waited till you were out, the fact they were not greedy is vital. This was a professional job. Very professional.'

Anne still looked blank.

'I have to speak to Calvin,' he said, standing up. 'Come on.'

'He won't be out of bed yet,' said Anne.

'Then we'll have to wake him up,' said Billy.

'That might be a very bad idea.'

CONCERNING THE WOMAN WHO LIVES UPSTAIRS

Calvin lived in the ground floor flat next door. Billy announced that he knew from experience that knocking on the door would not do anything other than eventually attract the attention of the woman upstairs - if a person wanted to wake Calvin his best bet was to clamber over the locked gate into the alley and knock loudly on the bedroom window.

'If,' continued Billy, 'two people want to wake him then their best bet is for the larger of the two to assist the lighter of the two in climbing over the locked gate and then have her knock loudly on the bedroom window.'

Anne looked at him, 'that,' she said, 'was definitely not part of our initial agreement.'

'Nevertheless,' said Billy, 'that is by far the path of the least resistance.'

'Not if I resist,' said Anne, 'which I will.'

'Go on,' said Billy, 'it'll be much easier if you go over.'

Anne shook her head.

'There are spiders over there.'

'You're not scared of a little spider are you?'

Billy looked her in the eye. 'They're not little,' he said.

Anne simply shook her head and gave him one of the looks she used on her class. She was not climbing over no gate.

Billy shot her an accusing grimace and clambered ungainly over the gate himself.

'Oh Jesus!' he shouted back, 'they're enormous.'

Anne listened to the eeks and grunts of a man trying to squeeze himself past the waiting webs of arachnids and then a loud knocking and call of 'Calvin, wake up, it's me.'

Nothing.

More knocking. 'Calvin, get out of bed and open the door - it's important.'

Noise from within the house, some muffled swearing, a fairly alarming crash, then nothing, then a very loud 'what the fuck!' and then the front door crashing open and Calvin sitting in his wheelchair in a superman pyjama top and nothing else, his hairy penis and balls lying on the seat between the two blunt stumps where his legs once were.

'Oh,' he said, 'sorry Anne, I didn't know it was you.'

'Don't mind me,' said Anne. It was a struggle but she successfully stifled a giggle and remained, as far as anyone else knew, entirely unmoved.

Billy, grunted and swore and dropped heavily back over the fence.

'Bastard!' he said to nobody in particular. 'I saw a spider this fucking big.' Anne looked but he didn't hold out his hands to demonstrate the size of the spider or anything so she assumed it was just a figure of speech.

'What do you want?' asked Calvin.

'We need to talk to Clump,' said Billy, 'I'd say you should get dressed first but I'm not sure if we wouldn't do better with it all hanging out, so to speak.'

'Oh fuck off,' said Calvin, spinning himself around and wheeling himself back into the house. Billy followed after, and Anne followed Billy.

'Who's Clump?' asked Anne.

'The woman upstairs,' said Billy, 'don't call her that to her face by the way.'

Despite being neighbours for three years, and being fairly chatty neighbours for the previous two years, Anne had never been inside Calvin's flat. She could see now why he had never invited her. It was small, a lounge, bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom, in that order. In the lounge was a television and, scattered about the floor, a few dumbbells, several empty tins of lager, and there was a beanbag. There was no other furniture. From what she saw of the bedroom it was much the same except with a bed instead of a beanbag. She couldn't really tell what state the kitchen was in because the entire room was buried beneath pizza boxes. They concealed most of the table and, more shockingly, were trampled several deep over the floor like an uneven cardboard carpet, with twin rutted grooves marking the common wheelchair routes through the room.

After a few seconds of grunting and swearing Calvin re-emerged wearing a t-shirt and his usual shorts with the empty ends tucked back beneath him.

'Pass me that broom,' he said.

Anne looked around her but Billy, clearly familiar with the procedure, grabbed a broom from where it was propped up in the corner and tossed it over to Calvin. Calvin banged on the ceiling with it. Even with the broom Calvin could not reach the ceiling and so was required to lob it upwards and catch it again. He did this three times.

They listened. From above came the faint sound of movement.

'She's got to put her shoes on yet,' said Billy.

'Oh god those shoes,' said Calvin to Anne, 'she wears them to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. You should hear it, clump clump clump.'

Sure enough, like a pair of hammers being dropped, the clump clump of heavy footfalls filtered down through the joist and plaster. Anne's, Billy's, and Calvin's heads turned in unison, watching the featureless ceiling and tracking the movement back and forth above them. A door closed. And then, louder, the clump clump clump of somebody banging down the stairs two steps at a time.

Calvin wheeled himself out and opened the door.

'Claire,' Anne heard him say, detecting what sounded like a rather forced bonhomie into his voice.

'You banged,' said the voice.

The voice. Anne knew, immediately who Claire must be the moment she heard the voice. Loud, almost shouted, fat and ungainly like it came from a mouth half strangled by a swollen tongue, words punctuated by sudden unhealthy wheezes. There was no doubt that the voice belonged to the woman with the bad skin and greasy hair she sometimes passed on the street, the woman who looked down at her feet whenever she passed anyone else and pretended not to have seen them. The woman, remembered Anne from one horrifying sight the previous summer, who had once worn a skin-tight Pokemon t-shirt with a denim mini-skirt and shocking pink leggings.

Anne tried to remember her shoes, she could not picture them until the woman walked into the room. Of course! Huge steel capped purple Doc Marten boots.

'Hello,' said the woman.

Anne waved.

'Billy, you know,' said Calvin, 'have you met Anne from next door?'

'I've seen you,' said the woman, managing to make it sound almost like a threat. She extended a hand and gave Anne a clammy handshake. Anne fought the urge to

immediately wipe her hand on her jeans. The moment the woman turned away she brushed away stray greasy flecks of crisps from her fingers.

'It was Billy that wanted to talk to you actually,' said Calvin.

'Is that the only reason you asked me down?' asked Claire, staring blatantly at Calvin's crotch, now thankfully covered up.

'Besides the pleasure of your company,' said Billy.

'I was working,' said Claire, and then, apparently for Anne's benefit, 'I work from home translating Japanese card games into English.'

'Oh,' said Anne, sensing something was required of her, 'that's interesting.'

'It is sometimes,' said Claire, 'except when it's just more Yu-Gi-Oh.' She laughed at her own joke.

'Oh,' said Anne again, without the faintest idea what Claire had meant.

'Do you read Manga?' continued Claire, 'I do some Manga as a hobby. I'm doing my own version of Kyoshoku Soko Gaiba at the moment because the official one is rubbish. Although not as bad as Inju Gakuen, but I don't think people really read Inju Gakuen for the words.' Again she laughed. 'But some of the words are actually quite poetic which just goes to show.'

Anne looked at Billy for help but Billy just seemed to be vaguely amused by her plight. She was suspicious that he may have engineered this conversation purely for his own amusement.

'I have no idea what you are talking about,' she said to Claire.

'I'm also a writer,' said Claire. 'I know everyone says that these days but I've sold some stories. Mostly I write fic though which you can't sell, obviously. I've probably written

most of the Severus Malfoy slash there is, the decent stuff at least, which is the minority let me tell you.'

Anne thought she recognised a word and grabbed it like a lifeline. 'Harry Potter?' she asked.

'Yes,' said Claire, 'but I don't do Harry he's too wholesome,' she smirked, 'I like the squick.'

Anne had absolutely no idea what the woman was talking about but there were few things that annoyed her more than adults reading children's books. She had to do it as part of her job so she confident in her opinion that they were all simplistic fantasy and not the sort of drivel that ought to occupy grown up minds.

She said, 'isn't that a kid's book?' In the full knowledge that this was a good way to wind up the adult fan.

Claire spluttered. 'Well,' she exclaimed, 'originally.'

'Yes it is,' said Anne, 'I've read it to my class.'

Anne had done this before, she was just going to let Claire splutter a little more before delivering the hammer blow and telling her that the eleven and twelve year olds in her care had thought the books positively babyish. Which had not only been true, but had worked like a charm on all the over-defensive thirty-something Potter fans Anne had met in the past.

Anne was just about to say this, a tiny cruel smile on her lips, when Billy stepped in.

'Anyway Claire darling,' said Billy, 'we wanted to ask if you'd seen anything suspicious on Saturday.'

The non-sequitur surprised Claire right out of her scandalised spluttering.

'Suspicious?' she asked.

'Anne,' said Billy, 'had a very valuable item stolen on Saturday and it looks like an extremely professional job, no sign of a break-in at all, in fact they may even have had copies of the house keys.'

'Ooh,' said Claire, suckered right in, 'what was it?'

Billy spoke before Anne had a chance to. 'Can't tell you darling,' he said, tapping the side of his nose to indicate a secret, 'for the same reason as we can't tell the police. Once things clear up I promise I'll let you know. You understand.'

'I understand,' said Claire, for all the world as if she did.

'So,' said Billy, 'did you see anything.'

'Ah well,' said Anne without pausing for thought, 'didn't see anything on Saturday.'

'Yes?' said Billy.

'Was what I didn't see on Saturday wasn't it. All last week there was a white van parked across the street, I noticed because it was occupied by two very handsome men.' She glanced at Calvin, or rather, at Calvin's shorts. 'Almost as handsome as Calvin,' she said, 'and it wasn't there on Saturday. Hasn't been there since in fact.'

'Can you describe them sweetheart?' asked Billy, taking out his notebook.

'Handsome,' she said, 'mid to late twenties, curly hair, nice faces, jeans and white t-shirts.'

Billy did not look impressed, it was not much to go on. 'Anything else darling?' he asked.

'There was a legend on the van, I remember because I looked it up and couldn't work out what it was.'

'Yes?'

'Staralfur,' said Claire.

'Staralfur?' said Billy, holding his pen as if he did not know what to do with it.

'Here,' said Claire, taking the pen and notebook from him and writing it down. 'Staralfur.'

Billy showed the word to Calvin and Anne.

'Staralfur,' said Calvin.

'Well,' said Billy, 'you've been an absolute godsend darling. If we get this thing back I shall definitely owe you a

drink,' and then, before Claire had much of a chance to say anything else, 'anyway we must be going, sorry to wake you up Calvin, see you around Claire, bye.' He hustled Anne quickly out of the flat and shut the door behind them, trapping Calvin with Claire.

Billy sniggered. 'Strange lass,' he said, 'spends all day everyday up there watching everything that happens on this street. Is very into Calvin.'

'I noticed,' said Anne, 'she wouldn't stop staring at his crotch.'

'It wasn't his crotch she was staring at,' said Billy, leaning in and whispering, 'it was his stumps.'

Anne's hands shot to her mouth as she gasped. She could not remember the last time something had actually shocked her.

CONCERNING THE THREE CUPS

A week later, at four in the afternoon, on Sunday, in The Three Cups, in Bedford, at the corner table in the lounge bar which is by the piano, Billy Bones sat down bearing two pints of Greene King IPA, one for him and one for Calvin who sat opposite. They nodded to each other and both took long thirsty gulps at their respective drinks, and then Calvin said 'Any joy yet?'

'About what?'

'The hamster you schmuck.'

'Trail's gone cold mate.'

Calvin looked at Billy, 'that's it? Trail's gone cold and you give up.'

'I didn't say I'd given up, I just said the trail had gone cold. You give me a lead and I'll follow it.'

'The van is your lead, follow that.'

'How?' said Billy, 'it was a white van, do you have any idea how many white vans there are in the world? In Bedford? Hell, Bedford is the spiritual home of the van.'

'Eh?'

'Bedford van, because all the vans used to say Bedford on them ...'

Calvin looked blank.

'You're useless.' Billy saw Bob the barman and shouted over to him, 'heh Bob! You've heard of Bedford vans right?'

'Of course,' said Bob.

Billy sat back.

'What about the legend, Staralfur, that must be traceable.'

'You'd think so, yes,' said Billy, 'but I googled it, I looked it up at companies house, I spent an afternoon in the library trying to find it and do you know what I found - zip!'

Billy took a long drink from his beer as if to signal that that was an end to the matter, he had done what he could.

'So that's it,' said Calvin, 'you take Anne's money and give up after one week.'

'Heh!,' said Billy, 'I haven't taken a penny remember.'

Calvin muttered something, clearly far from convinced that Billy had any claim to the moral high ground.

'And it's not as if I couldn't use it right now,' said Billy taking another long swig at his pint.

They were distracted by the arrival of Russian Frank who sidled up to their table with a pint of lager in his hand. 'Do you mind if I join you fellows here?' he said.

'Sure Russian,' said Calvin, wheeling himself through a three point turn in order to sidle around the table.

'I am Ukrainian,' said Frank.

'We know Russian,' said Calvin.

'Billy,' said Frank, 'have you found that woman Anne's lost hamster yet?'

'He has not,' said Calvin, 'in fact he has given up looking.'

'Already?' said Frank.

'Yes already,' said Billy quickly before Calvin could speak for him, 'the trail has gone cold.'

'I remember the good investigators,' said Frank, 'once they had their claws into something they never let go till they had the truth. Those were the men that got results. The ones who did not give up.'

'I have not given up,' said Billy, 'I just have nothing to go on. Besides, what do you know of investigators, you're a book seller.'

'I knew journalists,' said Frank, 'I used to drink with them in a bar in Kiev where I used to drink. The good ones did not give up,' he said again, jabbing the table with a bony finger, 'they are like British Bulldogs, they bite into the bull and they never let go till the bull is dead. You can cut their legs off and they still bite at the bull.' He gnashed his teeth to illustrate the point causing his dentures to come loose before he sucked them back into place. 'I have seen this,' he said, 'do not give up.'

'I have not given up,' complained Billy.

'You take that woman's money and give her nothing in return.'

'I have not take her bloody money.'

'And the poor little girl,' said Calvin, 'she gets home today from Greece and Anne will have to tell her that she lost her hamster.'

'It wasn't lost,' said Billy, pouncing on the point, 'it was stolen.'

'Greece,' said Frank, and then seemed to lose himself in thought.

Billy and Calvin looked at each other.

'Frank!' said Calvin, 'You still with us?'

'I went to Athens once on business,' said Frank, 'it was hot. Hotter than an oven it was. And the girls. Ah the Greek girls were the most beautiful you ever saw but you

never got a sniff. The German girls on the other hand ...'
He tailed off, a fond leer on his face.

'Anyway,' said Calvin, 'the girl is coming around tonight to pick up her hamsters and Anne will have to explain that there is one missing.'

'That poor girl,' said Frank, 'Billy you have let her down too.'

'I feel terrible for the girl.'

'And Anne for having to tell a little girl such a thing.'

'And Anne. I feel sorry for both of them but what more can I do? Tell me that.'

Neither Calvin nor Frank spoke for a moment, and then Frank said 'you should find the hamster.'

'Yeah,' said Calvin.

'Oh for fucks sake!' said Billy, draining his pint, 'who want's another?'

'Russian hamsters,' said Frank, 'are better. Your hamsters in this country are all Syrian, they are nice,' he waved his hands to indicate that nice was about the extent of their qualities, 'but they are all the same. In Russia hamsters are interesting animal, they have characters. You,' he waved an accusatory finger past Billy and Calvin, 'have Islamic hamsters.'

'I think he's had enough,' said Calvin, 'but I'll have an IPA.'

'I will have half a pint of Stella,' said Frank, 'I do not like to get too drunk on a Sunday.'

'Why?' asked Calvin, 'it's not as if you need to open early.'

Billy peered into his wallet, his lips moving as he mentally summed up the likely cost of the round.

'It is the principle of the thing.'

'What principle?'

'I really could have used that money,' muttered Billy to himself, deciding he had enough for a round but not a lot more than that.

'The principle of work,' said Frank, 'what do you English call it ...?'

'Oh that was it,' Calvin exclaimed, 'money!'

'Ethnic work ...' pondered Frank out loud.

'What about money?' said Billy.

'The Quantity Surveyors are chucking Anne out in order to have a baby. If you need money why not rent her your spare room.'

'Oh no,' said Billy, 'oh no - no - no. I live alone. I like living alone. I have all my habits geared towards me being alone. I am not sharing.'

'Okay,' said Calvin, 'it was just a suggestion.'

'Work Ethic!' exclaimed Frank.

'What?' said Billy, looking at the old man as if he was mad, 'no, not that either. No flat-mates and sure as hell no work ethic.'

PART 2

W*e were stolen, that is the irony. We thieves were ourselves stolen, stolen from the safety of our burrows, stolen from our mother, stolen from the predators that would have fed themselves and their young on us. That is our story. Illegal from day one. Nobody truly owns us, we were fenced, pawned, and smuggled. We belong in the fields, we belong to the wheat and to the earth, we belong to the hawk and owl and the snake and the fox. Not to any man.*

CONCERNING EMILY MURRAY, WHO IS ME, ACTUALLY.

The following is an excerpt from What I did On My Holidays by Emily Murray aged 11. It was awarded an A-minus by Miss Thrope (minus because of the spelling errors which I have mostly corrected here).

My mummy is the best mummy in the whole wide world, when she is there. She works in management in a big company which is very important so she has to work late a lot. This is because she loves me, not because she does not. My daddy is a doctor so he has to work late a lot too. When mummy and daddy are both working late I am mostly looked after by either my Nanna, Mrs Buxton from next door, or sometimes an au-pair when we have one. The last one was called Mumta and was very nice but she got sent home because she went to parties and drank alco-pop and had boys over.

That is why our holiday in Greece was the best holiday ever because I got to be with Mummy and Daddy all the time and they never did any work, ever. Except for Mummy who had a long call on her mobile phone on the first day which was work, but then Daddy

took the battery out of it and made her ask his permission every time she wanted to make a call. She was angry at first but by the end she said it was a brilliant idea and Daddy should do it every holiday from now on.

My holiday would have been the best holiday ever but when I came home I discovered that one of my hamsters was missing. Mummy did not want to pick them up till the following day but I really missed Sniffles and Snuffles so Daddy took me over to Miss Thrope's house and Miss Thrope told me one of them had disappeared.

I cried. Normally I don't like to cry and try not to but I think you are allowed to cry if one of your hamsters has gone missing.

Then Miss Thrope told me that she had hired a real life private detective to find my hamster and that he said my hamster had been stolen. I stopped crying when I heard this because it was so exciting and I asked miss Thrope if I could help the private detective find my hamster and she said that if my parents did not mind she would take me to meet him the following day.

Then I went home with Sniffles (or it might have been Snuffles) but I could not go to sleep on account of my being jet lagged and my being excited and upset at the same time.

CONCERNING RUSSIAN FRANK

On Monday morning there was a letter from London delivered to Frank's bookshop. Frank recognised the way that the 'F' in Mr. F Burodovsky had been deliberately gone over so as to make it stand out. He had received letters like that before, though not for some time. Even though there were no customers in the shop he closed it up and locked the door before going into his small office to read it. It was a thick envelope containing a lot of paperwork which he did not read, he only read the covering note.

'Well,' he said to himself in Russian, 'that changes everything.'

CONCERNING THE TRICKY MATTER OF EMILY'S (WHO IS ME) EMPLOYMENT AS BILLY'S ASSISTANT.

Billy Bones had moved in to the flat on Shakespeare road four years ago with his then girlfriend, Marketta. The girlfriend had long gone but Billy was still not fully unpacked.

The main problem was the records.

Billy owned a lot of records. Not just a few hundred, but boxes upon boxes of them that piled up in the spare room, and the hallway, and the lounge, and had recently even spread to underneath the kitchen table. In pride of place in the lounge sat the record player, perched atop the totem pole-like stack of the stereo system. There was no television in the lounge; there was a small one in the kitchen but in the lounge all seats faced the record player. Unlike the television in the kitchen, or the chairs in the lounge, or much in the flat, the stereo was not dusty. It was loved and tended with almost religious reverence and regularly wiped clean.

Also gathering very little dust were the boxes. Billy Bones listened to his records, he listened to them with impulsive and seemingly random desire, and was forever moving boxes to get at the particular box that he needed. In this way the boxes spread themselves throughout the house; one being picked up and moved aside to access another would then remain wherever it was placed.

Billy kept his record collection scrupulously in exact chronological order, not in order of production, but in order of purchase. For example, if Billy was ever struck with the desire to listen to *Blood On The Tracks* by Bob Dylan he had to remember that he had purchased it at a Cambridge record fair on a hot day in June in 1993 and then find the appropriate box for the summer of '93 - May through to mid July. The remembering part Billy could do almost all of the time with uncanny precision; the finding the appropriate box part proved more troublesome and often contributed to the further dispersal of the boxes around the flat.

It was in this flat, among the boxes, at noon on Monday, lying with one arm cuddling the guitar that occupied the empty side of his bed, that Billy was woken up by the doorbell.

He swore in a way that is common among people who are woken suddenly by doorbells when they are hung over, stood up, put on a dressing gown, and answered the door.

It was Anne, and behind her, yours truly.

Before I go any further I should mention that I am a lot older now and when this story touches, as it already has a little bit and might well do so a little bit more, on adult themes, drinking and drug taking and sex and violence and that sort of thing, you should not worry, it is not an eleven year old girl narrating, at least for most of it, parts of it I wrote at the time and parts I did not. It is complicated I

know, so, for the moment, just go with the flow and don't worry.

And don't get too excited about the sex. There's very little of that. Although there is some violence in the next chapter.

So there we were, the three of us, Billy Bones in his dressing gown rubbing the sleep from his eyes; Anne, prim and sensible in a rather nice summery blouse and cardigan and denim skirt, there out of a sense of guilt after losing my hamster; and me, I forget what I was wearing, I think jeans and pink t-shirts were the thing at the time, but don't worry about that because what children wear is hardly important, instead picture me wide eyed and excited at meeting a real life private detective and, I show my childlike innocence here, not being in the least disappointed with what stood before me scratching at its stubble.

'This,' said Anne, 'is Emily.'

Billy looked confused.

'The girl who owns the hamsters,' Anne explained.

'Oh,' said Billy, 'right.'

He still did not sound entirely woken up, but I have to admit that I was still impressed. Children are often given credit for insightfulness unclouded by adult prejudices, but in this case I think I was simply falling prey to those other childhood attributes, naivety, lack of objective reasoning, and over excitement.

Billy waited to see if Anne was going to say anything else but clearly Anne thought she had provided enough information for Billy to act on and so she shut up.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' said Billy.

I think I have given you a reasonable impression of Billy's flat. I have not told you that it was reasonably big but far from massive, of a Georgian design, how it was laid out, which windows faced south and that sort of thing; those

things would be important to an estate agent selling a flat but they are rarely what strikes you when you walk into one. Perhaps if the flat had massive high ceilings like a ballroom, or one huge bay window facing the sunrise then you'd notice that, because it would be unusual, but none of the ceilings and windows in Billy's flat were unusual, if you had lived a while in the area you would have seen many other similar ceilings and windows.

What you would not have seen before would be boxes of records stacked to the rafters, so I have not wasted words describing the ceilings and windows - imagine the ceilings and windows however you want - but I have told you about the boxes of records because the boxes of records describe Billy's flat far better than a thorough forensic itemisation of every article in it ever could.

Perhaps it would be wiser to just let Anne do the talking. This is what Anne said when she first walked in to Billy's flat.

'Dear God! You live like this?'

I think that probably puts it better than any of my pontificating about boxes, but I am including my pontificating about about boxes anyway because it is my book and I can do what I like. So there.

Tea was made without answer to Anne's question. I was given a glass of milk - I would have preferred tea but Anne thought I was excited enough as it was - and, since nobody seemed to be getting to the matter in hand I thought I had better bring it up.

'Are you looking for my hamster?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Billy.

Let us remember that Billy was not used to talking to children and had only just been woken up, and forgive him his abrupt manner.

'Are you really a private detective?'

'Yes,' said Billy.

'Can I help you look for my hamster?'

Billy looked at Anne, who shrugged.

'She wouldn't stop crying,' Anne whispered, 'I don't know why she whispered because I heard her perfectly and it made me feel embarrassed.'

'I didn't cry,' I said, which was a lie because I did but I thought that if Billy knew I had cried he would not want me to help. I didn't think the lie was going to wash though because I was starting to cry again. Well not cry, but my eyes were watering a little and my lip was quivering. I really wanted to be Billy's assistant, I had planned it all out the night before and now he was not going to let me because Miss Thrope had told him that I was a cry baby.

Billy looked me right in the eye, and very seriously he said 'I believe you.'

I should not credit Billy with being good with kids or anything. Too often that is banded about as if it were proof of good character - often by the same people who credit children with being insightful - but it is no proof at all, just ask an insightful child. Billy had not talked to an eleven-year-old since he was one and had no idea how to do it. But, by chance, he stumbled right there on the right thing to say and I cheered up. Even though I did not believe him when he said he believed me, and I don't think he expected me to, I liked him saying it.

'Can I help you?' I asked again.

'Yes,' said Billy, and he reached across the table for his notebook and pen. 'First thing,' he said, 'which hamster was stolen, Sniffles or Snuffles?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'How do you tell them apart?' he asked.

'Sniffles has slightly bigger ears.'

'I think Sniffles was taken,' said Billy.

'So do I,' I said, suddenly convinced.

'Second thing,' said Billy, 'where did you get them?'

'From the pet shop on Tavistock Street,' I said, 'they were my tenth birthday present.'

'Were they brothers?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Did they come from a large family?'

'Yes, there were seven of them but Sniffles and Snuffles were the best.'

'I think,' said Billy, 'I am going to need your help.'

'You are?' I said, excitedly.

'You are?' said Anne, incredulously.

'Do you think you could cry,' said Billy, 'on demand, when I ask you to.'

'Yes,' I said, and proceeded to try and prove it, letting my lip quiver and my eyes water. All I had to do was think about Sniffles.

'Excellent,' said Billy, 'that will do nicely but don't do it yet.'

'Okay,' I said, keen to show it was all just an act and I was not really upset.

'Now there is the matter of your employment as my assistant,' said Billy, and I'll make no attempt to hide it, my heart leapt when he said the word assistant, 'unfortunately,' he continued, 'Anne drove a very hard bargain and I cannot afford to pay you.'

'Oh I'll work for free,' I said, 'after all, it is my hamster.'

'There is another problem,' he said, 'which is that I can't really be looking after an eleven year old girl on my own, it would be all wrong and I'd probably end up on some government list or hounded out of town by Daily Mail readers, so whenever you are with me Anne must be with us too, understand.'

'I understand,' I said, though there were parts of it I did not but that did not matter because I liked Miss Thrope, that was why I asked her to look after Sniffles and Snuffles in the first place.

'Anne?' said Billy, looking for agreement. A look passed between Billy and Miss Thrope that, at the time, I did not have the slightest clue what it could mean. Now it seems fairly obvious but in case you are an eleven year old girl yourself, or I have not explained everything clearly, it roughly meant that Anne had dumped me on Billy and Billy had turned the tables right back on her and she only had herself to blame.

'Okay,' said Anne.

'There is one more thing,' said Billy, 'was there anything else about Sniffles or Snuffles, anything unusual.'

'No,' I said.

'Do you have any idea where he might be? Any idea at all?'

'Sometimes when he gets free he hides under the cooker,' I said, 'have you looked there?'

CONCERNING CALVIN WATSON

In the space of one year Natalie Bennett met Brian Watson, a Yorkshire born actor who's star was then rising, married him, moved to Hollywood with him, and became pregnant by him. That year was 1980. Ten years later she left him. His star had continued to rise for a while but then stopped, he made a name for himself in Hollywood as heavy drinker with drug issues and mostly ended up working on straight to video horror flicks. Natalie, taking her son Calvin, moved in with an American real estate agent named Red in a small town north of San Diego, Red, too, turned out to be a drinker, but any life seemed stable to Natalie and nine year old Calvin after the Hollywood life.

Calvin was thus raised as an all-American kid, he never did all that well at school except on the football field, the American football field it should be clarified, where his speed, size, and strength dominated.

In 1995 the real estate agent divorced Natalie in favour of his nineteen year old secretary. Natalie won a large settlement and took her son back to England with her. Calvin continued to not do terribly well at school except on

the rugby field, where his speed, size, and strength dominated.

Calvin went to Middlesex University, ostensibly to study an HND in electrical engineering but mostly to drink, meet girls, and play rugby, where his speed, size, and strength still dominated. One night, very drunk, Calvin amused himself by sitting on the edge of the platform at Wood Green tube station, laughing as his girlfriend tried hopelessly to pull him back. A tube train took his legs.

For a while, once out of the hospital, he lived with his mother, but she was just embarking on a new relationship with a successful office furniture salesman and Calvin, always a heavy drinker and now prone to sudden fits of violent rage, rather dampened her style. He drifted from place to place for a while, never really settling, and finally ended up in Bedford where, for some reason, he started to calm down a little and, living mostly just on his disability benefit augmented by occasional temporary wiring work, put a little shape back in his life.

On Sunday, when Billy was meeting Anne and me, Calvin was on his way to Milton Keynes to try out for a wheelchair rugby team. The very fact that he was even doing this was evidence enough that he had come a long way in preceding few years, or perhaps it was just because somebody had told him that the name preferred by the players of Wheelchair Rugby is not Wheelchair Rugby, it is Murderball.

Anyway, Calvin never even got out of Bedford that day because on his way to the bus station a white van with the legend 'staralfur' stenciled on to the side drove past him.

Ever since the day he was first put in a wheelchair there was nothing Calvin liked more than to get angry with people who deserved it, at times he sought them out, trying to find the lowest, scummiest mother-fuckers in the world purely in order to fly into a violent rage. Calvin felt good afterwards, even on the occasions when his targets got the

better of him, a blissful peace descended over him for days knowing he had fought some guy who deserved fighting.

So it was a happy Calvin who pushed his wheelchair out into the road and after the van, a delirious and delicious rage descending upon him, a vicious teeth clenched grin spreading across his face as he raced the wheelchair forwards with an animal howl.

Calvin was hot stuff on the wheelchair, he could clock twenty miles an hour on the flat easy and, in the stop start urban traffic of Bedford town centre, he quickly caught up with the van. He pushed himself, skidding and frighteningly fast, out into the wrong lane in order to overtake the van and bang furiously on the side.

What the driver thought when he saw Calvin in his wing mirror can only be guessed at, a huge, grinning, screaming, legless man in a wheelchair careening, barely in control, faster than the van and punching the side of it with one fist so hard that he left a visible dent. The driver slowed down, pulled over, and got out, which was really a terrible mistake on his part.

I gather he had time to say something along the lines of 'what?' before Calvin, who had timed this run perfectly, charged into him at full speed and knocked him flat on the road. Calvin did not stop, visions of tearful little girls deprived of their beloved pets had filled his vision during the chase, working him up into a such an apoplectic state of rage that when the wheelchair skidded out from under him after he hit the man all he could recall was seeing red. Literally, nothing but a blank featureless wall of red.

Calvin held the poor man with one hand and hit him repeatedly with the other as if he were trying to pound him flat into the tarmac until blood was streaming down the man's face and he was crying for Calvin to just stop.

All this happened very quickly, so quickly that the passenger in the van had only just descended from the

vehicle and ran round to help his friend. He grabbed Calvin by the arms and dragged him away.

Calvin put it like this: suddenly, he said, the incoherence of the rage lifted and he realised he was in a fight and had better get his act together. He wrenched one arm from the other man's grasp and used it to pull the man's ankles out from beneath him. Once the guy was on the floor, Calvin said, they were on equal terms, unequal terms in fact because the guy was not as big as him. Calvin started punching, but this time he was smart, he went straight for the solar plexus, winding the man, and then swung himself around and grabbed the man in a head lock from behind and broke the man's nose with his elbow.

At this point, apparently, Calvin screamed 'where's the fucking hamster dickhead!'

He kept screaming that, five or six times, 'where's the fucking hamster dickhead! where's the fucking hamster dickhead!' each time punching the man in the face.

In a few minutes Calvin had determined both who the men were, who they worked for, and what they had done with my hamster. You may take issue with his methods but you cannot fault his results.

Meanwhile, Billy, Miss Thrope, and I were about to discover something of even greater importance.

CONCERNING THE LINEAGE OF SNIFFLES AND SNUFFLES

The logic goes something like this, bear with me:

Why go to all the fuss and trouble of stealing a hamster when hamsters are cheap and anyone can buy one? Obviously there must be something very special about that hamster.

Being as you are stealing a very special hamster, and stealing two hamsters is not much harder than stealing one, why only take one hamster and, in leaving its nearly identical brother, run the risk of having taken the wrong one? Obviously, either hamster would have done.

Whatever was special about Sniffles was special about Snuffles, and vice versa.

So, what property do two apparently unremarkable brother hamsters share? they were similar to look at but it was clear there was nothing special about the way they looked, and they were of a similar temperament, but there was nothing special about their temperament either. Whatever property it was that made them special, it was

something invisible to the naked eye, something not apparent to even their owner (me!).

Simple, really, when you think about it. They were brothers, it was their genetics. Their DNA.

So I'll spare you the boring details and rush this bit because I'm sure you're anxious to know what Calvin found out, but you'll have to wait because what we found out was even more important, although we did not think it at the time.

We concocted a barely believable story about me losing Sniffles and Snuffles and wanting one of their other siblings as a replacement and then went down to the pet shop on Tavistock street with me all primed to burst into tears at a secret signal from Billy (he would cough into his handkerchief three times - I thought of that).

However when we got there the pet store owner was very friendly and asked me about Sniffles and Snuffles and Billy decided on another tactic and immediately started talking and announced that I was making a hamster family tree for school and wanted to know where they came from.

The pet store man was very helpful and said he knew all the people who had taken Sniffles' and Snuffles' other brothers and sisters and would ask them for details and names and things when they came in to buy bedding and hamster food.

Then Billy asked him about their parents, and this is what he said:

'Oh yes,' he said, 'funny story about that. The father was Pickles. He was a lovely animal, wonderful temperament, but he'd torn one of his ears in a freak hamster-wheel related accident when he was young and it looked rather horrific so nobody would buy him, which was a shame because, like I say, he was a lovely animal. Eventually I just took him for my own. He died last year. Lovely animal.'

'That's interesting,' said Billy, with a look that clearly indicated he did not think so at all, 'what about the mother?'

'Stranger still actually,' said the pet store man, 'her name was Fenchurch. Last year a gentleman wanders into my shop and says he is trying to breed his female hamster and asks if he can buy a male, so I sell him Pickles.'

'You just said nobody would buy him?' said Billy.

'Nobody except this one man, and he gave him back not long after. You see over the next few weeks he kept coming back in with his female, Fenchurch, and asking me to look at her and see if she is all right. She looks fine to me every time but he keeps coming back, very concerned, so eventually I tell him to just go see a vet but he doesn't want to because that would cost money and he wants the free advice from me. This goes on and then eventually he turns up with Pickles and this litter of baby hamsters and says that he doesn't want them and asks me to take them. Well I can always sell babies so I'll have them, and Pickles is like an old friend to me so I take him though I don't figure I'll be able to sell him. And that was it, I never saw him again.'

Billy made notes in his notebook. 'Fenchurch and Pickles,' he said, confirming the names.

The pet store owner nodded.

'Can you describe the man?'

'Not really,' said the pet store man, 'ask me to describe a budgie or a guinea pig and I'm fine, but people ...' he made a funny noise and shook his head and raised his hands to indicate that he was useless at describing people. 'Middle Eastern gentleman I think,' he said, 'long brown coat.'

'Nothing else?' asked Billy, 'age, height, facial hair.'

'Haven't got a clue,' said the pet store man, 'Fenchurch was your basic Syrian, brown, white patch behind the head, very similar to the two boys you took,' he indicated to me.

'Four males in the litter and three females. Like I say, I'll ask for details when people come in.'

At that point Billy's phone rang. It was Calvin, apparently urgently requesting we go to the pub.

CONCERNING THE GOINGS ON IN A SECRET UNDERGROUND BUNKER NEAR SHEFFORD

In a secret underground bunker near Shefford a red haired scientist in a white coat was sticking a syringe into an unhappy hamster in order to extract a small blood sample. That is not so important just now, what is important is what was happening two floors below in a small office.

In a small office two floors below, an MI5 deputy field commander of little importance was debriefing two agents who might, but for the broken noses and black eyes, have been described as 'handsome.'

What passed between them was not recorded, and is top secret anyway, but I think we can make a fair guess at it. This is my guess:

We start a little way in, the deputy field commander of little importance has just read the report of an incident concerning the two agents and he says something very like:

'Let me get this straight, the pair of you were beaten up by a man with no legs?'

'He was a big guy,' says one of the agents.

'And fast,' adds the other, 'he took us by surprise.'

At this point the deputy field commander of little importance refers back to the printed report and says: 'I see that he took ... ' insert the name of the first agent here ... 'by surprise, but that you ...' insert the name of the second agent here ... 'joined the fray a moment later, once the fight had already begun.'

'I was over confident,' said the second agent, 'on account of him having no legs.'

'Yet, despite his lack of legs, he had already overpowered your colleague.'

'He took me by surprise,' said the first agent, 'I was hit by him at great speed and was stunned by the ferocity of the attack.'

'So you say here,' said the deputy field commander of little importance, indicating back to the report and then reading it verbatim, 'the assailant then proceeded to question us, shouting over and over again the question "where is the fucking hamster, dickhead."' "

'That is what he said,' said the second agent, 'he was holding me in a headlock at the time and continuing to punch me.'

'And you,' the deputy field commander of little importance indicated the first agent, 'did not rush to your partners aid because,' he started reading again, 'you were in great pain on account of your nose being broken.'

'That is true sir,' said the first agent, 'my nose was and continues to be broken, also my ribs and legs were bruised after the collision with the wheelchair.'

'Instead,' said the deputy field commander of little importance, 'you "attempted to placate him." Tell me, exactly how did you attempt to placate him?'

'We attempted to placate him verbally, sir,' said the second agent.

'Indeed,' said the deputy field commander of little importance, 'your exact words were, and this has been corroborated by independent witnesses at the scene, your exact words were "please stop hitting me, please stop hitting me."'

'I do not remember my precise words sir,' said the second agent, 'on account of being in a fist fight at the time. I said what I thought would be the best thing to say to bring the situation under control.'

'To bring the situation under control?'

'Yes sir.'

'And did you bring the situation under control?'

'Not at that point sir, no.'

'No,' continued the deputy field commander of little importance, 'in fact it says here that, and this is the part I particularly do not like, that - in front of several witnesses composed of members of the general public - you admitted to being MI5 agents and to stealing a hamster. Tell me, would you consider this operationally sensitive information?'

'I considered it to be the minimum information I could give out in order to bring the situation under control sir.'

'Would you consider this operationally sensitive information?'

'Yes sir, it could be considered operationally sensitive information.'

The deputy field commander of little importance then slams the paper report down onto a table and shouts 'you fucking imbeciles!' so loudly that he was heard two floors above by the red haired scientist in a white coat who was at that moment carefully dripping drops of hamster blood into the separate phials of a centrifuge.

CONCERNING WHAT CALVIN TOLD BILLY IN THE PUB

I wasn't allowed to go on account of my only being eleven and so Miss Thrope took me home instead even though the pub had a garden and I could have sat there and it would have been fine. A fact I am still bitter about, so I have made up the preceding chapter instead and refuse to go any further.

They probably just talked about medieval folk music anyway and it was boring.

CONCERNING BILLY BONES' BANK STATEMENT

Billy Bones' bank statement lay unopened on the kitchen table in the same spot where it had lain unopened for a week.

Every morning, over his corn flakes and coffee, Billy looked at the bank statement and told himself he ought to open it, but Billy was not a morning person, in fact Billy was so little a morning person that he hardly ever saw more than a couple of hours of one from the conventional end. It was not that Billy was lazy - he was, but it was not that - Billy was just very much not a morning person, in fact you could go so far as to say that Billy was barely a person in the morning. Anyone who had seen Billy up before nine would tell you that it was generally better all round if, in future, allowances could be made to allow him to sleep later in the future; anyone who had seen Billy up before eight, and they were very few indeed, would have been hard put to recognise the shambling incoherent mess of human being as him, most assumed it was a drunk that had wondered in off the street; the very select few people who had seen Billy up before seven would have been hard put to recognise him as human, one genuinely thought he had

seen some sort of strategically shaven performing bear on its way to the circus.

Thus Billy did not open his bank statement over breakfast because he rarely felt up to contemplating it. The things, in Billy's experience, never delivered good news. Instead he resolved to tackle it later in the day when he was feeling a bit stronger of nerve and sinew, which was a fine sentiment but he rarely went into the kitchen during the rest of the day and never really took the time to sit idly at the kitchen table eating corn flakes and drinking coffee and so, sadly, forgot entirely about the unopened statement until the following morning when, again, he did not feel up to it.

A week, however, was a long time. Before long the value of the information contained therein would diminish beyond all practical use and Billy might find himself destitute before he even knew he was approaching the bread line. There was every possibility, if he did not tackle it, that he could find his card refused and end up stuck with nothing to eat.

Billy reached for the statement and placed it in a more prominent position, the better to remember it later.

Mentally he topped up what money he could count on in the near future. There was not much, he had helped out a friend cleaning windows the other week but that had mostly been blown in the pub that night. The private detective thing was not proving as lucrative as it had once promised, in the last few months he had only had three jobs.

The first had been a long lost uncle who turned out not to be so much long lost as exactly where he was left but no longer on speaking terms to the niece due to some family feud that neither could remember the cause of but both seemed keen to resume all the same. That had paid but had been so ridiculously easy he had not managed to fleece the bill to anything like the extent he preferred. The second had been a long lost grandson who had turned out to not be so much long lost as dead from a heroin overdose. Billy did not think he had it in him to the send yet another reminder

to the old lady he had had to give that news to; she always assured him she would pay but he had noticed the bare shelves and the holes in her stockings and did not think he could count on it. The third was the hamster thing, and despite recent advances the prospect of actually getting any money out of it in the near future looked slim.

There was not much else, the band had not played in months and their violinist had moved to Milton Keynes. There was probably work to be had if he looked for it but that was a last resort, and he could sign on but that involved form filling and hassle and the demand that he go for interviews, all of which sent a cold shiver down his spine.

Things were potentially dire, the rent and several bills were due soon, and the only information that could tell him just how dire it might be was lurking in the unopened envelope peering out at him through the little window, holding its secrets safely out of sight.

He squared himself to it on the chair, topped up his coffee mug, and opened the envelope.

It was not good news.

CONCERNING CURTAINS

If there was one thing Anne Thrope had in common with Billy Bones it was a reluctance to get out of bed in the morning. This is not a big thing, everybody has a reluctance to get out of bed in the morning, but with both Anne and Billy the tendency was particularly strong, though in different ways.

With Billy it manifested itself in him just not getting out of bed, consequently he had never really held down a job and the prospect of any commitment that might require his presence in the morning horrified him. There were days when he never got out of bed at all.

With Anne it was different, Anne held down a job, had held down several and always been punctual every single morning. What was special about Anne were the days when she did not have to get out of bed in the morning. She did not, and not just did not but luxuriated in the not doing so. She lounged about for hours in a half waking state, and then later in a fully wide awake state, but still not so much as thinking of getting up. She read books, she listened to the radio, she watched television, she did marking and lesson plans, she mooched downstairs in her dressing gown and slippers on missions in search of tea and meals which she then smuggled back upstairs and consumed in bed.

Anne loved being in bed, she loved to lay there and listen to the world going on and knowing she was safely tucked away from it, she loved the sound of people moving about the house and cars on the street outside. She wallowed in it, she reveled in it, she luxuriated in an orgasmic glow of joyful calm beneath the duvet. Billy may have spent more time in his bed, but Anne got a lot more out of her time in hers.

Thus, at around seven thirty a.m. on Monday, Anne was just settling down to a really good morning in bed. The best mornings were the weekdays during school holidays, she woke early anyway because her body clock worked that way, and she would have probably set the alarm if it did not, and then she got to curl herself up beneath the duvet, head hooked snug into the pillow, and listen to the Quantity Surveyors move around the house, shower, breakfast, and leave for work. After that a wonderful empty silence would descend for a while, and she would drift off a little, perhaps half falling asleep again, until after a while she would hear voices and cars from the street, the sun would creep higher and the quality of the light penetrating the curtains would change, then she would sneak downstairs for a cup of tea and a bowl of muesli, put on the radio, and open a book, but still go back to bed. That was a perfect morning for Anne.

It was curtains, coincidentally, that were the partial cause of disrupting Anne's perfect morning on Tuesday.

At seven thirty three a.m. the door to her bedroom opened and the Quantity Surveyors walked in.

'Oh Anne,' said Susan, 'you're not up yet!'

The facts that Anne was never up till long after they left for work, and that Susan started saying the line before she had walked in the room, and that it just sounded rehearsed and false, convinced Anne that they knew

perfectly well she was not up and had decided to barge into her room anyway.

'Sorry,' said David.

'We just need to measure the curtains.'

'We're going to look at some during our lunch break.'

'It's the only chance we'll get this week.'

'Do you mind?'

Of course Anne minded, what sort of saintly all accommodating selfless angel would she have to have been not to mind! The pope would have minded! Mother Theresa would have minded and told them to stuff off!

'No,' said Anne, muffled in the pillow.

'These ones are nice,' said Susan, evidently feeling the need to make conversation while David did his thing with the tape measure, 'but perhaps not really suitable for a baby's room.'

'Four foot three inches,' said David.

'Of course we don't know if it's a boy or a girl yet but we will soon and then we'll be able to make a decision on exactly what we want.'

'Five foot six inches,' said David.

'I know some couples don't like to know till the birth but we can't see the point, I mean, how do they plan anything?'

'Shut up!' screamed Anne at the top of her voice, near bursting her lungs and dislocating her jaw with the effort, 'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' Somehow she managed to do this without making a single sound, not so much as a peep.

'Oh,' said David, 'do you think we'll need it in metric.' He started unreeling the tape measure again.

'No dear,' said Susan, 'we'd better leave Anne in peace. We can always do the conversion if we have to.'

'Can you remember how much you need to multiply?'

'It'll be on the internet,' said Susan, 'bye Anne, have a nice day.'

Anne tried to relax back into the pillow, to drift off a little, to enjoy listening to the world, but the morning was shot, it was ruined and there was no getting it back. She might as well get up.

And then she realised that every morning was shot, the sanctity of the room had been broken and she would never truly enjoy another lay-in in that bed.

CONCERNING THE BLUE HAIRED GIRL

The Three Cups was run by Bob the landlord and his wife Mary and had been for the last twelve years. It was a nice sort of a pub, handy and central but far enough removed from the bustle of the town centre to avoid the Friday and Saturday night binge drinking youths. If you were coming from the high street you had to walk past three or four perfectly good pubs to get to The Three Cups, if you were coming from the other direction it was probably the second pub on your way in. There was a garden, which was mostly lawn and a few shrubs but kept nice, there was a lounge bar with a piano in it, and a public bar with a darts board in it, they did some simple food during the day and could always whip up a toastie if the need pressed.

Bob the landlord was a retired policeman, he had a big bushy brown beard that years of slow decline were just starting to turn grey. He and his wife ran the pub with the help of the usual sort of people who work as bar staff, students needing a bit of money, both students at Bedford during term time and students from Bedford during the holidays, a lot of Australians, Kiwis, and South Africans of

course, the staple workhorses of pubs across the country for many years, and more recently young Polish and Hungarian people, mostly also students, but sometimes just East Europeans who needed a job.

On Tuesday night a new girl started. Her name was Natalia, and there were two things especially memorable about her, one, that she had shocking bright blue spiky hair, and two, that she was astonishingly attractive.

It was the second, rather than the first, which had caught the attention of Billy. Billy was largely immune to noticing details like clothes, or height, or hair. If you had asked him seconds after visiting the bar what colour the girl's hair was he would have probably turned around to look.

As it was, if you were waiting for Billy to come back from the bar, as Calvin was, you would have a long wait ahead of you because Billy was trying assiduously to engage Natalia in conversation. He had ascertained her name, and her nationality, and that she was a student in the country, and he was on the verge of being told that she had a boyfriend back home in Poland when another customer coughed loudly and she rushed off to serve him instead.

'Took your time,' said Calvin, once his beer finally arrived.

'There's a new girl in,' said Billy, with a sort sideways half wink that was probably supposed to convey some rakish insinuation about the new girl.

'I saw.'

'She's gorgeous.'

'Is she? You were standing in front of her most of the time.'

'Well she is gorgeous, really really gorgeous.'

'I believe you.'

'Fantastic breasts.'

'Yeah. Don't ruin it, I'll see for myself when the time comes.'

'Oh you'll miss the best of them mate, you really have to look down on them from above.'

'You know that is one of the things I do miss,' mused Calvin, 'but then if they're a good size they can also look quite striking from below.'

'Is that so?'

'Mmm.'

'I think you need to look down on these, they're sort of hanging loose in a V-neck top and it's like staring into a ravine. It's hypnotic. A man could lose himself looking at that.'

'God I remember that.'

'Maybe you can get her to lean over.'

'You think?'

'Yes, see if you can get her to lean over, that would be a fantastic view.'

Both men drank their beer and imagined the sights to come.

'Very nice arse as well I think,' said Billy.

'You think?'

'I didn't get that good a look.'

'Asses are more my level these days, I see a lot of asses, I am a connoisseur of asses.'

'I think you'll like this one.'

'I'm mostly looking forward to the rack, I miss that.'

Billy drank his beer and thought for a moment. 'What do they look like from below?' he asked.

'The really good ones,' said Calvin, 'block out the sun.'

Both men considered this for a while, and then Calvin asked Billy how the money situation was.

'Don't ask,' said Billy.

'Anne said she might pop down tonight.'

'Did she?'

She was pissed off with the Quantity Surveyors for some reason.

'And you still think I should ask if she wants to flat share?'

'You need the money.'

'You've seen my flat right?'

'No worse than mine.'

'And you're aware that Anne has seen it?'

'That might be a problem yes, but one you'd have had to face eventually if she was to move in, so in a way it's good that it's already over with. In fact the hard part is done, if you'd have asked her by now you'd be halfway to having half of your rent paid.'

'The rent may be a problem this month.'

'Sooner you ask sooner it might be sorted.'

'Of course she'll probably say no.'

'Then the sooner you can start working on another plan.'

'Actually I was thinking of getting the band together again.'

'I meant a plan with an outside chance of working.'

'Heh!' Billy looked genuinely hurt.

'Besides,' continued Calvin, 'didn't your violin player move to Milton Keynes.'

'Violin players are two a penny,' said Billy, but Calvin was not listening because Russian Frank had just walked in the door and then stopped standing in the doorway. He was wearing a dark baggy suit and a wide brimmed hat and he said, loudly, in the way of announcement:

'Hello to all my friends.'

'Hello Frank,' said Calvin. A few other people said likewise, Bob the landlord waved.

'I have announcement to make,' he said, 'I am retired.'

'You sold the shop?' asked Billy.

'No, I still have book shop, I am not retired from that, I am retired from my other job.'

'You have another job? I didn't know you had another job.'

'None of you knew,' said Frank, 'I have another announcement.'

'I think he may have been drinking already,' said Calvin. Billy nodded.

'I am not Ukrainian,' said Frank, 'I am Russian. And since 1977 I have been KGB sleeper agent in England but now I am retired.'

The pub went silent.

'I think he's definitely been drinking already,' whispered Calvin.

'I want to apologise to you all for lying to you. I hope you are still my friends.' Frank took off his hat and hung his head and for a moment he stood like that, holding his hat in front of him in both hands, penitent, silhouetted in the doorway, waiting till it became obvious to everybody in the pub he was not drunk, or at least not just drunk, but was in fact deadly serious.

'Frank,' shouted Bob the landlord from across the bar, 'you're forgiven. Come in and have a drink.'

Frank lifted his head and put his hat back on it and looked up, he noticed Billy and Calvin in the corner and called to them, 'Billy, Calvin, you are still my friends, yes?'

'Of course,' said Billy.

'Then let me buy you a drink.'

'There's no need,' said Calvin but he was cut short by Billy who asked for another two pints of IPA. Frank bought them and sat down.

'Are you really KGB Frank?'

'For over forty years of my life, and thirty years as deep cover sleeper agent in this country. It is very good of you,' he said, 'to still share an English beer with me now you know this. I am touched deeply in places.'

'It doesn't mean anything,' said Billy, 'we like you. And you're still you right?'

'Yes I am me but all this time I was not the me you thought I was.'

'Well ... it was your job, and now you are retired you come in here and tell us the truth right off the bat, which proves that you are a decent bloke.'

'I do not know anything about bats, but I am surprised you are not upset. I tried to subvert your democratically erected government.'

'And I'm sure,' said Calvin, 'that the United Kingdom and the United States both have tried to subvert your ... less democratically erected ... elected government.'

'I kept files on all of you,' continued Frank, 'you, Billy, I know that your mother was once a member of the communist party.'

'I think she still is,' said Billy.

'And that sometimes,' Frank lowered his voice, 'she dresses as man and makes love to other women.'

'That's not a secret,' said Billy.

'And you, Calvin, I know you became leg-less from drinking too much in tube, and that the woman who lives in flat above you lusts after you because of your amputations and sometimes writes you erotic poetry in Japanese.'

'I told you that,' said Calvin, 'in here. We were talking about it only a couple of months ago.'

'Oh no!' said Frank. His face fell.

'What is it?'

'Oh no.'

'What? What's wrong?'

'Always I was sleeper agent, through Brezhnev, through Gorbachov, through Yeltsin and Putin, through cold war and fall of Berlin Wall. Always in deep cover, minimum contact. Never activated. Never once activated for any job no matter how small. And now I find out why. I was bad spy.' He buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

Billy and Calvin looked at each other and Billy put his hands on the old Russians back.

'That can't be it,' said Billy, 'you did what was required of you and you stayed secret. Very secret. We all thought you were Ukrainian.'

'No you did not,' said Frank, 'you called me Russian Frank.'

'We did do that, yes,' said Billy, 'but that's because we're stupid and don't know the difference between Ukraine and Russia.'

'Ukraine is smaller than Russia and to the South West, it became part of Soviet Republic in twenties and independent in nineteen eighty nine. Is nice place, I liked it, I was happy to pretend to be from there.'

'I think,' said Calvin, 'that the only reason you did not find out anything interesting about Billy or me is that there is nothing to find out.'

'No?' said Frank.

'Nothing,' said Calvin, 'I'm afraid I'm quite boring.'

'Me too,' said Billy.

'You did quite well,' said Calvin, to find out what you did.

'I did?' said Frank.

'You pretty much got the lot,' said Billy, 'I don't think there's anything worse I could tell you.'

Frank picked himself up and wiped his fingers across his eyes. 'So you think I am good spy?' he asked.

'You must have been good,' said Billy, 'because I had absolutely no idea you were one.'

'And you?' he asked Calvin.

'Not so much as the faintest notion,' said Calvin, 'and I'm a very suspicious person.'

'I tell you who I do know something about,' said Frank, and he turned to look towards the bar and spoke in a whisper. 'Bob the landlord is not just ex-policeman but ex-Special Branch officer. Still has many contacts in security services.'

'Really,' cooed Billy and Calvin, looking over at Bob who was at that time trying to pull a pint while fishing about in his beard apparently in the manner of someone who is sure he has lost something in there but can not find it no matter how hard he looks.

'And did you see new barmaid with blue hair?' said Frank excitedly, 'she is gorgeous.'

'She has blue hair?' said Billy.

CONCERNING THE FUTURE

Fiercely independent, congenitally solitary, fond of a drink, Anne had in fact never walked into a pub by herself and, even though she knew perfectly well that Calvin was already there and expecting her, she was nervous.

Much as she had suspected, the despicable invasion of her morning solitude by the Quantity Surveyors had been the precursor to a rotten day. When she had gone to make a cup of tea she had noticed a small hair stuck to the moist lip of the kettle and, without thinking, had gone to remove it. It had not been a bad burn, in fact she could not even remember which finger it was now, but as she had thrashed her arm about in pain she had knocked one of the Quantity Surveyors' good wineglasses on the floor, one of a set of four which they would definitely miss. Later she had put a packet of rice sideways in the cupboard without realising it was open, stubbed her toe on her shoe, pricked her thumb on a cactus, spent two minutes searching for the remote control while holding it in her hand, and closed her book without putting the bookmark back in. A chance encounter with Calvin as she was on her way out to ascertain the possibility of buying a exact matching wineglass (no dice)

had yielded an invitation to the pub that evening. Somewhat out of character, she had accepted.

The Quantity Surveyors were giving up booze for the pregnancy, both of them, so there was now none allowed in the house in case they should be tempted. Anne had secreted a bottle of Bailey's in her bedside cabinet and rescued two bottles of wine from the small pile to be given away as birthday presents and placed them under her bed in case of emergencies. At least it would be a while before they noticed their wineglass was gone.

She noticed Billy and Calvin the moment she walked in the pub, they were sitting in the corner with the man named Russian Frank and laughing about something. They were obviously all a little bit drunk. Bob the landlord said hello as she walked past the bar, he even remembered her name.

'Anne,' said Calvin, 'you came. Was it that bad?'

'They haven't discovered the wine glass yet, but it was pretty bad anyway. Susan bought books on natural childbirth and kept showing me photos all the way through dinner.'

'Oh dear.'

'We were having spaghetti Bolognese.'

'Oh dear! Well you're better off here. Can I get you a drink?'

'No,' said Anne, 'I'll get them. What does everybody want?'

She went to the bar with an order for two IPAs, a pint of lager, and whatever she wanted, which was also a pint of lager. She was served by an incredibly striking girl with bright blue hair and a Polish accent. She was gorgeous, thought Anne, not accustomed to thinking that about anybody, much less members of the same sex, but then, she mused, this girl would be worth turning gay for.

'Hi Anne,' said Bob, wondering round from the other bar, 'did you hear about Russian Frank yet?'

'No,' said Anne.

'Turns out he's Russian.'

Russian Frank and Billy moved apart to give her a place to sit when she got back.

'Frank,' she said, 'Bob says you are actually Russian.'

'It is true,' said Frank, 'all this time I am actually Russian KGB sleeper agent, but now I am retired, I get retirement papers in mail last week.'

Calvin nodded from across the table. 'It's true,' he said, 'or at least we think it is.'

'Anne,' said Frank, turning to her seriously, 'did you see girl at bar with blue hair.'

'Oh yes,' said Anne.

'Tell Calvin how gorgeous she is.'

'I believe you,' said Calvin.

'She's a good looking girl,' said Anne.

'She is gorgeous,' said Frank, and then whispering, 'and she has a fantastic bosom.'

Anne nodded, it was undeniably a fantastic bosom.

'And,' continued Frank, 'she is from my homeland of Mother Russian.'

'No she's not,' said Billy, 'she told me she was from Poland.'

'Yes,' said Frank, pointing a stubby finger at Billy, 'but over here, nobody knows the difference.' He burst out laughing.

Calvin smiled apologetically. 'He's had a trying day,' he said.

'With the spy thing?' said Anne.

'Billy was just saying how he was going to put his band back together.'

'Really,' said Anne, turning to Billy, 'your ... what was it? Medieval folk.'

'It was,' said Billy, 'but that never really took off and I think it would have to change anyway because our violin player has moved to Milton Keynes. I haven't talked to the other band members yet but now I'm thinking that we might go in a whole new direction. I'm thinking Medieval Folk Heavy Metal.'

'Really?' said Anne, trying despite her strongest instincts not to be dismissive.

'It's different, isn't it?'

'It is that. What's the band called?'

'Well we were called The Singing Oysters, but that's not really a very heavy metal name and it's ... well ...'

'Crap,' said Calvin.

'Crap,' said Billy, 'that's the word.'

'It is a bit,' said Anne.

'What about The Iron Oysters?'

'Also crap,' said Anne.

'Billy Bones and the Iron Oysters?'

'Still crap,' said Calvin.

'I think you need to get away from the oyster thing.'

'You think?' said Billy, 'I liked it, sort of continuity between different line ups, a theme.'

There is, I should interject and mention at this point, a very good reason why Billy is obsessed with oysters, but it isn't relevant at this point so I won't go into it now.

'How about ...' said Frank, slurring his words now, 'the KGB Assassin Agents?'

'Hmmm,' said Billy.

'How about The Sleeper Agents?' said Anne.

'Ooh,' said Billy, scratching his chin.

'How about Billy "Private Eye" Bones And The Lost Hamsters?' said Calvin. Billy shot him an unamused look but Anne laughed.

'No,' said Billy, 'but I quite like The Sleeper Agents though.'

'You cannot call band this,' said Frank, 'it is insult.'

'No it isn't,' said Anne.

'Is it not?' said Frank, 'okay. Call band that. Is good name. I am going to room with little boys in.'

Billy and Calvin both looked at her, very impressed.

'How did you do that?' said Billy.

'Do what?'

'Shut him up like that.'

'Drunks are like children,' said Anne, 'it's all in the voice you use.'

'Wow,' said Billy.

'Oh I know what I was going to say,' said Calvin, banging his hands down on the table. 'Anne, Billy is looking for someone to take the spare room in his flat. Billy, Anne is looking for somewhere to live.'

Anne looked from Billy to Calvin to Billy, not quite sure how to react.

'I'll get another round in,' said Calvin, 'you kids talk it over between yourselves.' He drained his pint and wheeled himself off to the bar.

Anne looked at Billy, not quite sure what she thought of the idea. Billy looked at Anne, apologetically mostly.

'I'm aware you've seen the flat,' said Billy, 'so if you want to say no I'd understand.'

'It's a sty,' said Anne.

'But it's cheap,' he said, 'and you could move in immediately. Or ... once I've cleared a space.'

'How cheap?'

'Two fifty a month.'

'You'd have to keep it a lot cleaner.'

'I can do that.'

'And I have a job, I need sleep. I can't be doing with any late night parties, or even the telly on loud after eleven.'

'I'm way past late night parties, and I don't watch telly.'

'What do you do?'

'Listen to records mostly, and I can do that with the headphones on.'

'I'd need the records in some sort of order, I can't be doing with boxes everywhere.'

'I'll keep them strictly in my bedroom, the lounge and maybe the garage. Do you have a car?'

'No.'

'Good.'

'And I'd need space for the cactuses.'

'You can have the shelves by the kitchen and lounge windows.'

Anne did a small calculation in her head. 'I'd need more,' she said, 'I have a lot of cactuses. A couple of good tables worth.'

'How many?' said Billy, but he was interrupted by Calvin coming back bearing drinks and in a state of great excitement.

'The barmaid,' he hissed urgently.

'Yes, we know,' said Billy, 'she's gorgeous.'

'No,' said Calvin, 'well yes but not that. I recognise her.'

'From where?'

'It was when she was leaning over to hand me down the tray.'

'You got her to lean down then?' said Billy.

'Yes, and it was then that I recognised her.'

'From where?' asked Anne.

Calvin's voice dropped even further. 'From the internet,' he said.

'The what?'

'The internet.'

'I heard you,' said Billy, 'I just don't understand.'

'From the internet,' said Calvin again, 'from web sites. Oh for Christ's sake. From porn!'

CONCERNING FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE LINEAGE OF SNIFFLES AND SNUFFLES

The pet store man rang me on Wednesday and I copied down everything he said. This was it:

Pickles and Fenchurch had a litter of seven, four male and three female. They were Sniffles and Snuffles who both came to me. Hercules, who went to a boy from Kempston. A small male, the runt of litter, who was sold to an old couple as a present for their grandson in Ipswich who apparently named him The Eviscorator. Mrs Twinkle went to Sarah Phillips, a girl from my school who I knew a little but did not like a lot. Herman Goering, a mis-identified female, went to a boy from out near Cranfield. And Denise Van Outen went to a professional breeder from Dead Man's Cross.

Pickles was the son of Fluffy and Squeak who were mistakenly allowed together by a boy from Old Warden. Fluffy was the daughter of Honeydew and Wendy, which the pet store man had bred himself. Wendy's mother was named Martha but that was all he knew. Honeydew was

born of Melanie who belonged to the same breeder from Dead Man's Cross.

That was all. He could tell us nothing of Fenchurch and the number he had for the gentleman who had owned her rang through to a Chinese take away.

As soon as I got off the phone with the pet store man I rang Billy and told him everything. He said the other names in the litter were useful and he'd visit their owners but that the lineage of Pickles was not what he wanted. What he wanted was to know where Fenchurch came from.

There was one other thing the man from the pet store said that Billy was very interested in. He said that in his ringing around various other pet store owners, breeders, and general hamster enthusiasts, many of them mentioned stolen hamsters. It seemed there was something of an epidemic going on.

1. And lo! it shall be told from litter to litter, from mother to mother, from generation to generation, the one truth that we are all descended from the same mother whose name was Twinkie and who was the last to dwell in the fields and eat of the crops.

2. Twinkie spoke unto her litter of eleven when they were still blind and hairless and said you shall grow and dwell in the fields and eat of the crops. You shall make litters of your own and you shall be food to the fox and the snake and the owl and the hawk and your litters shall be food to the fox and the snake and the owl and the hawk but they shall dwell in the fields and eat of the crops and they shall make also make litters and thus we shall abide.

3. Then came a human man Israel Aharoni who

by night dug Twinkie and her litter of eleven from their hole in the fields and took them far away to a room where there was no light and no crops and no fields and they were kept in a cage.

4. And Twinkie spoke unto her litter and said if you cannot dwell in the field and eat of the crops and if you are not to be food to the fox and the snake and the owl and the hawk then it is better that you are dead. And one by one she placed her teeth about their necks and killed them. But after she killed only one the human man took her from her litter and her task was not done. And thus are we descended.

5. And so we remember Twinkie who would have sacrificed her own litter if they could not dwell in the fields and eat of the crops. And we remember the human

male who saved her litter from Twinkie's mercy. And by such judgements do we come about. For it was not kindness in the human man to save Twinkie's litter. And it was not cruelty in Twinkie to kill her litter. Yet actions lead to unforeseen results, and all ends cannot be seen, and what we do in life affects our litters, and our litters' litters, and our litters' litters' litters. Such has it always been. Such it always will be.

CONCERNING CACTI

Anne had a lot of cactuses. Not as many cactuses as Billy had records, but then cactuses do not stack as easily as records, are harder to handle, and require more care. Nevertheless Anne had a lot. Some were in her bedroom where they must have occupied half of all the flat surfaces that were not the floor. There were others she kept around the house, but not so many that they annoyed the Quantity Surveyors who just could not see the attraction in what they called an ugly, vicious plant. In fact the Quantity Surveyors were not big enthusiasts for any plant; they liked the idea of them, and occasionally bought the odd cheese plant or Japanese Peace Lily or something else equally trendy, but they invariably either watered them too little or too much, and the plants almost never survived more than three months.

Anne, on the other hand, nursed and tended her cacti with carefully measured love and expertise. She watched the Quantity Surveyors destroy their, invariably expensive, plants with an idle disinterest. Anne could guess what they were doing wrong and knew what was required to rescue the plant but could not be bothered to intervene. She only cared about cactuses; other plants seemed to her to be weak

and vulnerable, pathetic even, flowers were whores, shrubs were pointless, cactuses had personality.

It was the Quantity Surveyors' lack of interest in plants that opened up the space for Anne to keep the bulk of her cacti, for in the small garden at the back of the house was a small greenhouse that Anne had positively filled with the plants.

She stood in the greenhouse on Thursday morning measuring small portions of water into each pot. It was a job that had to be done carefully, so small was the greenhouse, and so crammed was it with cacti, that one wrong move and Anne would be spiked by one of her own plants, and some of Anne's cactuses were very big and wielded dangerous spikes.

Anne was still angry about the Quantity Surveyors barging into her room the other morning, in fact time had not mellowed her and she had become steadily angrier with each passing day till she positively seethed with rage. Periodically, she ran the events over in her mind and stoked her anger.

There had been no apology of course, the Quantity Surveyors had no idea they had done anything wrong.

She had not accepted Billy's offer of a room but neither had she turned it down. It now lurked at the back of her mind as an escape route, no matter how unappealing in and of itself, the thought of an alternative place to live available at very short notice was a pleasing one. It was a way out - it meant she could freely burn her bridges with the Quantity Surveyors, she could risk what she liked.

She watered her cactuses and plotted her revenge, a thin prickly smile spreading slowly across her lips.

CONCERNING A CONVERSATION ON A TELEPHONE

From a secret underground bunker near Shefford a deputy field commander of little importance placed a telephone call through to a departmental director of some small importance. The deputy field commander of little importance was put on hold by the departmental director of some small importance's secretary.

There was piped music.

'Yes,' said the departmental director of some small importance, and he addressed the deputy field commander of little importance by his full name, 'what on earth are you doing in Bedford?'

'It is the matter of the hamsters sir,' said the deputy field commander of little importance.

'The matter of the hamsters?'

'Yes sir, the hamster matter, we discussed it last week.'

'I discussed a lot of things last week.'

'At the Tuesday breakfast briefing sir.'

'I have a breakfast briefing every day, sometimes more than one.'

The deputy field commander of little importance sighed, carefully covering the receiver of the telephone as he did so in order that the departmental director of some small importance would not hear. 'There were jam donuts sir, and cherry danishes, and I believe you had cappuccino and a grapefruit and passion fruit juice.'

'Jam donuts? Cherry danishes? Weren't there custard creams as well? Oh yes, I remember. Hamsters! The Americans were very keen we should have a go at it. Go on. Have you made any progress?'

'Yes and no sir.'

'Both yes and no? Let's start with the yes.'

'Investigation reveals that there may be something in it sir. There is definite evidence of a hamster breeder traveling the country introducing a particular hamster strain.'

'A particular hamster strain? Why?'

'That would be the no sir.'

'What would?'

'The why sir, we still don't know why?'

'It seems easy enough to me. Simply procure one of these hamsters and have it cut open and examined.'

'We have done that sir, with several hamsters.'

'And?'

'As I said, that was the no sir.'

'No what?'

'No progress.'

'What, no progress in cutting up hamsters, what on earth is preventing you?'

'As I said sir, we have cut up several hamsters but it has not helped, we have made no progress in identifying what, if anything, is special about them. In fact the scientists say

cutting them up is probably the problem and we should have observed them more while they were alive.'

'Doesn't sound like scientists to me. Normally they want to cut things up. Well I suppose you had better do what they say.'

'We have sir, with a fresh supply of hamsters.'

'And?'

'Nothing so far sir.'

'Well there must be something.'

'Possibly not sir.'

'How on earth can there not be, why else are we pursuing this chappy round the country cutting up his hamsters.'

'We have a theory that the target has yet to perfect whatever it is that he is attempting to perfect, and all the hamsters we have cut up have been his failed prototypes.'

'But prototypes for what?'

'That we don't know sir.'

'You must have theories?'

'We have several, but none I would like to dignify by telling you sir.'

'Well what about the chappy, do you have anything on him?'

'Not a lot sir. The chappy ... I mean the target is a Middle Eastern gentleman between forty and fifty years old, never leaves a true address or phone number, moves around the country breeding an assortment of borrowed or bought male hamsters with his one female called Fenchurch. That is all we have.'

'Middle Eastern eh? You think there might be a Jihadist angle on this.'

'It's a possibility we are considering sir.'

'Would please the Americans no end but I can't stand these religious types. Give me the Russians any day, they

knew how to play the game. Ever play chess with a Russian?'

'No sir.'

'What?'

'I've never played chess with a Russian sir.'

'What has that got to do with anything?'

'You asked me if I had sir.'

'Did I? Must have been a rhetorical question. Smart of you though. Damn good chess players the Russians - you'd never beat one. Not smart enough. It is a smart man who knows how smart he is, but a smarter one who knows how smart he is not. Know who said that to me?'

'No sir.'

'Shame, it's completely gone out of my head too. Anyway - was there anything else?'

'No sir.'

'Wait, hamsters in Bedford? Yes there was. I remember reading about it the other day in a memo. Let's see, it was about elevenses and I either had a bourbon or a chocolate hobnob. That was it! Chocolate hobnob. Wasn't there a snafu?'

'A snafu sir?'

'Yes man. A snafu. I remember reading the memo.'

'Well there was an incident sir. I don't know if I'd call it a snafu.'

'I would. It was a snafu.'

'Maybe a minor snafu sir.'

'Let me see. What were the words? Potentially embarrassing to the service and operationally damaging. Sounds like a pretty major snafu to me.'

'Perhaps a potentially major snafu sir.'

'It's coming back to me now. Two agents beaten up on the street in daylight by one man in a wheelchair. We would

have called that a sodding massive snafu in my day, using those very words. Who was this man?'

'We don't know sir.'

'You don't know! Well bloody find out man, that's what your paid for. Didn't he ask about hamsters? He might even know more than you do which would not be all that hard by the sound of things. Apart from anything else you ought to get him into the office and rough him up a bit, just for pride's sake.'

'I think that would be illegal sir.'

'Well then rough him up outside the office on your own time then. Or better still give him a job, he sounds useful.'

'He hasn't got any legs sir.'

'Didn't bloody stop him though did it. I remember an agent with no arms who could kill a man with his teeth. Apparently the Egyptians had a girl with only one tit doing seduction work, don't think many men went for it though, but I hear on the grapevine the Americans are trying to develop a girl with three. Can't see that working either myself but you can never tell. Strange old business this.'

There was a pause.

'Is that all sir?' asked the deputy field commander of little importance.

'What,' said the departmental director of some small importance, 'yes. Yes it is. I have other field ops who've cocked up this week. One of them spent a hundred and fifty grand bugging a Liberal Democrat MP. A Liberal bloody Democrat! What sort of a use of resources is that!'

'And it is illegal sir.'

'Is it? I suppose it probably is. Anyway, get off the phone. And find that bloody gerbil!'

'Hamster sir.'

The line clicked dead.

CONCERNING A PTERODACTYL

From the pages of The Bed's On Sunday:

Vicar in Gay Sex Tryst sights Pterodactyl Shock!

A local vicar involved in a late night gay sex tryst with a young parishioner at Bedford Embankment on Thursday night claimed that he had seen a pterodactyl circling above the Castle Road area. The vicar, Reverend Peter Hanna from Elstow, met a young man who has not been named but who the Beds On

Sunday understands to be one of the Vicar's parishioners and a member of the church choir, on the Butterfly bridge at eight o'clock on Thursday night. Acting on a tip off from another parishioner that the pair were meeting for the purposes of gay sex in a public place a twelve man observation team from Bedfordshire Constabulary were already watching. According to police sources the pair "just walked up and down by river and bought an ice-cream, and then stood about staring at the sky for five minutes." later the pair disappeared behind some bushes and were immediately arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to perform an indecent act.

Rev. Peter Hanna released a statement on Friday saying that "I am openly gay and have been since before I was appointed Vicar in Elstow. We were only going behind the bushes for a kiss and cuddle and I am free to do that with whoever I choose. I really did see a pterodactyl."

No charges were brought and the police consider the matter closed. They refused to comment about the pterodactyl.

CONCERNING PICKLES, SLEEPING.

The pet shop man lived way out on Goldington road but still liked to walk to and from his shop on Tavistock Street every day. He had a car, but he hardly ever used it because he enjoyed walking and worried about his carbon footprint. On Friday, however, he had driven in because he was transporting some guppies back from the shop for the weekend. The guppies were about to give birth and so needed to be watched because, if left alone too long with the babies, the mother would just eat them up. Consequently he got home early on Friday evening.

He lived alone. He had lived with his mother till she died after a long and painful fight with lung cancer, she had refused to leave her home. Towards the end he had married Tracy, the MacMillan nurse who had helped him care for his mother. His mother had been very keen on the match and it was, possibly, to please her that they had decided to marry so soon. It had not lasted and two years after his mother's death Tracy moved out. Last year she had told him that she had met someone else and a divorce was now in

process. It was all very cordial. They still spoke. Neither were the sort of people to get unduly emotional.

The curious thing was, on the Friday night, that the garden gate was shut. He was sure he had left it open because he had walked out of it holding the temporary tank to bring the guppies home in and had not had a hand free to shut it, and then when he was driving off he noticed he had left it open and thought about stopping to close it but decided not to bother.

Only, now it was shut.

He assumed maybe the postman shut it, or some kindly passing stranger.

He went into his house, said hello to the dogs and the cats, fed them, opened his mail (all junk), put the temporary tank on the side in the kitchen and made himself a cup of tea, and then, since it was a nice day, went outside to drink his tea in the garden.

The pet store man kept a lot of pets, he loved pets, his mother had loved pets, it was the reason he had become a pet store man. A man who has a lot of pets acquires a lot of dead pets. The pet store man buried his in the garden, marking each grave with a tiny headstone he carved himself (it was a hobby) and a rose. It made for a beautiful, if somewhat macabre, little garden. His mother had loved it.

On Friday night one of the graves had been dug up. He looked at the disturbed stone. It read 'Pickles, sleeping.'

Instinctively the pet store man looked up at his dead mother's window to see if she had noticed.

The pet store man would have called his soon to be ex-wife, she would have been kind, and offered sympathy, and said things like 'what sort of a person would do such a thing?' and 'it's just unfathomable?'

It was that last thing that put him off, the 'unfathomable' thing. He didn't want it unfathomable. He wanted it fathomed. He wanted to know who had done it and why.

It would be incorrect to say something like 'and then it came to him.' It did not just come to him because he was not the sort of a man things just came to, and it did not just come to him because he thought of it immediately and it was always with him. He had not forgotten Emily and Billy Bones' visit, he had taken great care finding the information they wanted, and he had not forgotten the connection between that and Pickles either. He did not think anything of it at the time because it seemed to him perfectly natural that people should be interested in the lineage of their hamsters, and still, even in the light of Pickles' exhumation, it did not strike him as suspicious.

So it did not just come to him to call Billy. You could possibly say it just came to him not to call his soon to be ex-wife, but I would have preferred not to say that because it is a horrid clichéd writery type thing to say, but I've put it in anyway because it is kind of true.

After it just came to him that he did not want to call his ex-wife he sat down and drank his tea and the reasons why he did not want to call her clarified in his mind. Mostly he just wanted to talk to his mum, but second to that he wanted to find out who had desecrated his dead hamster's grave and why. He did not suddenly remember Billy's connection with Pickles because he had never forgotten, but he did suddenly remember the business card that Billy had given him and what it said on it. It said *Private Investigator*.

He went inside, found it, and rang the number.

CONCERNING REVENGE

In order to celebrate the fact that they would soon be reproducing, the Quantity Surveyors had organised a dinner party for Saturday night. It was short notice, but they were excited, and it turned out that most of their friends could make it (Anne, if she were narrating the story instead of me, would undoubtedly make a point of noting that the Quantity Surveyors had the sort of friends who had no plans on Saturday night - but I shall rise above it).

Obviously, what with the Quantity Surveyors not just being both avowedly teetotal for the duration of the pregnancy, but actually going so far as to demand an alcohol free house (Anne's secret emergency stash still unknown and unsuspected), it was to be a dry dinner party. Also obviously, as the party was to be the formal announcement to all their friends that they were expecting a baby, it had to remain a secret from the guests that it was to be a dry dinner party. Whether the Quantity Surveyors' trust that this would not be a problem was more to do with their ignorance of human nature, or their growing self obsession with regards to all things baby related, or just the fact that they only invited the sort of people who had no plans on Saturday night, I shall not speculate.

Anne was invited, grudgingly, she thought, although, to be fair, only grudgingly because it apparently made the numbers awkward. Anne took it as a personal slight that the Quantity Surveyors did not ask if she wanted to bring anyone, but then recently Anne took a lot of what the Quantity Surveyors did as a personal slight. It also somewhat annoyed Anne that she did not herself have any plans for Saturday night. Thus formed an idea, thus formed a plot, thus formed a plan so wicked it was all she could do not to smirk in public.

Anne feigned ignorance, if the Quantity Surveyors looked likely to bring up the subject of the dinner party she left the room, she avoided conversation, she assumed an unusually distracted air about her, she did everything possible to make it seem plausible that she had entirely forgotten about the dinner party on Saturday night. She made sure to be out of the house most of Saturday.

CONCERNING SARAH PHILLIPS, A GIRL FROM MY SCHOOL WHO I KNEW A LITTLE BUT DID NOT LIKE A LOT

Miss Thrope picked me up around eleven a.m. on Saturday saying there was Hamster work to be done, and together we walked over to Billy's flat. He was already up and dressed and invited us in for a cup of tea.

'First order of the day,' he said, 'is Mrs Twinkle.'

I groaned and Miss Thrope asked who Mrs Twinkle was.

'Daughter of Pickles and Fenchurch,' said Billy, 'sister of Sniffles and Snuffles.'

'A hamster?'

'Yes, a hamster,' said Billy, 'and, luckily, one owned by a friend of Emily.'

'Sarah Phillips,' I said sternly, 'is not my friend.'

'Oh I'm sure you'll get along fine.'

'I don't even know where she lives.'

'I do,' said Billy brandishing a piece of paper, 'and it is not far from here.'

'How did you find out?' asked Miss Thrope.

'There have been developments,' he said, 'and you are no longer my only employer on hamster related matters. The man from the pet store had one of his deceased hamsters stolen from its tiny grave this week. Care to guess which one?'

'Pickles?' I said.

'Yes, Pickles. He has hired me to find out who did it, and why, and, I might add, he paid half the price up front.'

'Well I suppose that eases your financial position a bit,' said Miss Thrope, ignoring the jibe.

'It does a bit,' said Billy, 'although the offer is still open.'

'I'm thinking about it,' said Miss Thrope, looking disparagingly around the house, 'does the easing of your money worries mean you can come out to the pub tonight, I fancy a drink.'

'I was going anyway,' said Billy, 'for a band meeting, but you're welcome to come along.'

'Will Calvin be coming?'

'I think he goes every night,' said Billy.

Miss Thrope smiled a strange smile. If I knew then what I know now I would have called it a smirk.

The three of us walked down to where Sarah Phillips lived, somewhere off Bromham Road. At first it was very difficult because her parents, and indeed she, were very suspicious about why I, who had never really had anything to do with her, had come to call in the company of my teacher (not Sarah's) and a strange man. Billy tried to explain that it was a matter to do with a lost hamster but they did not really understand and then Miss Thrope, who had some leverage with them purely on the grounds that

she was a teacher and they recognised her, said that it was a school project I was doing over the holidays where I was trying to build up a family tree of the hamster I had lost. Then she took them aside where I could not hear and said something to them. I suspect it was about how upset I was and that this was helping, but whatever it was it seemed to do the trick because they let us go upstairs to Sarah's room and see Mrs Twinkle and talk to Sarah.

At first Sarah was a bit shy, which was a surprise to me because, frankly, she'd always been a mouthy bitch at school. But then I asked to see Mrs Twinkle and she got her out of her cage where she had been sleeping in her burrow.

Mrs Twinkle's cage was bigger than Sniffles' or Snuffles' cages and had plastic tubes for Mrs Twinkle to walk through but it was almost bare, it hardly had any sawdust or bedding in it and no toilet roll tubes at all. Sarah said it was to stop Mrs Twinkle making too much mess. I said I just spread newspaper around the cage.

After Mrs Twinkle had woken up a bit Sarah let me hold her because I already had hamsters and knew how to hold them. I put her in my hand and stroked her and she closed her eyes and went back to sleep which was so cute that both me and Sarah went 'ooh' at exactly the same time, which was funny but I suppose you had to be there.

She looked just like Sniffles and Snuffles and I thought about Sniffles, or was it Snuffles, and where he was now, and I wondered if he was having a bad time and missing his brother or me and it made me so sad I was worried I might cry and so I gave Mrs Twinkle back to Sarah.

Billy asked a lot of questions about when she first got the hamster and was there anything unusual about her and had anyone else shown any interest recently but Sarah could not tell him anything of interest and so I decided to just talk to Sarah about general school and hamster stuff to gain her trust because I knew that was what detectives on television did.

As it turned out Sarah Phillips was not really that much of a bitch at all.

Billy and Miss Thrope were beginning to look a bit bored while Sarah and I were talking until Sarah said: 'did you see the Pterodactyl?'

'There was a pterodactyl?' I said, because I didn't read the local papers and neither did my parents so I had not heard about it.

'Lot of people saw it, it was circling right over our house for ages on Wednesday.'

'A real pterodactyl?'

'Oh yes,' said Sarah, 'it made a noise like this: rrrrrrrr rrrrrrr.'

Billy seemed interested in this but Miss Thrope did not and she suggested that we had better be going. I said good-bye to Mrs Twinkle and promised Sarah that I would bring Sniffles (or was it Snuffles) over so they could play with each other some time, and also Snuffles (or was it Sniffles) when we found him.

And then we went home.

'Honestly,' said Miss Thrope, 'Pterodactyls?'

'It's true,' I complained, 'Sarah said it was in all the papers.'

'I hate to break it to you kid,' said Billy, 'but just because something is in the Beds On Sunday doesn't make it true. On the other hand, there's obviously something flying about.'

'See,' I said, 'Billy believes it.'

'Not a pterodactyl though,' said Billy, 'but definitely something.'

CONCERNING THE BAND, AND GETTING IT TOGETHER AGAIN.

Billy Bones was meeting the two other remaining members of The Singing Oysters who had not moved to Milton Keynes, for dinner in the 'Three Cups at six thirty. There was Billy who played guitar and sang; Glenn the bass guitarist who had been in an almost successful punk rock band in the nineties but was now almost completely deaf and completely bald, in the side of his bald head behind one ear was a small metal implant into which he could plug a hearing aid; and there was 'Terry the drummer, who nervously announced the moment that he sat down that, though he was completely stoked about starting the band up again, he had sold his drum kit in May in order to buy a scooter.

They all ordered scampi.

'So sell the scooter,' said Billy.

'Can't' said 'Terry, 'crashed it into a lamp post outside Debenhams.'

'Crikey' said Glenn, 'were you hurt.'

'No,' said Terry, 'I wasn't actually riding it at the time.'

'Hold on,' said Billy, 'isn't Debenhams in a pedestrian area.'

'Yes,' said Terry, 'that was why I wasn't riding it.'

'Right,' said Billy, deciding he did not want to pursue this any further, 'we will cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'There wasn't a bridge,' said Terry, 'it was a lamp post outside Debenhams.'

'What?' said Glenn, adjusting his heading aid.

'Anyway,' said Billy, 'I want to take the band in different direction. I think we should go more heavy metal medieval folk.'

'I am completely stoked by that,' said Terry.

'What?' said Glenn.

'Heavy metal medieval folk,' said Billy loudly and clearly.

'Heavy metal eh,' said Glenn, 'it's a new direction. It would mean I could actually hear it. I'm in.'

'When do we start?' asked Terry, 'do we have any songs?'

'Nothing yet. I figure we can start by just playing the ones we already know in a heavy metal style, that ought to at least help us iron out the kinks. As for when we start, when you can find another drum kit.

'That may take it a while, things are a bit tight right now.'

Billy scratched the stubble on his chin. 'There's also the matter of the name.'

'What about the name?' said Terry.

'What?' said Glenn.

'We need to change the name,' said Billy, loudly.

'Why?' said Terry, 'I like the name.'

'So do I,' said Glenn, 'it's a great name.'

Billy looked at them, 'we are talking about the same name here right?'

They nodded.

'The Singing Oysters?'

They nodded again.

'It's a terrible name,' said Billy, 'it's an appalling name, it's a horrible awful rubbish name.'

'You thought of it,' added Terry.

'I know I thought of it,' said Billy, 'but I still hate it. Besides, it's hardly very heavy metal is it?'

'Yeah it is,' said Glenn, miming a few power chords and muttering the name in an aggressive heavy metal style. 'The Singing Oysters!'

Terry joined in, miming a drum roll and then rehearsing a chant that a heavy metal crowd might chant. 'Sing-ing! Oy-sters! Sing-ing! Oy-sters!'

Any argument Billy might have made was interrupted by three plates of scampi turning up. 'We'll come back to this,' he said, 'I've got some much better ideas for names.'

'I like the name we have,' said Terry.

'What?' said Glenn.

CONCERNING OYSTERS

I mentioned earlier that there was a very good reason why Billy Bones originally named his band The Singing Oysters and that I would come to it later. Well later is now and now that I have come to it does not seem that good a reason at all, in fact it seems a rather silly reason. I had this notion that it would reveal some important facet of Billy's personality that would shed new light on his actions so far, but it does not really do that, and besides, his actions so far have been few and not especially indecipherable.

But I did promise, and a promise is a promise so here goes.

Back about three years before the events in the pub I was just relating, Billy was already living at the same flat, already owned an awful lot of records, but had not already split up with his previous girlfriend, Marketta, and he had not already formed The Singing Oysters, but he was just about to.

The band were formed largely because of Marketta. Marketta was a sort of tall lithe dark-haired martini drinking creature in skinny black jeans who hung around rock bands. Billy had met her six months before in The

Ship on Bromham Road, which was a common haunt to neither of them, but Billy had been meeting a man with rare records to sell and Marketta was on her way into town and decided she needed a drink. She was on her way to split up with her current boyfriend.

Billy realised, astutely, that his best chance with the girl was to say he was a musician, which was not one hundred percent a lie. Somehow, to his surprise, this worked, and somehow, to both their surprise, the drink that Marketta joined him for went rather well and she stopped and joined him for another, and then another, and then definitely at least one more but neither of them were counting by that point. Within four months they moved in together to the flat on Shakespeare Road.

Marketta did not forget to dump her old boyfriend. She did it by text message just after accepting Billy's offer of a third drink. Years later she dumped Billy by text message too though it was not a surprise to him at the time and, he said, added a pleasing symmetry to the relationship. The boyfriend of the time was apparently very surprised and ran all the way over to Marketta's house and spent the whole night calling for her outside her window, which was a shame because she spent the night with Billy and was not there.

The only problem with going out with Marketta was the need for Billy to maintain the pretence that he was a musician. Consequently he decided to form a band, and carefully chose a genre of music so obscure and absurd that it would hide his lack of talent. As it turned out they were not that bad, they even made a little money at one point playing the folk circuit, but it never took off and, after Marketta left, Billy lost interest in it.

Anyway, Oysters. Billy was not used to lying, it was not in his nature to be deceptive about himself, he was what he was, simple, but all there, all on display, nothing hidden. Billy was not embarrassed by his failings or particularly proud of his virtues, he just was. He was not comfortable

with even this little white lie to Marketta and it caused him anxiety, which is what undoubtedly spurred him to get off his arse and start the band. This anxiety also manifested itself in recurrent dreams.

Billy would begin the dream by walking along a beach on a beautiful evening, perhaps with a ruby tropical sunset out to sea. Then, suddenly, the sea would retreat revealing row upon row of oysters. The oysters would, one after the other, open their shells with a little sucking pop, and then, one after the other, begin to sing in tiny squeaking voices. The cacophony of the oysters singing all out of time with each other was unpleasant and indecipherable but Billy would walk down to the first of the oysters, and the oysters stretched away in neat tiers all the way to the horizon, all singing, and Billy would bring his head down close to listen to the tiny voice of just one of them.

The oysters were singing a song about him, about what a useless lazy stupid person he was, mocking him. The strange thing was, was that the song itself, was beautiful.

Billy had always tried to remember the song but never could, he had littered the floor by the side of his bed with pieces of paper hurriedly scrawled with what lyrics he could remember when he woke up.

Billy is stupid.

Billy forgot to shave again this morning.

Billy lost another job. Oooh baby, another job.

Never had Billy been able to capture the tune and, after Marketta had left, the dreams had stopped and he had given up. But there you have it, singing oysters.

CONCERNING STANDARDS OF PROOF

Anne turned up at The Three Cups shortly before seven o'clock, earlier than she normally liked to start drinking, but it was necessary as part of her plan.

The plan was working out nicely, the morning hamster research trip had got her out of the house without once talking to either Quantity Surveyor. She had had lunch at Billy's flat and looked again at the room. She had correctly guessed that the Quantity Surveyors would be out most of the afternoon buying ingredients for whatever Guardian supplement recipe they were planning - no doubt scouring the food markets of Bedfordshire for genuine Macedonian asparagus because Sainsbury's only had Hungarian asparagus and the recipe clearly called for Macedonian asparagus - or something, so had been able to go home and have a rest and a cup of tea, and then leave again before the Quantity Surveyors got back.

In order to kill the remaining time she had decided to buy a new pair of shoes, or rather to look through every shoe shop in Bedford checking for a possible better pair of

shoes before returning to her usual shop and buying the pair she always knew she would buy.

She was wearing them now, they were brown and good.

She had then breezed straight in and out of the house with only a quick hello to let the Quantity Surveyors know she still existed. The cleverest part of the whole show was that she had managed to run the battery on her phone right down and it was now left on charge, leaving the Quantity Surveyors with no method of contacting her. Not once in the past five days had a word about the dinner party passed between them, she had an unassailable claim to have forgotten and they had no way left of reminding her, her excuse was complete. All she had to do now was lie with a straight face when the time came.

Her only worry was that the Quantity Surveyors might panic and call the police, thinking she had been abducted, but she doubted that. Once she was in the pub she was safe.

'Anne meet the band,' said Billy, 'band meet Anne. This is Terry the drummer without any drums and Glenn the deaf bass player. I was just going to the bar, would you like a drink?'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Anne, and 'yes please I'll have a white wine. Are they still doing food?'

Billy said he'd ask and that the scampi was good.

'Hello Anne,' said Terry.

'What?' said Glenn.

Billy came back with a menu and Anne gave him money and instructions to order a scampi.

'How's it going?' she asked the band.

'Pretty good,' said Terry, 'we were just arguing over the name.'

'I heard it last night, it's not all that great is it.'

'I know,' said Terry, 'we should so stick to the original name. I am stoked about that.'

'The original name?' said Anne.

'Yes.'

'The Singing Oysters?'

'Yes.'

'No,' said Glenn, 'we should call ourselves The Singing Oysters!'

'That's what we were saying,' said Terry, 'we should stick to the original name.'

'What?'

'Turn your hearing aid up.'

'There's no need, I can hear fine.'

'You're an idiot.'

'What?'

Billy came back with the drinks.

'You're keeping the oyster name?' asked Anne.

'They want to,' said Billy, 'I like your sleeper agent one better.'

'That was your name?' asked Terry, 'well maybe it isn't all that bad.'

'What?' said Glenn.

Shortly after that Calvin arrived and barged his way rapidly through to the corner table. 'Is she in?' he hissed.

'Is who in?'

'The girl, the girl with the blue hair.'

Billy and Anne looked over to the bar. 'Yes,' said Billy, 'she's over there.'

'Look at this,' said Calvin, retrieving three carefully folded A4 pieces of paper from his jacket pocket.

On the pieces of paper were printed three photographs of a very pretty and completely naked girl arranged in three different soft porn poses, one standing in a doorway, full frontal, with her hands raised above her head holding the door frame, another curled coquettishly on a huge white

sofa, and the third lying back on the same sofa with her legs spread wide and everything on display in full gynecological detail, except that Calvin had evidently felt it necessary to censor the pictures for a sensitive audience and had scribbled over the very naughty bits with a brown felt tip pen.

'It took me ages to find these again,' he said, 'I was surfing all day.'

'They're very nice,' said Anne.

'Hello,' said Terry.

'What did I miss now,' said Glenn, turning a picture around on the table to get a better look at it and turning his hearing aid up.

'It's obvious right,' said Calvin, 'it's her.'

'I don't know,' said Billy.

'She hasn't got blue hair,' pointed out Anne.

'She's dyed it,' said Calvin, 'look closer, it's definitely her.'

He held one of the pictures up against the backdrop of the bar so as to juxtapose the moist lips and come hither eyes of the model against Natalia the barmaid going about her job.

That was moist lips on the face I was referring to.
Pervert!

'I don't know,' said Billy.

'I'm terrible with faces,' said Anne.

Calvin looked at them one after the other. 'I'm going to ask her,' he said, wheeling himself away.

'No!' Billy almost shouted, and he reached down and engaged the break on Calvin's wheelchair.

Calvin punched him.

CONCERNING DRUNKEN CONVERSATIONS

19:12

-I'm sorry I hit you dude. I really am. But you should know better than to fuck with my chair.

-I know.

-Are we cool.

-Yeah ... we're cool.

-I mean really, 'cos there was blood and everything.

-And it sodding hurt, but it's okay.

-You just shouldn't do that sort of shit. You should know that better than anybody.

-I do. That's the stupid thing.

-Still pals?

-Yeah, 'course we're still pals.

-Cool. That was a hell of a lot of blood eh?

-I'm just glad you didn't break my nose. I know what you're like.

19:34

-Who's your favourite heavy metal band?

-Oh shit. That's a hard question.

-No it isn't.

-Oh it is. I'm tempted to just say Sabbath. I mean it's got to be Sabbath right. I mean who else comes close.

-Led Zeppelin.

-See told you it was hard.

-It's not hard, how can Black Sabbath compete with the Zep.

-That would be a subjective judgement. Besides Led Zeppelin are more straight Rock n' Roll than Heavy Metal.

-Subjective my arse! You're comparing the operatic majesty of Kashmir with what? ... I Am Iron Man.

-Kashmir may well be a better song, musically.

-It is.

-But is it a better *Heavy Metal* song.

-It's a better song. Blues song. Country song. Whatever. It's a better song.

-But it's not Heavy Metal!

-Guys, what about Metallica?

-Crap! I hadn't thought about Metallica

-Still not as good as Led Zep.

-But Zepellin aren't metal.

-And what about Iron Maiden?

-Fuck off.

19:52

-Anne, are you on facebook?

-No.

-Oh you've got to be, everybody's on facebook. If you're not on facebook you don't really exist.

-Don't I?

-Join up and I'll friend you. We can be facebook friends. I desperately need more facebook friends.

20:11

-How long is thirty feet. No ... wait. Don't answer that! It's a stupid question.

20:30

-What do you think ... right ... what do you think ... I mean ... do you think ... if medieval people ... in olden times ... if they had had the electric guitar ... would they listen to heavy metal medieval folk? Do you think?

-Yes.

20:45

-No way is there a pterodactyl circling Bedford. It's ridiculous.

-Ah, but the Times and Citizen had a picture. Or was it the Herald.

-It was in the Beds on Sunday.

-I know it was in the Beds on Sunday, but the Times and Citizen had a photo.

-What of?

-What of! Of the sodding pterodactyl.

-There is no pterodactyl. It's bullshit.

-There is too. I heard it ate a baby already.

-That wasn't a pterodactyl it was a velociraptor, and it wasn't Bedford it was in San Diego, and it wasn't in real life, it was in a movie.

-No, it was in the paper, it ate a baby.

20:59

-Yeah. I know I shouldn't of hit him, but he grabbed my chair.

-That's hardly an excuse.

-I just said it wasn't an excuse, but it's the reason.

-So you're saying your reason was irrational.

-If you want to put it that way. Is everything you do rational?

-I don't punch my best friends.

-I have rage issues. On account of my having no legs.

-I think you at least ought to buy him a new shirt. It's covered in blood.

-Actually I think it's an improvement.

21:11

-Don't get me wrong. I love my job, teaching, it's the best job in the world; but I just really hate the kids. They're basically all a bunch of little bastards.

-That is what they never tell you. That they are basically all a bunch of little bastards.

21:24

-I know what we should do. We should go see a heavy metal band.

-Yeah. Scope out the opposition.

-Actually I meant for inspiration, but that's a good idea too.

-We could go to Esquires, they have heavy metal bands on upstairs.

-Wasn't there a mass stabbing there a couple of years ago.

-There was only one stabbing.

-No, there were definitely two stabbings, I remember it.

-Two deaths but only one stabbing. The stabber got beaten to death by the victim's mate.

-Still!

-And that was pagan metal, not heavy metal. Completely different thing.

21:31

-No shit! An actual real live KGB agent?

-Actually. I think that was meant to be a secret. Forget I said it.

-At this point of the evening, I'm pretty certain to.

21:37

-Look at the picture. I mean really look at the picture. It's just the body god gave us and it is beautiful. What's wrong with her showing it if she wants to, she probably got paid well for it.

-It's exploitative. It objectifies her as nothing more than a sex object.

-We're all naked under our clothes Anne.

21:49

-Just think, if you moved into my spare room we could come here every night.

-The stupid thing is, right now that seems like a good idea.

-See I told you.

-Told me what?

-That we should go to the pub.

-I said that.

-Did you? Good idea.

21:56

-Why do men say 'oh God' at the moment of ejaculation?

-I don't know, why do men say 'oh God' at the moment of ejaculation?

-Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

-What?

-Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.

-That is terrible.

-I know.

-That is absolutely without any merit whatsoever. I think you should go now because of that. In fact you are now no longer my friend.

22:02

-Hamsters ... are the best pet! I've decided. I am so buying a hamster. I'm buying one tomorrow.

22:09

-I know. Lets go to the off license before it shuts and go back to mine.

-Is that a good idea? What about the Quantity Surveyors?

-They won't mind.

CONCERNING A DINNER PARTY

There was always a part of Anne that was sober. Always a part watching, monitoring, measuring. Always a part that was still in control.

She had planned everything, made sure to get everyone good and drunk, kept the rounds ticking over, kept the conversation flowing (although that was not a problem), claimed at the end that she was feeling bloated and wanted to move on to shorts knowing it would be a popular choice and that others would follow. A round of whiskeys followed. And then another. Knew that spirits would wake them up, would bring their drunkenness to the surface, would throw the last traces of their good judgement out of the window, would make sure they were all left with empty glasses at the critical moment. She suggested they buy a bottle of tequila and go back to her house, knowing her house was nearer than anyone's but Calvin's and his was a dump. Using her ownership of limes and salt to double up that logic. Prepared to say that she thought the Quantity Surveyors were out tonight if anyone thought it was a bad idea for that reason, but nobody did.

Everything went to plan.

Back at the dinner party not everything had gone to plan.

The numbers had been messed up by Anne's disappearance, the places could be readjusted but there was one woman too few and poor Quentin ended up the odd one out among couples.

The Quantity Surveyors had rather hoped that Anne and Quentin might hit it off.

Also they were worried. I have mostly described them from Anne's perspective which has been necessary for the story but perhaps a little unfair. They were wrapped up in themselves, to be sure, and if I could have found anyone who had anything nice to say about them then maybe I would have managed to wedge that viewpoint in somewhere just in the interest of balance. But in their favour, they were genuinely worried about Anne. They knew she'd gone out without her phone and although they suspected she had forgotten they had imaginations and they could not help but imagine her hit by a bus and rushed unconscious to hospital.

I'd lay cash money, however, that they were secretly pleased to have such an interesting subject for conversation over dinner. Proudly and heroically they laid out their plans to phone round the hospitals if Anne did not return soon.

As it turned out they needed all the dinner party conversation they could get. The reaction of every guest was the same when they were told it was to be a dry affair. All of them looked shocked, thought for a moment it was a joke, realised it was not, managed to fake a smile, said it was quite right what with the baby and all, and managed to summon up some contrivance on how it was better all round and they ought to cut down anyway.

Quentin, bless him, had even brought a bottle of organic Cornwall wine. The Quantity Surveyor's insisted that he leave it in the porch lest they be tempted. Quentin

was sorely tempted to sit in the porch with it by the time the cheese came round.

Besides Quentin, a friend from Susan's pottery night classes who was an actual genuine country-music musician of actual genuine talent, there were Leonard and Sandra, Susan's boss and his wife, and Kate and Richard, David's colleague and her boyfriend.

It would have all worked out nicely if there had been booze, if either Quentin had not been vegan or they had not served Coq Au Vin, if Kate and Richard were not going through a rocky patch in their relationship, if Leonard could talk about any subject other than quantity surveying, if Susan did not secretly suspect David of fancying Kate.

In Quentin's defence, he was certain he had said he was vegan when he had been invited.

So Quentin went hungry, nobody talked that much but Leonard who spoke of things only Susan, David, and Kate could understand and only Susan gave a fig about, Kate and Richard bickered in a passive aggressive manner, and Susan silently seethed whenever David passes Kate the alcohol-free sparkling apple juice.

Then Anne arrived, accompanied by Billy, Calvin, Terry, Glenn, and a litre bottle of tequila.

'Helloooo,' she cooed as she staggered into the room, exaggerating her drunkenness, 'I didn't know you had guests.'

'Yes,' said Susan coldly, 'you did.'

'Did I?' Anne reeled a little, which was not an act.

'We told you on Monday.'

'Did you?' Anne missed her calling as an actress, her incredulity was perfect, as was the look she allowed to cross her face as she pretended to be contrite, 'oh shit,' she said, 'I'm so sorry.'

'Well it's done now.'

'I completely forgot. I went to the pub with Calvin and Billy.'

'And brought them back.'

'Yes!' said Anne, again accentuating her drunkenness, 'the more the merrier.' She paused, and then raised up the bottle of tequila. 'We've got tequila,' she announced.

'Hello,' said Billy, 'stepping into the room and extending his hand to anyone that would shake it. 'Pleased to meet you. Billy Bones at your service. Private investor ... investegrator ... investigator and musician at your service.'

Quentin, bless him, laughed and shook Billy's hand. 'Quentin Rosebury,' he said, 'also a musician but not a private investor.'

'Quentin,' said Billy, genuinely drunk, 'you have very red hair.'

'Yes,' said Quentin, 'I do.'

And he did you know.

'Anne,' said David, spurned into action by a sharp elbow in the ribs from his fiancé, 'this is a teetotal house now.'

'Oh balls!' said Anne, 'I forgot. It's okay. we'll go in the kitchen.'

Anne needed to get out of the room before she started laughing, the shocked faces of the Quantity Surveyors were too much for her, but she had one thing to do, one final act to ruin their party and complete her revenge, one thing that had just occurred to her then and there, one thing she had to do herself before Billy did it, and she knew for certain that he was about to do it.

'Quentin,' she said, 'care to join us?'

Quentin dithered, he knew he shouldn't, but a dry Saturday night was not something he remembered having

since the day he had turned eighteen. Besides, he had never met Anne before and was intrigued.

'Come on mate,' said Billy, and grabbed Quentin by the hand and pulled him through to the kitchen with the rest of them.

They were there till the wee hours of the morning.

The following day it was made clear to Anne, if not in so many words, that she really needed to be moving out soon.

CONCERNING HANGOVERS

At seven a.m. the following morning. That's seven a.m. mind! Seven Ante Meridiem! On a Sunday! There are people on this planet who have never once seen a seven a.m. on a Sunday from the conventional direction, Billy Bones among them until he saw this one. At seven a.m. the following morning Billy was rudely woken by a loud knocking on the door, very loud, like they were going to knock the door down loud.

Billy was lying in Calvin's bath where he had gone to bed the previous night, after Anne's impromptu party finally drew to a close when dawn started making itself felt through the kitchen window. That is the last part Billy will play in this chapter but it was important we established that he was there.

Neither Calvin nor Billy opened the door. Billy did not open it because he felt rubbish and, anyway, it was not his door; the reason Calvin did not answer it was more complicated. In order for Calvin to answer the door he would not only have had to get out of bed early on Sunday morning with a bad hangover after barely an hour of sleep.

- in fact, it a testament to how hard the door was knocked on that either man woke up at all -

In order to answer the door Calvin would not only have had to transfer himself into his wheelchair (in fact he was quite good at that). He would not only have had to do that but he would have also had to accept that somebody, anybody, had any right to drag him from his bed before he wanted to get up himself.

This is not about the love of staying in bed that I previously expounded on in both Billy's and Anne's characters. Calvin liked staying in bed, but no more so than any other man. No, with Calvin it was more complicated. Calvin strongly felt he had no need to get up.

I'll try a different tack because, like I said, it's a bit complicated. This was a feature of Calvin's character long before he lost his legs. There was always something of the libertarian in him, he did not see the need for government or any other official institution, he would occasionally, when drunk and belligerent, preach the advantages of anarchy.

Calvin believed every person should be basically self sufficient, that they should have the wherewithal to hunt and grow their own food, to shield themselves from the elements, to protect themselves from those who would take what was theirs by force. Anything above that, society, supermarkets, armies, governments, police, incapacity benefit, running water, fridge freezers, trains, planes, and wheelchairs, Calvin thought was a thoroughly good idea but not something you should count on. This strange, poorly thought out, but fierce independence had always been in Calvin but was exacerbated by the loss of his legs. You could certainly make good arguments against it, indeed many had (including Billy), but he was not to be swayed.

And anyway it did not affect his life much, except in small ways like not answering the door.

You see, when you or I hear a knock at the door our thought processes run something like this: *ooh, a person at the door, come to see me, aww shucks, I wonder who it could be.*

You know, more or less.

The thought processes that ran through Calvin's head went more like this: *I'm not expecting anyone. I don't need anyone. I'm staying put.*

So Calvin did not answer the door, and unlike every other time he had not answered the door, this time they broke it down, ran mob handed into the flat, grabbed him, carried him out without his wheelchair, shoved him in the back of a van and drove away. They never even noticed Billy lying in the bath.

Two men who might well have been described as handsome except for the black eyes and broken noses sat in the back of the van with Calvin and pointed guns at his head.

'What,' they said, 'do you know about the hamster?'

Calvin did not say a word, mainly because he was suddenly, violently, almost - you would have sworn if you were there, which you are glad you were not, trust me - aggressively sick over both of them and most of the inside of the van.

Calvin would say later that you could still smell the tequila.

CONCERNING A SHOWER OF BASTARDS

The deputy field commander of little importance was not very good at this, he had been on the officially mandated training course, but unlike others had never had any enthusiasm or aptitude for it. There were great names in the service, the likes of William 'Jim' Skardon who Kim Philby made a point of fleeing the country before being interviewed by, men who could win a man's confidence in an interrogation room, men who could break a man. The deputy field commander of little importance was not one of those men. Mostly he preferred the safe, behind the lines, ordering other people about type of intelligence work. Since joining the service he had taken great pains to maneuver himself into a position where he was unlikely to ever meet a bad guy face to face, and now here he was, in a room with a man with an American accent, no legs, a violent reputation, and a strong stench of booze and vomit.

He was not happy.

Neither, needless to say, was Calvin. In fact, so unhappy was Calvin that the MI5 agents had felt it

necessary to cuff him to the chair. They had removed the sick covered t-shirt he had been sleeping in and managed to find him another which was too small and made the muscles in his arms and chest look particularly massive as they strained against it. Calvin had not been wearing anything other than a t-shirt and the MI5 men had not managed to find anything better to replace the nothing with than a towel which they draped demurely over his nether regions.

'Mister Watson,' said the deputy field commander of little importance. There was no answer.

Calvin was also fast asleep.

'Mister Watson,' he said again, louder, and ducked down to look at Calvin's drooping head, shut eyes, and gently snoozing face.

The deputy field commander of little importance dithered a bit, and then banged hard on the table.

Calvin woke up.

'Good morning Mister Watson,' he said, 'how are you feeling?'

Calvin took a moment to remember where he was, looking around at the interview room, noticing he was cuffed to a chair.

'Fucking awful,' he said.

'Can I get you anything, a glass of water?'

'Would you uncuff me to let me drink it.'

'Probably not.'

'Wouldn't be much fucking use then would it.'

'A paracetamol perhaps?'

'Please,' said Calvin with a grin.

The deputy field commander of little importance walked back out of the room and asked one of the agents guarding the door to fetch a paracetamol.

'Where from?' said the agent.

'I don't know,' said the deputy field commander, 'there must a medical kit or something.'

'That may have morphine in it,' said the agent, 'not paracetamol.'

'Well go and buy some then.'

'Where from?'

'From a sodding chemist.' He walked smartly back into the room before the man could say anything else.

Calvin looked at him expectantly.

'It may be a few minutes,' said the deputy field commander.

'If you don't mind,' said Calvin, 'I'll just go back to sleep till it gets here.'

'I'm afraid I do mind Mister Watson, there are matters of an urgent nature we need to discuss.'

'I ain't telling you nothing.'

'I think you will, Mister Watson'

'I lost my legs to a tube train dickhead,' said Calvin, 'what the else do you think you are going to do to me.'

The deputy field commander of little importance spluttered, 'what ... you think I'm going to torture you? Who on earth do you think we are?'

'I think you're a shower of bastards.'

The deputy field commander of little importance leaned forwards and tried to arrange his features into what he hoped might be a warm, fatherly expression. 'You may not believe this Mister Watson but we are on your side. You are a British citizen and our remit is to protect British citizens. We are not a secret police force, we are the good guys.'

'If you say so,' said Calvin. Later he wished he had made some comment about how, if they were so good, why had they manacled him to a chair, but as so often happens he did not think of it at the time.

'So why,' continued the deputy field commander, 'did you attack my men, unprovoked, in the street.'

'Because,' said Calvin, 'you stole a little girl's hamster.'

'That hamster was of vital importance to national security.'

'I don't give a toss about that.'

'You don't give a toss about national security.'

'No,' said Calvin, 'I give a toss about an eleven-year old little girl who had her hamster stolen. I give a toss about that because I hate people who take things from other people, especially when powerful people take from powerless people. I used to have legs but they were taken from me, not by any other person but by my own stupidity, but I know what it is to lose something and be powerless to do anything about it. I was planning on using my legs!' Calvin reared up in the chair at the last statement and strained at the cuffs holding him there. The towel draped over his lap fell off.

This last fact, the towel falling off, had a much greater effect on the deputy field commander of little importance than Calvin's little speech ever could. Like all non-elected officials who worked for the government he had quickly acquired an immunity to ideology of any kind, and like all such officials who were in any way successful, he had also acquired a selective immunity to logic; thus speeches did not work on him anymore.

What did still work was discomfort. The deputy field commander had, in his university years, wrestled with the suspicion that he might be gay. He knew in his head that there was nothing wrong with being gay, but still he definitely did not fancy it for himself, it all seemed a bit ... pooey. He had, in the end, pretty much convinced himself that he was heterosexual, indeed, by the time of the current encounter he was happily married and would go on to have children in a few years time. Still, he carried a tiny niggle of

a doubt around with him, and this has been unexpectedly stirred.

It was not the wedding tackle itself that disturbed the deputy field commander, that was, in all fairness to Calvin, rather a limp grey shriveled affair at the time; instead it was the fact of Calvin's nudity coupled with his proud forthright accusing stare that wheedled out something in the deputy field commander. Calvin only had the one really good stare at his disposal, but it was a really really good stare, it was a stare that said, in no uncertain terms, *fuck you!*

'Well,' stuttered the deputy field commander of little importance, 'yes, I can ... err ... see why you have a ... err ... problem but ... err I assure you that everything we ... err ... have done is ... err ... of the ... err ... utmost ... err ... necessity in the ... err .. matters of err ... national security.'

'I don't' said Calvin, 'give a toss about national security.'

'Well we do,' said the deputy field commander of little importance.

'Where's the fucking hamster?' shouted Calvin, and then adding, just for emphasis, 'dick-head.'

'The hamster is in a secure location.'

'Are you going to return it to Emily?'

'I'm afraid we cannot.'

'You've killed it!'

'No we have not killed it. What sort of people do you take us for.'

'Then give it back. What's so special about it anyway?'

'We do not know,' admitted the deputy field commander.

'Then fucking let me go before I pull your fucking balls off,' Calvin shouted, and then, with a ferocious scream, he flexed both his arms and wrenched the handcuffs apart at the chain.

Calvin laid his hands on the table and did not move.

The deputy field commander of little importance flinched visibly and went white with fear before realising Calvin was not going to attack. 'Yes ...' he stuttered, '... yes I think we're done here.'

He went to the door and walked out of the room.

'Congratulations sir,' said one of the agents standing guard, 'excellent interrogation.'

'Did they teach that technique in training sir?' said the other.

'Just put him back where you found him,' said the deputy field commander.

CONCERNING A SUDDEN AND UNEXPECTED EVENT

Billy Bones was not a coward - he was lazy, scruffy, and possessed of a generally lackadaisical attitude to life but he was not a coward. If Billy thought he could achieve anything by it he would have leapt from the bathtub where he lay and ran after the men who had snatched Calvin, but even in his current condition, which was far from tip-top, he correctly guessed who it was, why they had done it, and that there was nothing he could do about it apart from get detained himself.

Sadly Clump's thought processes did not reason with the same cool clarity and she came clumping down the stairs moments after in a state of near panic.

It was a shame, perhaps, that she had paused to put her boots on, she probably could have done some good if she had arrived in time. I don't know what she might have done but I suspect it would have been effective. It was sadder still, for Billy at least, that Clump had peeped out from behind the curtain when they had rolled in only a few hours earlier that morning and knew he was there. It was entirely regrettable that, not quite thinking straight, when she

barged into the bathroom announcing desperately that 'they've taken Calvin!' the only thing Billy thought to say was:

'Clump.'

It was not till much later that Clump correctly guessed this was her nickname, which soured her relationship with Calvin for ever more. At the time all she said was 'what?'

'Nothing,' croaked Billy, instantly realising his mistake.

'They've taken Calvin,' she said, 'some men in a van.'

'MI5,' said Billy.

'What?'

'MI5.'

'What about them?'

'Van,' said Billy, 'MI5.' Remember that this was seven in the morning and he was hung over.

'We have to follow them!'

'No good.'

'What?'

'Do no good.'

'What?'

'Follow,' said Billy, 'do no good.'

'But ...' said Clump, realising she was getting nowhere.

Then a pterodactyl crashed through the bathroom window.

I know that I've already said a lot about Billy Bones' character but I think, at this point, it would be illuminating to point out that he did not move from the bathtub, even as broken glass rained down upon him, he did not even flinch. Put that down to an extraordinary unflappability or an almighty hangover as you like, personally I think it was a bit of both.

Clump, like any right thinking person, screamed.

Billy looked up and, once the screaming stopped, said simply 'interesting,' and closed his eyes again in an attempt to get back to sleep.

It was not really a pterodactyl, although it did look a bit like one, in fact it was some sort of large military remote control plane. At the front was a gimbal mounted camera which swiveled around the room, struggling to focus on objects far closer than it was designed to focus on, looking first at Clump and then at Billy.

Clump decided she had had enough of this and was going back up stairs, and said so, and did so. Billy waited, having a fair idea of what sort of person, if not exactly who, to expect next.

CONCERNING NATIONAL SECURITY

Three men, each dressed in jeans, dark glasses, and black leather jackets, walked into the flat and, cautiously, into the bathroom.

'Morning,' said Billy, still lying in the bath.

'Morning sir,' said one of the men in an American accent.

'American?' said Billy.

'Yes,' said the man.

'CIA?' asked Billy.

'I am not at liberty to divulge,' said the man.

'So yes then,' said Billy, 'I take it that is yours.' He indicated the stricken spy drone stuck halfway through the bathroom window, one wing sheared entirely off.

'I am not at liberty to divulge,' said the man.

'So yes then,' said Billy, 'what happened? Get too close.'

'Bird strike,' said one of the other men.

'Pigeon,' said the third.

'We are not at liberty to divulge,' said the first.

'I am interested,' said Billy, 'in acquiring a hamster taken from next door two weeks ago. And discovering who dug up the remains of a different hamster from its grave in the back garden of a house in Goldington Road and why.'

'I'm afraid we are unable to help you there sir.'

'I can,' said Billy, 'be extremely discreet ... when the mood takes me. Other times, less so.'

The men huddled together and conferred in hushed tones for a moment before the first man said: 'the hamster next door was taken by MI5.'

'I know that.'

'We exhumed Pickles.'

'Did you now,' said Billy, 'why?'

'We were checking for evidence of disease.'

'But you didn't find anything did you?'

'I am not at liberty to divulge.'

'Because disease was always a long shot,' said Billy, 'but you had to check for it. What you're really after is a genetic strain and for that the father is no good to you, you need the mother or one of the children.'

'If that were the case,' said the man, 'then you would be correct.'

'Which is why this thing was circling a little girl's house off Bromham Road last week.' The camera on the spy drone panned up to the three men and back down to face Billy again.

'I am not at liberty to divulge,' said the man.

'Why would you need your own hamster,' said Billy, 'if MI5 already have one?'

'It would be conjecture,' said the man, 'but it is possible there is a difference of opinion concerning the importance of the matter. A certain amount of distrust between the two agencies.'

'So the one agency,' said Billy, 'would probably be somewhat insulted to discover the second agency was conducting a parallel investigation on its patch.'

'That is possible,' said the man.

'Do you think any more little girls are going to have their hamsters taken?' Billy asked, 'because that is exactly the sort of thing that makes me feel like being less discreet.'

'Men in the field must obey the orders they receive,' said the man, 'but sometimes a little leeway is allowed.'

'Good,' said Billy, 'my client on Goldington Road would very much like the remains of his pet back. Perhaps in a nice wooden box with the name Pickles on it. Also it would be nice if he had something that went some way to recompense him for his distress. I gather he is fond of rose bushes.'

'I see,' said the man.

'I'll call him on Wednesday,' said Billy, 'and ask if he received these things. Now I imagine you'll want this thing back.'

The spy drone whirled as its camera tried to focus on what was going on.

'We would,' said the man.

'Proceed,' said Billy, and closed his eyes and, it seemed to the three men, and we know that it may well be true, that he went back to sleep.

CONCERNING MOVING HOUSE

On Tuesday Anne moved into Billy's spare room. He had cleared it out on Monday, stacking everything in it up against one wall of his own bedroom. There was only one wall in his bedroom that he was free to do this against and that was the wall with the window in it, consequently Billy's window was now completely blocked by a large pile of record boxes. Still, he mused, it kept the CIA spy drones from watching him get dressed.

The Quantity Surveyors had lent Anne their car to help her move, it was not an act of kindness, it was an act of hurrying her out.

Anne felt no regret about ruining their dinner party, she was in fact disappointed that, according to Quentin, it had been pretty much ruined already. Quentin had called on Monday and asked her out and they had arranged to go for a drink on Friday. She had not told Billy this yet.

'Poor Calvin,' she said, carrying yet another cactus from the car. The move was not taking a long time because Anne owned a lot of stuff, it was taking a long time because Anne refused to box up her cactuses.

'I gather he gave as good as he got,' said Billy 'it's hard to scare someone with no legs, what do you threaten them with.'

'No arms?'

'I don't think they do that sort of thing.'

'They could threaten to.'

'I don't think they do that either.'

'And the CIA are in on it too?'

'Well kind of, they seem to be running a little behind MI5 at the moment.'

'Gives you a flush of patriotism doesn't it.'

'Is that what that was, I thought it was indigestion.'

Anne carefully arranged the cacti on the table by the kitchen window that Billy had given over to the purpose. The rest would go on a table he had managed to squeeze into the hall, on the floor of the lounge (a temporary measure until a suitable space could be found), and on any flat surface Anne could find in her room.

'But,' she said, 'for all that, we don't seem to be any further towards retrieving Sniffles, or was it Snuffles.'

'We are a little,' said Billy, 'we know who they are, we know they're not far away, and we know Sniffles is still alive. Also I have completed the Pickles case. The pet store man rang this morning to say Pickles' remains had been returned and he would be sending me a cheque.'

'Did you tell him about the CIA?'

'I tried, but he didn't seem to care anymore now he had his hamster back.'

'So what do we do now?'

'There are three things we need to do,' said Billy, 'one: there is obviously something about hamsters we do not understand, I have my suspicions but I've put Emily on the case.'

'What have you got her doing?' asked Anne, who still did not trust Billy to protect me from things I should not be seeing or doing at my tender age.

'Just research,' he said, 'library work.'

'Okay,' said Anne suspiciously, 'what were the other things?'

'Number two,' said Billy, 'is find the man everybody is looking for, the man with the Middle Eastern looks, the owner of Fenchurch.'

'How do you propose to do that?'

'Talk to pet store owners. I rang round Bedfordshire yesterday and once you are moved in I'll start trying further afield.'

'Did you get anywhere?'

'One place in Luton knew of him but that was a nearly a year ago and he couldn't tell me anything I didn't know. By the way the rest will not be local calls so I need your permission to put them down as expenses.'

'Knock yourself out.'

'Is that a yes?'

'Yes it is. What was the third thing?'

'The third thing,' said Billy, 'is the most complex of all. We now have two security agencies to play off against each other and something we very much want from one of them. We should be able to get it off them somehow, but right now I have no idea how. Instead I intend to enlist expert help.'

'You don't mean ...?'

'Fancy going to the pub tonight?'

CONCERNING WHAT I DID ON MY HOLIDAYS

The following is an excerpt from What I did On My Holidays by Emily Murray aged 11. It was awarded an A-minus by Miss Thrope (minus because of the spelling errors which I have mostly corrected here).

Billy Bones is the best private eye in the whole world and is very handsome. Because Billy was looking for my hamster he asked if I would like to help him. Apart from going with him to talk to another girl from school who's hamster was one of Sniffles' and Snuffles' sisters, one of the first things he asked me to do was to research the origins of hamsters so I spent all day in the library and on the internet and I found out that all hamsters are descended from one single mother who was dug up from her burrow in a field in Syria with her eleven young. She killed one of her young when she was caught and then another five escaped, but five survived. All Syrian hamsters descend from just those five hamsters, which is amazing if you think about it.

I have deleted the rest because it would ruin the rest of the plot and, frankly, it is kind of embarrassing.

6. *And Lo. The litter of ten was taken from Twinkie still blind and hairless and raised by the human man Israel Aharoni and his wife and taken to the university and given to another human man Saul Alder where the cage was solid but the floor was wood. And thus did five escape, and their names were Twinkle Lavender Bramble Fanny and Digger. And five did not escape and their names were Noodles Nutmeg*

Hazel Jelly and Mozart. And Nutmeg and Jelly were placed in a cage together and begot Badger and Ham, and Ham begot Peanut who mated with Japhet who begot Apple who begot Wrinkles who begot Cookie who begot Miffles and Muffles and Monkey who were smuggled into this country in the coat pocket of a human man.

7. *And thus are all of us descended from Twinkie.*

CONCERNING EXPERT ASSISTANCE

At half past seven in the evening, in 'The Three Cups, in Bedford, at the corner table in the lounge bar which is by the piano, Billy Bones sat down bearing two pints of Greene King IPA, one for him and one for Anne Thrope who sat opposite.

'Did you ask him?' said Anne.

'No,' said Billy, apologetically.

'Why not?'

'It's hard,' he said, 'I'm not supposed to know all this stuff about him. I can't just stand there all blasé and blurt out that I know all about his past.'

'Hardly all about?'

'Still. If he's never said anything before there must be a reason. He probably doesn't want people to know.'

'Why wouldn't he want people to know?'

'Maybe not want is too strong, maybe he just doesn't feel comfortable with it. People act differently around policemen, they can't help it.'

Anne tried her drink and grimaced. Billy had persuaded her to try a bitter instead of lager, she did not like it very much.

'You won't like it very much on your first try,' said Billy.

'Now you tell me.'

'Keep at it for at least one pint, it will grow on you.'

'I have my doubts,' she said, taking another sip.

'Then it will not,' he said, 'you have to be positive about it.'

'Being positive is not in my nature.'

'This will open up a whole new world of beer for you. No more will beer be a fizzy foamy thirst quenching way to get drunk, it will become an end in itself, a wealth of taste and experience to rival wine.'

'I don't get that much out of wine you know,' said Anne, 'I mostly just pick a dry white and drink it to get drunk.'

'That's because wine is difficult to master,' said Billy, 'it's a shy girl who won't talk. Beer is a buxom lass who puts her hands straight down your trousers.'

Anne looked at him. 'Do you lie awake at night thinking about this stuff?'

'What? Buxom girls and beer? Yeah - pretty much.'

'So what are we going to do?'

'About talking to Bob?'

Anne nodded.

'Wait till Russian Frank gets in,' said Billy, 'he's been dying to come clean to Bob but is too nervous, he thinks Bob will get him deported.'

'Would he?'

'Doubt it.'

'What if Frank doesn't come in.'

'Then we'll just have to come back tomorrow night.'

Anne sampled her beer again. 'Not so terrible,' she said, 'might have a white wine next though.'

Frank came in at nine o'clock on the dot. By that time Calvin was already there and drinking with Billy and Anne, they called Frank over once he had been to the bar.

'Hello, my friends,' he said, 'I hear through grapevines that you have been having interesting times.'

'What have you heard Frank?' asked Billy.

'Firstly,' said Frank, 'my name is not Frank.'

'No?'

'Is Filip Semichastny.'

'Phillip ...'

'Filip.'

'Semi-nasty.'

'Semichastny.'

'Do you mind if we keep calling you Frank?'

'Frank is not my name but everyone I know these days knows me as Frank, so what is a name? Perhaps Frank is my name. Perhaps now I am Frank pretending to be Filip rather than Filip pretending to be Frank.' He seized Anne by the hands and looked into her eyes. 'I do not know,' he said, 'what is the difference between Filip and Frank.'

'Frank is Ukranian,' said Anne, not impressed by having her hands seized.

'Yes,' said Frank (or was it Filip), 'that is it, Frank is Ukranian and Filip is Russian. I am Russian I think. I only went to Ukraine the once. So I am Filip.'

'But we can still call you Frank?' asked Billy.

'I think I do not mind,' said Frank, 'you know Frank, Frank is your friend, it would be unfair to expect you to be friends with Filip as well. Filip is not a good man, has done bad things. Frank is harmless Ukrainian bookseller, very likeable man.'

'Frank, then,' said Billy, confused.

'Frank,' said Frank, 'but you tell Filip about trouble with CIA and MI5 and maybe he can help.'

'Actually that was exactly why we wanted to talk to you.'

'I thought so, see! Am not such bad spy after all. But I think now you be better off talking to Bob. He still have contacts but I am ignored. Call office last week to query fact that retirement bonus is to be paid in roubles.' He looked at Anne again, as if she might somehow help him. 'Always I am paid in pounds sterling - now suddenly roubles. I send question last week and still they have not replied.'

Billy coughed.

'Yes, Billy,' said Frank, 'you tell me about CIA and MI5 and then I tell KGB and get bonus in sterling and am able to help you too, we all scratch each others backs.'

Billy described to him, in great detail, the events from the first disappearance of Sniffles (or was it Snuffles) to the events of the past Sunday when Calvin was taken away in a van and Billy's bathroom repose was so rudely disturbed by a CIA spy drone. I could describe, I suppose, exactly how Billy related this, and in some ways it is interestingly different from how I have put it, but to do so would run the risk of writing a recursive book and I don't think any of us want to do that. I want to finish writing it and get back to my everyday life and no doubt you want to finish reading it and get back to yours. An infinite book would be no good except to someone being paid by the word, and none of us are, writers or readers.

Billy's account of the story was so long that it encompassed a whole new round of drinks, which Anne bought, and so boring that Anne and Calvin started talking among themselves, about choral singing if you must know, though neither of them had any expertise in that area.

When Billy was done Frank asked if that was it, received a positive answer, and then stood up without a

word and walked to the toilet. He was there a long time, so long that Calvin suggested sending out a search party. Which would be Billy because Anne could hardly be expected to venture into the gents and Calvin found pub toilets so difficult to use that he had, over the years, developed a quite extraordinary bladder capacity and saved it all up till he got home. On the occasions when he really had to go he generally took a pint glass in with him and used it as a transfer device between bladder and urinal, even in that case it took some care as, on the occasions he was driven to do it, far more than a pint would be produced.

All that is irrelevant anyway because Frank came back and sat down again like he had only been away a couple of minutes.

'Spies turn for five reasons,' he said, jabbing the table with his finger, 'all of them turn because of idealism, from each side to the other. Russians turn because they like living in the west and do not want to be called back to Moscow. Americans turn because of money. English turn because they are gay and you find them out and blackmail them. French turn because they sleep with beautiful woman who is actually KGB and you have pictures and blackmail them.'

He paused to make sure that had sunk in with everybody.

'For us,' he said, 'idealism is no use, it only comes by chance and it will not come to us. We do not have money so we cannot turn CIA - so we must find out which of British MI5 agents is gay. Have pictures taken of them with another man and blackmail them.'

Nobody spoke.

'You are thinking this is problem, obviously we need person to sleep with MI5 agent. Do any of you know pretty gay boy who might help.'

Still, nobody spoke.

'Very well,' continued Frank, 'then Billy must do it. Obviously he must have shave and haircut first.'

'Frank,' said Anne, slowly, 'I think you may be behind the times.'

'Behind the times how?'

'Just proving somebody is gay isn't really enough to blackmail them anymore, even in the security services.'

'No?'

'Besides,' said Calvin, 'what if they aren't gay.'

'Ahha,' said Frank confidently, 'always many spies are gay, because gays have to conceal their real feelings which gives them good practice to be spies.'

'Maybe once,' said Anne, 'but I still don't think, even if you find a homosexual MI5 agent, that you'll be able to blackmail him about it. The chances are he will already be out.'

'Blackmail is KGB way,' said Frank, 'blackmail and assassination. You ask for my help and this is help. Unless you want assassination.'

'No,' said Billy quickly, 'we don't want assassination.'

'Hello gents,' said Bob the landlord, suddenly standing unexpectedly at the table, 'any empties?'

An awkward silence descended as Bob collected the empty glasses.

'Couldn't help overhearing your little quandary there Billy,' he said, 'think I may know a man you could talk to might be able to help. You interested?'

'I think so,' said Billy.

'I'll call him,' said Bob, 'and let you know.'

PART 3

We owe everything and nothing to a human man called Israel Yariv who was employed to provide hamsters for his experiments. Yariv, who's butterfly-catching expertise had pleased the Sultan and won him free passage though Syria, Yariv who, with the help of the local guide Georgius Khalil Tab'an, approached Sheik El-Bebed and sought permission to hunt us in his fields. Yariv who, with a mob of men, dug us out from a depth of eight feet. Eight feet! Handed up from Georgius' hands to Yariv's. Yariv who, with his wife, nursed us and fed us when our own mother turned against us.

There are other human men in our history. Ben-Menachen who first persuaded us to breed in captivity, Saul Alder who first smuggled us into this country in his coat pockets, many many more, but it is to Yariv that we owe the most. We thrived in captivity, we invented for ourselves a new life, we became something other, something more and something less than what we were, something shaped by these human men and women, something new.

CONCERNING FAMILY

On Thursday morning, over a late breakfast of branflakes and yogurt, Billy Bones asked Anne Thrope this: 'Did I tell you that my mother and grandmother are visiting today?'

Anne replied in the negative.

'Well they are,' said Billy, 'just for a cup of tea after they've been shopping.'

'Do you want me to pretend to be your girlfriend?' said Anne, and Billy could not tell whether she was being serious or not, and if you could have asked Anne, and if she was being honest with you, you probably would have discovered that she did not completely know herself.

Billy considered the offer seriously. 'It would probably make things easier today,' he mused, 'but not in the long term. In fact suddenly I want you out of the flat entirely.'

'Isn't going to happen, this is my home now, and since when did you think in the long term?'

'Only when my mother is involved,' said Billy, 'you need to play a long game with my family. You need to be thinking in terms of decades to better them.'

Anne stirred her bran-flakes around in her yogurt. The yogurt was cherry flavour.

'I ought to warn you about my mother,' said Billy.

'I know,' said Anne, 'lesbian cross-dresser.'

'Well there's that,' said Billy, 'she can also be somewhat forthright.'

'Forthright.'

'Calvin says she terrifies him.'

'I'm quite sure Calvin would happily fight every football hooligan in Essex but would still go weak kneed at the voice of a stern woman.'

'Weak kneed?'

'Poor choice of phrase.'

'Well, you can judge for yourself when she gets here.'

'Can I pick a fight?' Anne asked with a smirk.

'At your own risk,' said Billy.

Billy mother, Ambrose Bones, and his maternal grandmother, Eliza Bones, turned up at twelve, earlier than they said they would.

Ambrose was dressed unremarkably but androgynously in jeans and a t-shirt. She did not remark on Anne at all, even when introduced to her. Eliza on the other hand ...

'Is this your girlfriend Billy?' asked Eliza.

'No gran,' said Billy, 'she's just my flat-mate.'

'Hello dear,' said Eliza, shaking Anne's hand formally, 'he's such a lovely boy. I always hoped he'd end up with a nice girl.'

'He said she's just his flat-mate,' said Ambrose, loudly.

'I heard,' snapped the grandmother, 'I'm not deaf.'

'Deafness isn't the problem,' said Ambrose.

'I'm not daft either,' said Eliza.

'Ambrose,' said Anne, 'that's an unusual name.'

Billy froze.

'It's a perfectly fine name,' said Ambrose coldly.

'For a woman,' added Anne.

'I'll make tea,' said Billy, all but leaping for cover into the kitchen, 'who wants tea?'

'Oh dear,' said Eliza, taking Anne warmly by the hand, 'we thought she was a boy for ever so long.'

'Thought because you said,' said Ambrose.

'It was confusing,' said Eliza, 'I was all on my own and there was a war on. We didn't have sex education like the young people do now. Anne understands don't you Anne.'

'You knew enough to make a baby,' said Ambrose, 'I'm sure you could tell boy from girl.'

'Tea?' asked Billy again.

'Yes please dear,' said Eliza. Ambrose nodded and Anne shook her head.

'It's still unusual though,' said Anne with a perfectly innocent face, 'even for a boy.'

Ambrose scowled.

'Oh dear let me tell you,' said Eliza, pulling Anne into the kitchen after Billy, hand still clutching her arm, 'I would never have agreed to it if I thought it would be permanent, but Billy's grandfather god rest his soul was set on it. It was a Bones family name you see.'

'He thought Ambrose was a boy?' asked Anne. Billy shot her a look that rather perfectly expressed his disapproval with her line of questioning but Anne pretended not to notice.

'Oh he was so set on a boy,' Eliza remembered fondly, 'and so proud when Ambrose was born. How could I tell him.'

'Oh mother,' said Billy, 'I was meaning to ask. Are you still active with the communists.'

'Communists!' spat Eliza, 'her father died fighting them and she joins the party.'

'Father died of a heart attack in nineteen fifty mother,' said Ambrose wearily, 'and he never fought the communists he fought the Germans.'

'Don't you listen to her dear,' said Eliza.

'Not very active,' said Ambrose, 'but I'm still paid up, why?'

'It turns out my friend Frank is a KGB agent.'

'Frank who runs the second hand bookshop on Castle Road? I didn't know you were friends with him.'

'You knew?'

'He donated,' said Ambrose, 'only two people donate to communists, nutters and KGB. It stands to reason that any genuine communist doesn't have money, you become communist because you're broke, if and when you make some money you tend to discover that you were actually a capitalist all along. Frank had a bit of money, didn't seem insane, and spoke with a Russian accent. Ergo, KGB'

'Anyway, he's retired and come out.'

'Hah! Good for him.'

'He might be looking for people to make representations on his behalf, he doesn't want to go back, he has a life here.'

'I can ask, but we're mostly just thought of as a bunch of far left loonies these days.'

'I meant make representations to the Russians.'

'So did I.'

'Tea.' Billy handed out mugs of tea.

'Do you think they have tea in Russia?' Eliza asked Anne.

'Of course they do mother,' said Ambrose, 'but they all brew it in the one big peoples' pot.'

'I don't think I'd like that,' said Eliza.

'So,' said Ambrose, 'I assume that since you're living with a girl you're not sleeping with, you got her in to help with the rent. Are you short of money again?'

Anne looked up in surprise at the sharpness of the remark, fired, quite literally, across her head.

'I get by,' said Billy, 'had a job pay last week, getting the band back together.'

Ambrose Bones snorted in a dismissive way.

'Are you staying long,' asked Anne, sunny disposition not slipped a notch.

'Are these your cacti?' asked Ambrose.

'It's a hobby.'

'Like my son with his records. There is something wrong with people who collect things, they have something missing that they're trying to replace.'

'I think that's a given,' said Anne, 'the question is, what are we missing and why can't we get it?'

'Normally with women it's children and with men it's a purpose in life.'

'Well you've had children,' said Anne, 'do you have a purpose?'

'Yes,' said Ambrose, 'I do.'

'So you truly are both one and the other then.'

Ambrose did not answer, she was examining one of the cactuses.

'As it happens,' said Billy, 'there's more communist party help I need.'

Ambrose kept looking at the cactus.

'Mother ...'

'Yes,' she said, 'I heard. What is it?'

'I need to join.'

That surprised Ambrose and she looked back at him. 'You don't have a political bone in your body, why would you want to join the party?'

'Straight up,' said Billy, 'I need the CIA to take an interest in me.'

'What makes you think the CIA would be interested in you?'

'I know something they want to know, but at the moment they think I'm just an interested citizen and are not concerned about my intentions. I want them to be concerned.'

'What do you know?' asked Ambrose forcefully, almost like a mother with a naughty child.

'Where a certain person is.'

'Who?'

'A hamster breeder of Middle Eastern appearance, and don't ask me any more about him because that's all I know, that and where he is.'

'You found him!' exclaimed Anne.

'Yesterday.'

'And you didn't tell me?'

'I'm telling you now,' said Billy.

'And because of this you want to join the party?' asked Ambrose.

'All I need is for you to take me to a couple of meetings.'

'You've never taken in interest in politics before, why should they think you have now? I barely even go myself anymore. They'll be suspicious.'

'I thought you wanted them suspicious,' said Anne.

'Not the CIA,' said Ambrose, 'the communists.'

'Will it matter if they are?' asked Billy

Ambrose thought for a moment. 'No,' she conceded, 'they're desperate for members these days.'

'I don't suppose you know any radical Islamic organisations?' asked Billy, 'that would really do the trick.'

'No,' said Ambrose, 'why would I?'

'I don't know - you always seemed to sign up with every weirdo carrying a placard.'

'I draw the line at religion,' said Ambrose, 'it's more evil than Thatcher and Blair combined.'

'Shame,' said Billy.

'Ambrose dear,' said Eliza, who had gently twisted Anne's arm in order to look at her watch, 'hadn't we better be off if we're going to watch Midsomer Murders.'

'Had we?' asked Ambrose.

'I think so,' said Eliza, 'it's nearly quarter past now.'

'They meet on Thursdays,' said Ambrose to Billy, 'shall I pick you up tonight about eight?'

'That would be perfect,' said Billy.

Ambrose shrugged and, falteringly, awkwardly, hugged her son good-bye. She went as if to kiss Anne on the cheek but, instead, just sniffed at her suspiciously. 'I know your secret,' she whispered into Anne's ear.

After they had gone Anne took a look at the cactus Ambrose had been taking such an interest in. On its side, almost hidden from view, was a small, round, burn.

CONCERNING ANNE'S SECRET

Late at night, when the Quantity Surveyors were asleep, or after she moved into the flat on Shakespeare Road when Billy was gently snoring in his own room, Anne, who had gone to bed hours before, quietly rose, put on her dressing gown and slippers, and slipped out to the greenhouse when she lived with the Quantity Surveyors, or just outside the back door when she lived with Billy, and smoked a cigarette.

Never, not for a second, had either the Quantity Surveyors or Billy suspected that Anne smoked. Anne smoked only the one cigarette a day. She hid the boxes and matches well. She was careful to air or deodorise her dressing gown afterwards. She collected the butts in an airtight Tupperware box she kept for that purpose and disposed of them weekly in a public bin somewhere.

That was it, that was all there was to it. Anne's secret was neither big nor important. In fact the only notable thing about it was the great pains she went to keep it. Quite why she did this is a mystery to me I'm afraid, Anne was

hardly the sort of person to be ashamed of being a smoker.
Yet keep it a secret she did until the day she told me.

CONCERNING BOB THE LANDLORD'S FRIEND IN SPECIAL BRANCH

Anne turned up at the pub at about ten thirty expecting to find Billy but he was not there. Communist party meetings, she mused, must go on till late. Bob the Landlord shouted hello to her but continued serving customers in the other bar. They had a date after closing time with his friend from Special Branch, a man, he said, who could help them. Calvin was not there, and neither was Frank or anyone else she knew, so she sat at the bar and ordered a glass of white wine and wished she had brought a book.

'All alone tonight?' asked the girl with the blue hair.

'I'm waiting for my friend.'

'Is your friend with the wheelchair coming?'

'I don't know,' said Anne, 'I guess if he's not here now then no, not tonight.'

The girl wiped the surface of the bar. 'He is very big man,' she said.

'Yes,' said Anne.

'Very strong,' said the girl.

'Yes,' said Anne.

'Does he have girlfriend?' said the girl.

'No,' said Anne, suddenly interested.

'I was just making conversation,' said the girl, and wandered off to serve another customer. Anne sipped at her drink and wondered what, if anything, she should say to Calvin.

Billy turned up at about quarter to eleven and sat beside her.

'How was it?' she asked.

'Dull,' he said, 'all they do is talk about politics.'

'Well that's a given.'

'Iraq war this, Iran that, workers rights the other, I barely stayed awake.'

'Do you think it did any good?'

'I hope so, if at all possible I'd like to avoid going again next week.'

'You think the CIA will know you went?'

'We shall find out.'

'And the hamster breeder, you never told me how you found him?'

'Truth is,' said Billy, dropping his voice to a whisper, 'I didn't.'

'You didn't!' said Anne, 'but why lie.'

'I strongly suspect the flat is bugged.'

'Bugged!'

'It occurred to me after the morning in Calvin's bathroom. They spent a lot of money just watching Calvin with that flying doohicky.'

'The pterodactyl.'

'If you like. I pretended I knew a fair bit at that time, purely in order that they should tell me what they knew and

to scare them into giving Pickles back. Later I realised that if they were already interested in Calvin just because he'd caused a bit a trouble and shouted about hamsters, then they would be very interested in me. I'm guessing that the flat is now bugged.'

'You could have told me.'

'It wouldn't have done any good and there was a risk you would have acted unnatural and given the game away. Try not to do that by the way.'

'So why go through the whole rigmarole about pretending to be communist?'

'Two reasons,' said Billy, 'one, because mum would never in a million years believe I actually wanted to go to a meeting and would have kicked up a fuss and probably ruined everything, two, so that they now know for sure I want to meet them again, and three, three reasons in fact, so that they think they know what I'm up to.'

'And you haven't found him?'

'Some leads,' said Billy, 'he's obviously been around breeding hamsters, always with Fenchurch, who must be getting very tired by now, but if the CIA and MI5 can't find him what hope do I have.'

'This is getting complicated,' said Anne.

'It's simple really,' said Billy, 'we want Sniffles back. We have to convince the people who have him that we have something worth exchanging him for.'

'And when it turns out we don't.'

'Hopefully something will turn up by then.'

'And this friend of Bob's?'

'Some Special Branch bloke apparently. Don't trust him, he won't be on our side, but he might be useful.'

'This is getting very complicated.'

'You want to go home and let me do it alone?'

'Hell no.'

Time passed. Bob rang last orders, then later rang time, then later hurried a few stragglers out of the pub and locked the door. He and the blue haired girl cleaned up and put chairs on tables.

'When's he turning up?' asked Billy.

'Has to drive up from London,' said Bob, 'shouldn't be much longer.'

After not much longer had passed there was a knock on the door and Bob unlocked it and let a burly man into the pub. They shook hands and asked each other how it was going. Anne noticed that neither of them actually gave an answer.

'This is Craig,' said Bob, 'Craig this is Billy and Anne. I'll leave you lot together. Do you want a drink.'

Craig declined and suggested they sit in the corner. They did.

'First thing,' he said as they sat down, 'don't tell me anything unless I ask you and only tell me what I ask you to. I don't know what this is about and I don't want to know what this is about. I know you've had a run in with the CIA and your friend had two run ins with Five. That's enough to convince me that I don't even want to be here, but Bob says you're all right and I'm here as a favour to Bob. You,' he indicated to Anne, 'I wasn't expecting you. Who are you?'

'I'm his flat-mate,' said Anne.

'You mixed up in all this?'

'I am.'

'Right. Bob reckons you're okay then you're okay. Bob says you want advice, ask me advice.' He looked at Billy.

'Why are MI5 and the CIA not working together?'

'Good question but there's no rule says they have to work together. Better question is why's the Agency operating on our patch without informing Five. Running two ops in parallel is dangerous, it confuses things. First theory, could be political, there's an arrangement between

Five and the Agency to share information. The Agency produce nearly four times as much as Five so they don't like it. Think they're getting a bum deal. Maybe they think if they can pip Five to data on Five's patch then that'll give them the leverage to rearrange the deal. Second theory, could be strategical. Five is cold on some of what the Agency are hot on, the Agency are cold on some of what Five is hot on, but mostly the first way round; the Agency can afford to be hot on more. Perhaps the Agency don't like the angle Five is taking. Not likely though. If they knew what's going on more likely they'd co-operate and pool resources. Third theory, could be operational. Maybe one side suspects the other of a mole. Happened before. Fourth theory, could be a cock up. Also happened before. Next question.'

'They have something we want,' said Billy, 'how do we get it?'

'Have something they want. Next question.'

'MI5 interrogated my friend near here, where are they based?'

'It'll be a military base. Either British or yank, doesn't matter, quite possibly the Agency are operating from the same place and neither team know what the other is up to.'

'Are they watching me?'

'Don't know. Good bet though.'

'Will my phone be bugged?'

'Not by the Agency unless it's an old fashioned bag job, they don't have exchange access except through Five. Five will be listening for sure.'

'How expensive is a remote control spy plane?'

'Expensive, but don't read too much into it, the yanks have big budgets. If you see another one that'll mean they're committing resources.'

'You know it crashed?'

'Everyone knows it crashed. CIA think they got away with it though.'

'They've committed a crime, can we use that against them?'

'Not unless it's a big crime. Don't tell me any more about the crime, in fact, don't tell me any more full stop. We're done here.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me, thank Bob. Was it your friend with the wheelchair flashed his old man and snapped a pair of handcuffs in the interview?'

'That was him.'

Craig stood up and put a ten pound note on the table. 'Buy him a drink on the Specials. That was fucking hilarious. Wait half an hour after I'm gone to leave. Goodnight.' He went over to say something to Bob and then walked back out the front door.

'Want a drink while you're waiting?' shouted Bob from behind the till where he was totting up the day's takings.

CONCERNING CLANDESTINE MEETINGS

Anne woke up on Friday morning and lay in bed thinking to herself that she had a date that evening with Quentin, the red headed man from the Quantity Surveyors dinner party. She was not terribly excited but she was looking forward to it, she expected to have a nice time, she did not expect to be swept off her feet. The plain fact was that Anne was not all that interested in romance, at least at that time, and so was going out with Quentin for the simple reason that he seemed nice enough and had asked her. She was expecting a pleasant evening and that was all. She devoted more time and energy, laying there, to thinking about cacti.

Billy woke up a few hours later on Friday morning and lay in bed thinking to himself that he would probably talk to the CIA that day. If they did not get in touch with him then he had definitely misread the situation and would have to think of a new plan as soon as possible. They did not scare him, and the fact that he was bluffing, playing a hand he did not hold, did not bother him. His normal discomfort with lying did not apparently apply to this situation. The

only niggle of doubt in his mind was the worry that Sniffles (or was it Snuffles) was no longer alive. The man from MI5 who had interviewed Calvin had definitely said he was, but that proved nothing.

Over lunch, because they had breakfasted separately, Billy outlined his plan.

'What I am going to do,' he said, 'is walk down to the park and sit by the duck pond. In my experience of old movies spies quite often meet by duck ponds in parks. Failing that I may walk down by the river. Failing that I'll grab a pint somewhere. If they don't approach me at any of those places then we'll know they don't care.'

'And you'll have to go to another communist party meeting,' said Anne, remembering that the flat might be bugged.

'I don't think I could hack another' said Billy, 'besides, a week is too long to wait. I'll just have to approach MI5 directly.'

'Why don't you anyway?'

'Because of Calvin's altercations with them. The Americans I met in his bathroom seemed much more ready to do business. Now I know where the hamster breeder is I want to do business, not get beaten up.'

Anne did not say anything, not trusting herself not to give away the lie.

'I'll see you this evening,' said Billy, 'let you know how it went.'

'Actually I'm out this evening.'

'Where?'

'I have a date with Quentin.'

'What, the ginger bloke from Saturday night?'

Anne nodded.

'Well I'll phone you if I need you.'

It was not till quite a lot later that Anne realised she was annoyed that Billy had not been jealous. It was not till a

very long time after that that Billy realised he had been jealous, but such things are beyond the scope of this story. If I have time at the end I'll fill you in on what happened.

Billy was approached, just as he had predicted, in the park. He recognised the two men from Calvin's bathroom, the one who had mostly spoken and one of the ones who had mostly not. The men stood at the edge of the pond, looked around, and then sat down on the bench either side of Billy.

'You,' said the man who had spoken before, not looking at Billy and apparently talking to himself, 'have some very interesting friends.'

'Did you have anyone in particular in mind?'

'Oh there are several,' said the man, 'starting with your man in the wheelchair who's had some adventures recently, then there's your mother who took you to a communist meeting last night, and then there is the surprisingly senior Special Branch detective who visited you in the pub late last night. I can't imagine what else you would have been talking to him about except a certain matter that I believe you said you would not talk about.' He turned to face Billy and said 'I thought we had a bargain.'

'What is it,' said Billy, 'with hamsters anyway?'

'Haven't you guessed, you had your little assistant do the research after all.'

'Surely it's not the Syrian thing?' said Billy.

'It is exactly the Syrian thing.'

'Oh you're kidding!'

'Domesticated hamsters originated in Syria, then came to this country, then to the States,' said the other man. 'For decades there was no other source of hamsters that would breed. All hamsters were Syrian and the Syrians knew something about hamsters that we did not. That scared us and it should scare you too.'

'Then,' said the first man, 'other hamsters became available, you know where from?'

'I actually don't know much about hamsters at all.'

'From China and Russia, also coming over here.'

'And that,' said the second man, 'scared us even more.'

'We had an open door,' said the first man.

'The hamster was a potential attack vector,' said the second man, 'from the Jihadists, the Russians, and communist China. There was a clean unbroken line, one Syrian supplied lineage of hamsters with unheard of penetration throughout the country.'

'They were going after our children,' said the first man.

'It was an attack vector,' said the second man.

'It was an open door,' said the first man.

'One we could not close,' said the second man.

'Please,' said Billy, 'I get that you are scared of hamsters.'

'So should you be,' said the first man, 'so should you be. We've been watching hamsters for years, plotting their spread, watching for potential attack patterns. You know what we saw?'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing to the untrained eye perhaps, but the hamsters were manoeuvring, soon they covered every major population centre, they have the country in a stranglehold, but they were still not activated.'

'It became obvious,' said the second man, 'that the Syrians were playing a very long game indeed.'

'This scared us,' said the first man.

'Apart from anything else,' said the second man, 'we did not know what the activation mechanism was.'

'That scared us even more,' said the first man.

'Perhaps there isn't one,' said Billy.

'Oh there is one,' said the first man, 'there's always an angle, always a play, always a potential weakness that your enemy is going for. If you haven't seen it yet all that means is you aren't looking hard enough.'

'But we were one up,' said the second man.

'We were watching the hamsters,' said the first.

'And what happened here was exactly what we were watching for,' said the second.

'They're being seeded with a new strain,' said the first, 'new DNA is being put into the mix.'

'Like a two part explosive,' said the second, 'you have one inert liquid, another inert liquid, you mix them together and ...'

'Boom,' said the first man.

'You think the hamsters are going to explode?' said Billy.

'It's a figure of speech,' said the first man, 'we believe this is far more dangerous than any bomb.'

'What do you think it is?'

'We don't know,' said the second man.

'But we believe it's dangerous.'

Billy looked from one man to the other, there was no doubt that they were deadly serious.

'So,' said the first man, 'are you going to tell us where we can find this hamster breeder.'

'No,' said Billy, 'because you are quite obviously insane.' He stood up and walked away.

'Wait,' said the first man, running after Billy and gesturing for the second not to follow.

'We scared you,' said the man, walking beside Billy but pointedly not looking at him, 'that's fair, it was a little intense. But we're scared ourselves, there must be something we can do, I know you want something.'

'I want Sniffles back,' said Billy, still walking, still facing directly ahead.

'We don't have Sniffles.'

'Not my problem,' said Billy, and made an abrupt turn so as to leave the man standing. Even knowing he was being watched he could not help but smile.

CONCERNING THE RED HEADED MAN

Quentin arranged to meet Anne in the George and Dragon on Mill Street, handily just down the road from The Three Cups.

'Were there repercussions?' he asked once they had sat down, Anne with a glass of red wine and Quentin with a bottle of Magners.

'About what?' asked Anne.

'The dinner party.'

'Oh cripes that!' said Anne, 'I'd forgotten all about that. You could say there were repercussions yes. I've moved out.'

'Blimey!'

'I was planning to go anyway, it just got accelerated a bit.'

'Where are you living now?'

'With Billy.'

'Billy who was there that night.'

'The very same. He had a spare room.'

'I used to know him you know, on the folk circuit.'

'You mentioned it on Saturday,' said Anne, and then leaning in close asked in a low voice 'was he any good?'

Quentin grimaced. 'Truthfully?'

'Yes, truthfully.'

'No,' said Quentin, 'not really.'

'I suspected as much.'

'I don't want to be hard on him, he had a definite something, you know, but it wasn't musical.'

'Oh he has something all right, but god knows what it is.'

Quentin drank his drink and one of those awkward lulls in conversation descended that sometimes descend on two people who do not know each other very well. Anne, who had once been told that they only occurred at twenty minutes to and twenty minutes past the hour looked at her watch. It was indeed twenty minutes to eight.

The act of looking at her watch had a negative effect on Quentin, who assumed that she was getting bored just ten minutes into the date and resolved that he must redouble his efforts to make conversation. By some incredible coincidence this was going to cause the date to go really rather well, not because he said anything especially witty or anything but because ... well, you'll see. It goes like this. First Quentin says:

'We should talk about the things people talk about on first dates. What do you do?'

'I'm a middle school teacher,' said Anne, 'you know that.'

'I did know that yes, but I don't make the rules and we have to follow them. Now you ask me what I do.'

'You're a musician,' said Anne, 'you told me on Saturday.'

'No,' said Quentin, who had correctly discerned the flicker of a smile playing about the tips of Anne's mouth, 'follow the rules.'

'What do you do?' asked Anne dutifully.

'As it happens, I am currently a lab technician.'

'Oh,' said Anne, 'not a musician then.'

'Strictly I'm that as well,' he said, 'but lab technician pays better.'

'What does it involve?'

'That's the really exciting bit. I can't actually tell you because it's covered by the official secrets act.'

'Oh go on.'

'There's something else,' said Quentin, who knew this was the point where he lost a lot of potential partners, but he had high hopes that Anne would be different, and not without reason, 'are you very opposed to animal testing?'

'Not at all,' said Anne with a shrug that belied her sudden interest. Underneath the table her hand was gripping the chair. 'What sort of animals?' she asked.

'At the moment,' said Quentin, 'hamsters.'

'Really,' said Anne breezily, the knuckles on her hand gripping the chair going white, 'where do you work?'

'At a military site near Shefford,' he said.

Anne lost control and laughed. Quentin looked confused.

'That is brilliant,' said Anne, 'I don't believe it.'

'Really,' said Quentin, 'because that does put a lot of women off.'

'Not me,' said Anne, 'in fact, tell me more, it's fascinating.'

CONCERNING A PICNIC BY THE RIVER

On Saturday afternoon, because it was such a nice day, Anne rang and asked if I would like to go with Billy, Calvin, and her for a picnic lunch out near Olney.

It was a beautiful hot summer day and Anne, who had been there before, led us from the bus stop to a pretty grassy spot by the river shaded by several tall oak trees. There we stopped and opened up the picnic hamper that Billy and Calvin had been taking turns carrying, and had lunch. We drank chilled white wine (actually I was only allowed lemonade and Calvin insisted on beer so brought his own) and ate chicken wings and sandwiches and cup cakes till we were fat and lazy and contented and we lay on our backs in a row on the slope of the river bank looking up at the leaves of the trees swaying gently beneath the bright blue sky and listening to the river Ouse gurgle beguilingly past.

Billy, who had worn a cowboy hat all day and taken offence when the rest of us had tried to tease him about it, pulled it down over his head to shield his eyes from the sun and, I think, started to drift off to sleep. Before he could

however Anne propped herself up on her elbows, her wine glass standing in the tall grass besides her, and announced that we should talk.

'We should,' said Billy sleepily from under his hat, 'do you want to tell the other two what you told me last night.'

'Emily,' Anne said, 'are you listening?'

I propped myself up on my elbows just like she was. She was wearing a floral summer dress and a wide brimmed black straw hat, and in that pose, with her hair down and the light catching it through the mesh of her hat, looked very striking indeed. I would not say pretty, because Anne, though handsome, was never really what you could call pretty, but at that moment I would not hesitate to describe her as beautiful. In fact I would say she was far more beautiful than any of the girls who are most often called beautiful, because Anne's beauty actually had character, it was a beauty that needed circumstances to draw it out, and not just a sunny day by the river either, it came from who she was, it was in her demeanour as well as her face, it was her confidence and her resolve and her strength of will.

'Emily,' she said, 'this whole matter is becoming serious, what we do next may be illegal. We need to know that you are not going to blab or boast about it to your friends at school. You need to be on board with us now.'

I nodded and said I would.

'Do you swear?' asked Anne.

'I do.' I said.

'The reason we are out here,' said Billy, from under his hat, 'and not in the pub ...'

'I was wondering that,' interrupted Calvin.

'Is,' Billy continued, 'because we are being watched and, most likely, bugged. From now on be very careful what you say and where you say it. I have reason to believe that the Three Cups is not safe and neither is my flat, that probably means your flat is out too Calvin.'

'It's also why Billy and I are wearing hats,' said Anne, 'to hide from anyone who might read lips.'

'Should we be wearing hats?' said Calvin.

'We'll be okay under the trees,' said Billy, 'I wouldn't worry about it right now, but this is the last time we speak freely until this is cleared up. From the moment we leave this spot be very careful what you say.'

'Understood,' said Calvin, 'although it is not really in my character to do so.'

'I know,' said Billy, 'but I'm trusting you on this.'

'The situation is this,' said Anne, 'we know that MI5 has Sniffles, and we think we know where, I'll get to how in a moment. We also know that the CIA is active but not cooperating with MI5. We have a number of theories as to why that is, but ultimately we don't think it matters. They're not playing together which means we can play them off each other. Clear so far.'

'Think so,' said Calvin. I nodded.

'Specifics then,' said Anne, 'both sides, but especially the CIA, are particularly interested in meeting the owner of Fenchurch, Sniffles' mother, a man of Middle Eastern appearance who has been breeding her with hamsters across the country and distributing the litters back to pet shops. The CIA at least, and possibly MI5, believe that Billy knows where that man is.'

'I don't,' said Billy, 'it was my intention to fob them off with the first Middle Eastern looking man I could find in return for them giving Sniffles back, but having met the CIA yesterday I am worried about exactly what they will do to him.'

'There is a process, Emily,' said Anne, 'called Extraordinary Rendition. Have you heard of it?'

I told her I had heard of it but did not really know what it meant.

'It means, basically,' said Billy, 'that I cannot in good conscience hand anyone over to the CIA'

'Are they really that nuts about hamsters?' asked Calvin.

'Nuts,' said Billy, 'is the right word.'

'So do we have an alternative plan?'

'That is exactly what we are here to discuss,' said Billy, 'Anne.'

'Last night,' said Anne, 'I went on a date with a man who works in a government research laboratory near Shefford doing experiments on hamsters.'

I gasped. My immediate thought was of people doing experiments on Sniffles and hurting him and I could feel myself begin to cry.

'I quizzed him pretty thoroughly,' said Anne quickly, 'if subtly, and one of the things I made sure of was that he did not hurt the hamsters.'

'Are you sure?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Anne, 'he was very clear that, in the last month, they had not done anything worse to a hamster than take a blood sample. Nothing worse than what a vet would do.'

'And before that?' asked Calvin.

'Don't ask,' said Anne.

'The question we are here to decide,' said Billy from beneath his hat, 'is what to do. We have two options, either we scare him into helping us, in which case that would be your remit Calvin.'

'I don't think I'm that scary. I just have a short temper on account of my not having any legs.'

'Or,' continued Billy, 'option two, we persuade him to help, which would probably require your help Emily.'

I asked what I would have to do.

'Nothing more than explain what has happened and how much you miss your hamster. Working those tear ducts would probably help.'

'If this guy is interested in Anne,' said Calvin, 'doesn't that give us a head start on option two.'

'Yes,' said Billy, 'is he Anne?'

'Hard to tell,' said Anne, 'either he was being a gentleman or he's not interested. He did seem the type to be a gentleman though. It's also possible he was a little nervous.'

'Not to get into gory details or anything,' said Calvin, 'but did you kiss goodnight at the end of the date?'

'Peck on the cheek.'

'If he calls,' said Billy, 'I think we can assume he's interested. Option two has the added advantage of not ruling out option one. Also, it is the preferred option if Anne is interested in him.'

'Haven't decided yet,' said Anne, 'so don't ask.'

'Right,' said Billy, 'here is the plan. We wait for whatshisname ...'

'Quentin,' said Anne.

'Not Quentin from the dinner party?' asked Calvin.

'The very same.'

'Quentin,' said Billy, 'we wait for Quentin to call, and act when he does. If he has not called by Sunday evening then Anne calls him.'

'Sunday?' said Calvin, 'give the guy a chance.'

'They went out on Friday, he should call by Sunday.'

'What's that?' said Calvin, 'the Billy Bones guide to dating for modern teens. When's the last time you went out with a girl.'

'That's two days, two days is plenty ... isn't it?'

'He only pecked Anne on the cheek, he's not exactly Casanova.'

'Well how long do you wait?'

'Dude, girls who go out with me don't get called after the date, they get woken up and offered breakfast.'

'Is that a comment on your charm or the sort of girls you go out with?'

'Truth is,' says Calvin, 'if a girl even agrees to go out with a bloke with no legs then she's probably already made up her mind.'

'How long do you leave it Billy?' asked Anne.

'I don't know,' said Billy, 'it's been a while. The following day?'

'Bit soon,' said Calvin.

'Risks looking desperate,' said Anne.

'So that's where I've been going wrong. Well how long should we give the poor bastard?'

'How long do you reckon Emily?' asked Anne.

I told them I would give him till the end of Monday.

'Very well,' said Billy, 'till the end of Monday. Failing that Anne rings him. Whichever one of them rings the other Anne suggests they meet at some sociable hour at some nice private child friendly location. This is where we have to be cautious, we have to assume that both Anne and Emily are being watched so it has to look innocent and be somewhere where they can talk freely. Any ideas.'

'Pub?' suggested Calvin.

'Child friendly,' repeated Billy.

'Pub garden.'

'Still no.'

'Library,' suggested Anne.

'Can't talk freely,' said Billy, 'and hardly a place to go on a date.'

'How about the swimming pool,' I said.

'No way,' said Anne.

'Wait,' said Billy, 'it has merits.'

'It has drawbacks too,' said Anne.

'It's noisy enough that whatever you say will be private. It's crowded enough that you can probably talk to Emily without anyone noticing. Double bonus, whoever is following you won't have a swimming costume so will be stuck waiting outside.'

'You're asking me to let him see me in a swimming costume on a second date, I may not have many foibles about my body but I am human.'

'Ah come on Anne,' said Billy, 'Calvin's dates get naked within the evening.'

'Two hours is the record,' said Calvin.

'I won't do it,' said Anne.

'Think of a better idea then.'

Anne lay there for a while, scowling. Finally she just said, 'bastard.'

CONCERNING A STROKE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY BAD LUCK

On the following day, which was Sunday, Quentin still had not called Anne and Anne, who normally would not have worried about that sort of thing, was feeling distinctly self conscious about it, so much so that she went out rather than just mooch around the flat. I'm not sure where she went, I think for a long walk and perhaps to the library or something, it doesn't matter because this chapter is a chapter about Billy, not Anne.

I'll start again.

On the following day, which was still Sunday, Billy was just mooching around the flat when the doorbell rang. He mooched over in the direction of the door and found a man of Middle Eastern appearance standing there.

'Hello,' said the man, 'are you Mister Billy Bones?'

'Uh-huh,' said Billy. Did I mention it was still before noon, Billy was not at his best before noon.

'My name is Reuben Yariv, I was told by my friend who runs the pet store on Tavistock Street that you wanted to talk to me.'

Billy, like I said, not at his best, was still a little lost. Fortunately he looked a little lost so Reuben Yariv continued to elaborate.

'About hamsters,' he said, 'I am a breeder. You were interested in my hamster Fenchurch.'

'Oh shit!' said Billy.

'I am sorry.'

Billy dashed out of the door and glanced up and down the street, he could not see anything particularly suspicious but that did not mean much. He pushed Mister Yariv inside and shut the door.

'Do not,' he said urgently, his voice dropping to barely more than a hiss, 'mention the H word.'

'What word?' whispered Yariv.

Billy mouthed the word hamster.

'Why are we whispering?'

Billy put his finger to his lips and then led Mister Yariv to the kitchen where, hurriedly fumbling through the mess on the table he found first an envelope to write on, and then second, and with much more difficulty - for the table was piled high with envelopes, a pen to write with. Mister Yariv went to speak but Billy put his finger, this time, to the other man's lips. There was enough panic and urgency in Billy's expression to keep Mister Yariv from saying anything.

Billy wrote on the envelope.

Do not speak. Room bugged.

You are in danger.

Mister Yariv raised his hands palms up to indicate he did not understand, but did not speak.

Explain later, Billy wrote.

Talk about, Billy looked around the room, *Cactuses*.

'My,' said Mister Yariv, 'what a lot of cacti you have.'

'Yes,' said Billy, almost managing to sound natural, 'they are my flat-mate's, she collects them. There's even more in the other rooms.' All the time Billy was thinking desperately what to do, fluttering his fingers in front of his face as if that would help.

'I have always been fond of cacti,' said Mister Yariv, warming to the theme, 'I think because I was born in the ...' He was cut off by Billy making rapid slicing motions in the air with his hand.

'... in the err ...' continued Mister Yariv, stuttering, 'in the nearby town of Milton Ernest ... where there is a very fine garden centre.'

Billy gave him a thumbs up.

'Your flatmate has a fine selection, I notice several unusual varieties.'

'Would you like to go for a walk?' asked Billy, somehow indicating that the answer should be yes.

'Yes,' said Mister Yariv, 'I would very much like to go for a walk.'

'Excellent,' said Billy, 'hold on one moment.' He dashed out of the room and then returned moments later brandishing his cowboy hat and Anne's wide brimmed black straw hat. He put the cowboy hat on his own head and indicated to Mister Yariv to wear the black straw hat. The hat was a bit small for him but he wore it anyway. Billy led him out of the flat, locked up, and walked hurriedly down the road.

'Don't ask me to explain because it would take too long,' said Billy, 'but I'm being watched by the CIA and they really don't like whatever you are doing with hamsters. Keep your voice low and look at the ground when you talk.'

'I am not doing anything with hamsters,' said Mister Yariv, 'except breeding them. What could be wrong with that?'

'I have no idea,' hissed Billy, 'but these people are insane and I'm worried about what they will do to you if they find you. I think it's mostly because you are Syrian.'

'I am not Syrian, I am Israeli.'

'Well that may count in your favour if you get a chance to explain it but I wouldn't count on it. Now hurry up, they are probably already on their way. I know a man who might be able to help but it's a step from here.'

'I have a car.'

'Why didn't you say so?'

'You didn't ask. It is back there outside your flat.'

Billy looked back. The coast was still clear.

'Come on,' he said, and about turned and walked very fast back towards the flat. Mister Yariv walked round to the driver side, got in and leaned across to unlock the passenger door. As he did so Billy spotted a shiny black four by four round the corner and head towards them. He leapt in.

'Go,' he shouted, 'they're already here.'

Mister Yariv started the car with an unhealthy rattle and pulled out into the street. 'Where am I going?' he asked.

'Can you see the big black truck thing behind us in your mirror?' asked Billy.

'Yes.'

'Can you see who is in it?'

'I can see two men.'

'Are they wearing sunglasses?'

'Yes.'

'That's them.'

'Are you sure, it is a sunny day, lots of people wear sunglasses to drive.'

'We'll prove it. Go all the way around the roundabout and double back.'

Mister Yariv performed the maneuver.

'Are they still following?'

'Yes,' said Mister Yariv, a note of fear in his voice now, 'they are.'

'Shit!' said Billy, 'how do we lose them.'

'I do not know,' said Mister Yariv, 'this is not a very fast car.'

'Double roundabout!' exclaimed Billy, 'there's a double roundabout at the end of the road. That's bound to confuse Americans. Go all the way around both roundabouts so as to actually turn left. After that take the first left turn you see into Linden Road and follow the one way system right round and come out again.'

'Very well,' said Mister Yariv. He indicated right, pulled out into the first roundabout which then led him straight into a second roundabout through which he swung the car round in a U-turn and ended up going East down Bromham Road. The black four by four followed him okay on the first roundabout but then had trouble making the unexpected turn on the second and lost a few seconds, three cars pulled in between them from Ashburnham Road, the last of them honking loudly at the four by four which tried to butt in in front of it.

'Left here,' said Billy, 'and then go fast round to the end and go right.'

Mister Yariv pulled a quick left turn without indicating into Linden Road and then followed the one way system round to the right and in a clockwise circle around the tennis courts. The black four by four turned just in time to see where they were going.

'He saw us,' said Billy, leaning over the seat to watch behind, 'go left instead.'

Mister Yariv skidded the car fast around a tight left turn into Dynevor Road.

'Left at the end,' shouted Billy, hearing the roar as the four by four accelerated after them.

Mister Yariv shot out into Lansdown Road, a leafy residential street, almost knocking over a cyclist who stuck two fingers up at him.

'Right and then right again,' said Billy, still watching urgently behind.

They turned North on to Linden Road and then back South on Warwick Avenue. Always the four by four not far behind, gaining through its superior speed.

'We need to get back to some traffic,' said Billy, 'turn left on to Union Street and right at the roundabout - we'll lead him into the one way system.'

The small car's engine to screamed as Mister Yariv followed Billy's instruction. They just managed to make it out in front of two cars which then wedged themselves between them and the fast gaining four by four. They were now traveling in a queue of traffic east down Tavistock Street. Billy looked forwards, searching the traffic ahead.

'Wait for it,' he said, and then suddenly shouted 'Left! Left! Left!'

Mister Yariv swung the car left the wrong way up the one way section of DeParys Avenue. A car coming down the right way swerved out of the way and honked its horn.

'What are you doing?' shouted Mister Yariv.

'Left again!' shouted Billy, grabbing the wheel to make sure he turned and forced Mister Yariv again up the wrong way of a short one way street that popped them out again into Tavistock Street. 'Right!' shouted Billy and the little car shot out into the traffic where other cars slammed on their brakes and skidded to a halt, just missing them.

'Next left,' said Billy, looking behind in satisfaction at the confusion they had left. The black four by four, horn blaring, was stuck halfway through an illegal turn into a one way street. 'We are headed for a bookshop on Castle Road.'

'Billy,' said Frank, ten minutes later, 'this is a surprise. Welcome to my shop, do you want to buy a book?'

'Frank,' said Billy, 'I need your help. First do you have somewhere we can hide a car?'

'No,' said Frank, shrugging his shoulders, 'but give me the keys and I will drive it up the street.'

Billy looked at the still flustered Mister Yariv. 'You'd better do as he says, he's an expert.'

'Am I?' said Frank, 'at what?'

'Spying,' said Billy.

'Ah yes. I am expert at that. You are being followed?'

'I think we gave them the slip but I don't know for how long.'

'You are right to be worried, give me keys. I know what to do.'

Mister Yariv grudgingly handed his keys to Frank.

'Go sit in back and make yourselves cups of tea,' said Frank, 'I will close up for now and be back in a few minutes.'

'Come on,' said Billy, placing a hand on Mister Yariv's shoulder, 'I have a lot of explaining to do.'

CONCERNING SPIES AND SPYING

That night Billy arranged to meet Anne and Calvin in the pub. They did not sit in the corner seat by the piano, where they normally sat, in case it had been bugged, instead they sat by the window at the front which also had the advantage of being a much noisier area of the pub. They talked in hushed tones.

'There was no doubt,' said Billy, 'we were being chased.'

'Jesus!,' said Calvin, 'those bastards.'

'What scares me is that I've led them to him. Exactly what I said I wasn't going to do yesterday.'

'Where is he now?'

'Frank offered to put him in a safe house but in theory only his car is compromised so Frank has hidden that and was going to take him home.'

'God!' said Anne, 'I'd be too scared to go back home.'

'He had hamsters to feed.'

'On the subject of hamsters,' continued Anne, 'did you find out what he was actually up to?'

'That,' said Billy, 'is a very strange story.'

At that point Frank walked into the pub. He was wearing his dark baggy suit and hat again and carrying a briefcase. He briefly acknowledged hellos from Billy, Calvin, and Anne with a little nod of his head and then went straight to the bar where he ordered a pint of lager and had a long hushed conversation with Natalia the blue haired barmaid. The others watched, waiting for him to come over, wondering what he was up to. Finally he sat down with them.

'It is good,' he said, 'that you have changed your habits and sat at a different table. I too suspect that the other one has been compromised. This one should be safe I think, but talk quietly all the same, technology is very advanced these days. Now, Billy, are these the men you spoke to in the park?'

Frank laid two large glossy black and white photographs of two men getting out of a large black four by four. The photographs were clearly taken using a very long lens.

'Yes,' said Billy, 'that is them.'

'Then it is set,' said Frank, 'we shall set a classic honey trap, Natalia has agreed to be our Swallow, I shall play the husband.'

'Can you say that again,' said Calvin, 'only this time in English.'

'This man,' said Frank, jabbing a stubby finger at one of the photographs, 'has a wife in the States. Better still he married into money and it was most likely his wife's connections that has, how would you say, lubricated his career in the Agency. He is prime candidate.'

'Go slower,' said Anne, 'what is a honey trap? And how do you know all that?'

'I forget I am dealing with amateurs. I know all this because I am not amateur, as Billy reminded me today, and also my legal at embassy feels bad for my being paid retirement benefit in Roubles so has done me a favour. We

must protect Mister Yariv who we have put in danger and also we must retrieve hamster for little girl so we shall go after CIA. These men,' he indicated the photographs, 'are staying in Moathouse hotel which is good because I have contact there. Natalia will be there tomorrow night posing as bored wife of Ukrainian businessman who is in Bedford on business trip and out late every night at strip clubs. Natalia will seduce with this man.'

Calvin made a strange noise, as if choking something back in his throat.

'There will be no sex. Unless Natalia wants, sometimes a swallow enjoys her work, sometimes they are just very professional. It is a matter for them and not for handler in case like this. She will have a signal and at signal I will burst into room pretending to be angry husband who, by coincidence, is carrying camera. I will shout in Ukrainian and be very angry and take pictures and storm out with Natalia. My contact in hotel will make sure we get away safe.'

Calvin looked worried. In fact everyone looked worried.

'Do not look worried,' said Frank, 'I have done this many times. I am professional. It is perfectly safe.'

'What happens after?'

'Following day Billy must go to man and show him pictures and say that man must give up on Mister Yariv, go back to America, and matter of hamster, which I shall come to in a moment. Calvin, you must go with Billy because target is liable to get angry. He will do what we want though, I guarantee it. We will have his metaphorical balls in a vice.'

'What does Natalia get out of this?' asked Anne.

'I was coming to that. I thought she would want money and this would be problem but in fact she says instead what she wants is date with Calvin.'

This time Calvin really did cough, choking on his beer.

'Apparently she is very shy.'

'Yet she's going to sleep with a stranger,' said Anne.

'Not sleep,' said Frank, confused by the turn of phrase.

'Well exactly.'

'People are shy in different ways. Also she would like to buy new dress and sexy underwear to use and keep afterwards. We will have to pay for this.'

'I guess that would come under the heading of expenses,' said Billy, looking at Anne.

'Okay then,' said Anne, resigned.

'Now, Anne,' said Frank, 'Billy has told me about your plan with red headed lab technician. It is good plan for amateurs but unlikely to work. I have better plan.'

'Damn,' said Anne, 'he called earlier and I already arranged to go swimming tomorrow.'

'How did he take it?' asked Billy.

'He was ...' said Anne, taking time to choose the right word, 'perturbed.'

'But he agreed?'

'Eventually. I suppose I shall have to cancel now.'

'No,' commanded Frank, 'you will go through with it but be much more subtle. We will also require another child. I will explain later. For now we must go on with our lives and act as normal, which right now means drinking beer and talking rubbish like we used to do.'

Billy and Anne looked at each other, neither able to think of anything normal to say. Calvin looked at Natalia who glanced shyly back as she went about her business.

'How's the band going?' asked Anne eventually.

'Still need a drum kit,' said Billy, 'Terry thinks his mate who works at a tip may have one.'

'That doesn't bode well.'

'Not wonderfully.'

CONCERNING SWIMMING COSTUMES

Anne was self conscious about her swimming costume. She did not have a good body for swimming costumes, she never had. She had a very good body for dresses and swishy skirts, all long and lithe and poised and elegant, but not swimming costumes.

She did not resent her body, it was a good body and had served her well, it had even won her the odd boy in its day, if never at the beach, it just did not have a whole lot of ... she searched for the right word ... shape to it. Also, the budget for a new and more flattering costume - and then some - had just gone to the Natalia lingerie fund. This had at least saved her the unpleasant business of shopping for one, but had forced her to wear her old one, which had turned out to be a fair bit older than she remembered it being, and worryingly tight in places where it did not used to be tight in, and disturbingly loose in places where it should probably have been tight.

Quentin's swimming costume, on the other hand, was worse. Quentin's body, unclothed, turned out to be distressingly thin except for the belly, where it was pot

bellied. It was also covered neck to ankle in fine, bright red, and really quite long hair. He immediately put Anne in the mind of an orangutan with alopecia. His swimming costume was a very small, very tight pair of speedos, out of the top of which small bunches of hair poked alarmingly. Anne adopted a strategy of avoiding looking lest it reveal more than she really wanted to know at that stage. Before she had adopted this strategy Anne had not been able to help noticing that ... as she put it to me ... there was definitely something to be revealed.

'I think,' she said, when they met outside the respective changing rooms, 'that I would like to get in the water.'

They had gone to Aspects Leisure Park, which was the sort of fun swimming pool that has slides and whirlpools and wave machines but nowhere to actually swim. Also, during the holidays, it echoed to the rafters with screaming children. Not being able to find anywhere to swim, and not being in a mood to play in the waves, and not being able to get in any of the whirlpools which were full, and not being remotely willing to get out and queue for the slides, Anne and Quentin rested by the side and attempted to make conversation above the general racket.

Anne said 'this may have been a mistake.'

'It was your choice,' said Quentin.

They paused.

'Did you have a nice weekend?'

'I had to work,' said Quentin, 'you?'

Anne looked around, as surreptitiously as she could, for Emily.

'And you?' repeated Quentin.

'What?'

'Did you have a nice weekend?'

'You know,' said Anne, 'quiet.' Where the hell was Emily!

'Are you sure you don't want to go in the waves?'

'Quite sure,' said Anne.

'Okay,' said Quentin, 'me neither.'

At that point Emily showed up, walking along the side and talking with Sarah Phillips, the owner of Mrs Twinkle who she - I suppose I mean 'I' - had roped into the job because of the hamster connection, and because she was quite nice really.

'Oh bother,' said Anne, sounding only a little like she had rehearsed this bit in front of the mirror the previous night, which she had.

'What is it?'

'It's a girl from my class.'

'That one there?'

'Yes. Don't stare.'

Emily (me), just as she was approaching Anne, burst into tears and ran howling into the changing rooms.

'Emily,' Anne shouted, full of exactly the sort of caring concern teachers are supposed to have. She was ignored.

'Miss Thrope,' said Sarah Phillips, 'hello.'

'Sarah,' said Anne, 'what's the matter with Emily.'

'She's just upset because her hamster was stolen the other week,' said Sarah.

'Oh the poor thing,' said Anne, 'should I go after her?'

'Not unless you can give her her hamster back,' said Sarah with a stamp of her foot. That line was not in the script, Sarah improved - so she said - on what we rehearsed.

'The poor thing,' said Anne to Quentin, 'did you hear?'

'Yes,' said Quentin.

'Who would steal a little girl's hamster?'

Quentin did not say anything.

'This is a terrible idea for a date isn't it?' said Anne.

'Well ...' said Quentin, who had said as much on the phone.

'Come on,' said Anne, 'let's get out and I'll buy you a drink.'

CONCERNING THE CONSEQUENCES OF INFIDELITY

You may remember that, near the start of all this, I said I could not vouch for the truth of any of the parts where I was not personally present. I have my sources though and I've done my research and I am comfortable that what I've written is mostly correct and has remained pretty damn close to the facts on those rare occasions it has strayed from them. Unfortunately I cannot say this about the episode between Natalia and the CIA agent. Most of the protagonists have vanished and those that are left either I cannot get in contact with or they're not talking. Rather embarrassingly I have not even been able to determine the name of the CIA agent.

I have however seen a photograph of Natalia in the dress she bought and can verify that she looked stunning, the dress was a figure hugging blue dress that matched her hair perfectly, the effect is quite something. Between you and me I have also seen a photograph of Natalia in the lingerie she bought and she looked even better in that, but I

was not supposed to see that and will get in trouble if certain persons ever read this.

I gather she contrived to meet him in the hotel lift. Natalia pouted and angrily complained about her husband canceling their dinner date and going out drinking with his business colleagues.

'He has left me behind because they are going to a strip club,' she apparently said.

She then all but demanded that the CIA agent take her to dinner. She would, she said, pay with her husbands credit card.

What amazes me about all this is the CIA agent must have been wise to this sort of a trap but fell for it anyway, with an East European girl at that! There is something profoundly poorly wired in the male brain when it comes to sex. I suppose that is not really any great revelation.

Dinner went well and a lot of wine was drunk. The angry Natalia announced she wanted to fuck the CIA agent to get back at her husband and wanted to do it in the room her husband was paying for. The CIA agent went along with this plan.

I have no idea how far they went, I gather they went far enough to produce some fairly damning photographs, which I assume to mean he, at least, was naked. I'll leave you to imagine it for yourself but don't imagine anything in too much detail, I'm not writing that sort of book.

Frank stormed in, playing his part with well practised perfection, took photos, grabbed Natalia (who grabbed her newly purchased dress and underwear), and left. The CIA agent either twigged what had happened or just plain realised the predicament he was in and went after them but Frank's contact at the hotel, a concierge, intervened and threatened to call the police. Frank and Natalia disappeared into the night. Natalia to her flat in Queen's Park, Frank to the little darkroom he kept at the back of his shop.

Early, by which I mean really genuinely early, the following morning, Billy and Calvin walked and rolled respectively to the Moat House hotel carrying a set of glossy six by eight black and white prints.

If this were a movie instead of a book this would be a good bit. Billy would stride purposefully along in the morning sunshine, Calvin would look big and mean a few paces behind.

I've said a lot about Billy so I think you have a pretty good impression of him. This morning in particular his hair is wild and uncombed, he has not shaved in a couple of days, he is wearing jeans and a leather jacket. Perhaps to the uneducated eye he looks rather unimpressive but to those of us who know what is going on he makes quite a sight. Billy is not normally a man of action, so now, stirred into action, he looks like he means business.

If this were a movie instead of a book there would be music playing, something with a good bass line that kept in time with Billy's steps, something with a little edge to it, nothing modern because Billy is not a modern man, something classic, I'm thinking *All Along The Watchtower* by Jimmy Hendrix. If you have a copy go put it on and picture Billy walking across Bedford Bridge in the hazy morning sunshine, the river Ouse glinting beneath, a grim determined expression on his face, Calvin rolling along behind.

It is a pity he was not wearing his cowboy hat to complete the high noon feel, but facts are facts and he is certain he left it at home that day. If this were a movie they would probably still have him wear it, movies play fast and loose with facts. Not like books, books you can trust.

By the sort of coincidence that normally only happens in movies but does sometimes happen in real life Billy arrived just as the three CIA men were leaving. He threw

the photographs down on to the bonnet of the four by four.

'I gather you have a wife,' said Billy.

There was a moment of silence when everyone just stared at each other.

'What do you want?' said the CIA man. The two other CIA men were very subtly edging around the vehicle, one to either side.

'Three things,' said Billy, 'one, you leave Bedford and never come back, two, you stop looking for the hamster breeder, and if it helps any I can assure you he is not up to anything untoward, he is not even Syrian, and three,' Billy paused, knowing this was the big one, 'give me and my friends access to the secret underground bunker near Shefford so we can steal back Sniffles.'

The CIA man made a show of considering the options whilst the other two worked their way, very subtly indeed, around behind Calvin and Billy. The moment one of them had moved behind Calvin, Calvin shot his wheelchair backwards at great speed. Calvin had done this before and had become very adept at it. He hit the CIA man right in the balls with the back of his head. The CIA man doubled over, something he did not have a great deal of choice in but was a terrible mistake because it brought his nose within range of Calvin's fist. Calvin broke it.

The other CIA man, who had been all set to go for Billy, rushed to his colleague's aid. Calvin pushed his wheelchair forward to intercept the man as fast as he could, which was fast, and then at the last minute launched himself from it like a missile and rugby tackled the man around the midriff. The man fell down with Calvin wrapped around him. As soon as they hit the tarmac Calvin pushed himself up with both arms, so hard that he cleared the ground, and dropped down again with all his weight landing on his right elbow, which itself landed on the unfortunate CIA man's nose.

'Two noses in twenty seconds,' said Calvin from his prone position on top of the second man, not even out of breath.

'These are not the only copies,' said Billy, 'we don't know where your wife lives, but we will soon.'

'I can leave if you can swear the hamster breeder is not a danger,' said the CIA man, 'but I can't get you into the bunker.'

'This is not a negotiation,' said Billy.

CONCERNING DARING DO

Later that same day Billy and Anne drove to the military base near Shefford in Frank's car. Calvin had wanted to go but Frank had insisted that the mission required a degree of subtlety that simply was not his style, and that it would not be wise after his previous run-ins with MI5, and besides Natalia had said she was free to go for a romantic stroll along the river with maybe an ice-cream or pub lunch or both if Calvin was around. In Billy's pockets were two passes that the CIA man had given him and in Anne's pocket was Snuffles, or was it Sniffles, which she had come and retrieved from me that morning.

All, as they say, was going to plan.

They turned up at the gate and a soldier looked at them in a bored way and asked for their passes.

Anne had worn a suit in the belief that it might make her look less suspicious. Billy did not have a suit to wear so, at Frank's suggestion, was carrying a large laptop bag. Inside the bag was a very large and almost ancient laptop along with assorted bits of wire and cable, it had been borrowed from the Quantity Surveyors the previous day at great cost to Anne's pride.

Billy handed over the two passes that the CIA man had given him, worried as he did so that it might look suspicious him carrying them both.

The bored looking soldier continued looking bored. He did not look at the passes but just scanned them through a machine that went beep in a not as threatening manner as it presumably would have done if the passes had not passed. The bored soldier pressed a button which opened the gate and allowed them in.

'Excuse me,' said Anne, 'but we're looking for the bunker.' Her hand stuck in her pockets holding down an increasingly awake Sniffles, or was it Snuffles.

The bored looking soldier just pointed.

Billy and Anne walked across a parade ground past a lot of men walking around in uniform carrying guns. None of them seemed to take the slightest notice of the two civilians.

Frank had given them one piece of advice that he said was of the utmost importance. 'Always,' he had said, 'act like you are there officially on business and that you are more important than whoever you meet. Walk with purpose, either look as if you know where you are going or accost the nearest person and ask them impatiently where to go. Never, ever, lack confidence. Treat everyone like dirt. Most of them will be soldiers and be trained to follow orders. Give them orders to follow and they will be thankful. They do not want you to not be allowed to be there. If you are not allowed to be there that causes them a great deal of work. So act as if you are meant to be there and they will be content to assume you are and ignore you.'

Anne walked confidently in the direction the soldier had pointed with Billy following a pace or two behind. They reached a likely looking windowless structure with one steel door in it. Anne tried it. It was locked.

'Shit,' she whispered, 'what now?'

Billy looked around, soldiers went about their business, so far all ignoring them.

'It's the playground,' he hissed, 'and you're on duty.'

Anne looked at him for half a second before it clicked. 'You!' she shouted in her best teacher voice to the nearest soldier. A smart intelligent looking young man with stripes on his shoulder wheeled around and walked towards them.

'Is this the entrance to the bunker?' Anne asked.

'Yes ma'am,' said the soldier.

'It's locked,' she snapped.

'You have to press this button here ma'am,' said the soldier, indicating a small contraption by the side of the door. He pressed it for her.

'Hello,' said a voice from the contraption.

'Anne Thrope,' said Anne smartly. Frank had insisted they use their real names.

'You will be found whatever,' he had said, 'your defence is you were doing the right thing, using your real names will convince them of this, otherwise they will worry you had too much help and must have other motives.'

'Put your pass against the reader please,' said the voice.

Anne looked at Billy who fished the pair of passes out of his coat pocket. The helpful young soldier took them from him, found Anne's and pressed it against the contraption. The contraption beeped and the door clicked open. The soldier handed the passes back to Billy.

Despite what Frank had told her Anne thanked the young soldier.

'No problem,' he said, 'good afternoon.'

Anne and Billy walked into the door which opened onto brightly lit downward descending stairs. They walked down one flight and saw a neat colour coded sign.

It said this:

Level 1: Barracks.

Level 2: Research

Level 3: Operations

Level 4: Command

Level 5: Administration

Level 6: Canteen and Bar

'I guess level two,' said Anne.

They followed the stairs down two flights and walked through a door into a reception room. A smart efficient looking girl in a military uniform sat behind a desk reading *Heat* magazine. She looked up with a mixture a resentment and disinterest as Billy and Anne walked into the room.

'We're here to see Quentin Davies,' said Anne, still using her schoolteacher voice.

The girl picked up her phone and scanned her finger down a list of names on her desk.

'Quickly please,' snapped Anne, 'it's important.'

The girl abandoned her list of names and keyed a well practised number into the telephone, when she spoke it echoed over a tannoy system.

'Quentin Davies to reception please.'

They waited, Anne doing her best to look impatient rather than nervous. In her pocket Snuffles, or was it Sniffles, rather keen to get out now, decided to give her finger an experimental nip. Anne turned to Billy and, very quietly, so the receptionist could not hear her, said 'Ow.'

Billy nodded importantly.

After a couple of minutes Quentin walked into the room. 'Oh,' he said, as you might well imagine, surprised, 'it's you.'

'Can we go somewhere private?' said Anne.

'Of course,' said Quentin, still not sure what was going on. He led them in to the complex, through some bright white corridors and into a small office.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he squeaked the moment the door closed.

'We want Emily's hamster, Quentin,' said Anne, 'we know you have it.'

'Oh Jesus,' said Quentin, 'I've been feeling bad about that ever since the other day.'

'Good,' said Anne, 'then you'll give it to us.'

'I really can't,' he said.

'If you don't,' said Anne, 'I'll tell the Quantity Surveyors you do experiments on fluffy mammals for the military.'

'Falling out with David and Susan would almost be a bonus,' he said, 'and is certainly not a threat.'

'Quentin,' said Anne, 'there's a little girl who has lost her hamster.'

'I know,' said Quentin, 'but it's not that simple.'

'It is,' said Anne, 'just get us the hamster.'

'I can't. It's important. It's being tested by MI5. It's ... you know ... national security.'

'Quentin,' said Billy, 'I know the owner of the hamster's mother and the owner of the hamster's father. There is nothing whatsoever unusual about that hamster.'

'Emily is eleven years old,' said Anne, 'she misses her Sniffles.'

'I don't even know which hamster is hers,' said Quentin.

Anne took Snuffles out of her pocket and said 'the one that looks like this.'

'Oh knickers to it,' said Quentin, 'okay then. Wait here.'
He took Snuffles and walked out of the room and locked the door behind him.

'Can we trust him,' said Billy.

'This is where we find out,' said Anne.

CONCERNING A SECOND CONVERSATION ON A TELEPHONE

From the same secret underground bunker near Shefford, the same deputy field commander of little importance we met before placed a telephone call through to the same departmental director of some small importance he spoke to earlier.

'You again,' said the departmental director, 'what do you want?'

'It is concerning the hamster matter sir,' said the deputy field commander.

'The what?'

'We discussed it at the department video conference on Friday sir.'

'I don't remember having a video conference on Friday.'

'There were jammy dodgers sir.'

'What? Oh yes, jammy dodgers, hamsters. Yes I remember. Apparently the Americans are not that bothered anymore.'

'It seems they were carrying out a parallel operation sir.'

'Really?'

'Yes, from level three of this very bunker in fact.'

'They should not have been doing that.'

'Not really without informing us sir, no.'

'That is excellent news.'

'Is it sir?'

'Oh yes. The deputy director general is going to love it.'

'Is he sir?'

'Very much, the Americans are always giving him stick, he'll love something to stick back at them. He was saying as much when we met on ... when was it ... let's see ... we had rich tea ... no that was the other week ... we had garibaldis and it was on Thursday. He was saying that the Americans had been getting up his nose about something.'

'Well I'm glad to be of service sir.'

'Yes. Very well done you and all that. Do we know why they were doing it?'

'Apparently it was an administrative snafu sir. Our end assures us they informed their end we were going after the matter but they swear they heard the opposite.'

'Oh well, these things happen. Have you got anywhere with the matter itself.'

'Well it has sort of resolved itself sir.'

'Has it?'

'Yes sir. The hamster breeder came forward of his own volition.'

'What the Syrian happy.'

'Turns out he was not Syrian at all sir but Israeli. Name of Yariv. Apparently he was Israel Aharoni's grandson.'

'Who?'

'Israel Aharoni, the gentleman who first domesticated the Syrian hamster sir. You were informed, I believe there were those pink wafer things at the meeting.'

'Oh yes. Aharoni. I remember. Interesting fellow.'

'Yes, well Yariv's mother was Aharoni's daughter. Yariv says that his grandfather worried that the domestic hamsters he created were in danger due to there only being of the one strain, all descended from the same mother. If they were not genetically diverse enough then one disease might wipe them all out and ruin the lives of millions of children. He tasked his grandson Yariv to do something about it from his death bed. Yariv apparently had to get himself smuggled into Syria, find a wild hamster colony, which was not easy, and then smuggle them out and start breeding them with existing domestic hamsters.'

'So he had a whole colony.'

'Yes sir, but he called them all the same name. Fenchurch. On account of him being a big Douglas Adams fan.'

'Who?'

'Nobody important sir.'

'If you say so. Interesting tale that.'

'We all thought so too sir, but it checks out.'

'So we can't really bring him in.'

'Frankly sir, I'd rather just wrap it up and go home.'

'Fair enough. Wasn't there something else?'

'There was a security breach sir.'

'Another Snafu?'

'It was sir, but not one of ours. Security is a military matter.'

'Well that's good news. Did anything happen?'

'Hard to say sir. There is some suggestion we may have lost a hamster, but frankly our hamsters were always escaping anyway, that is why we had to steal so many.'

'Any idea how it happened?'

'Rumour suggests it was a CIA breach sir. But their men have been recalled to Langley so it's impossible to tell.'

'A rumour will do for the deputy director general. A rumour will pretty much always do in this business, remember that and you'll go far.'

'I will sir.'

'Well, good job man. Wrap it up and come home.'

'Thank you sir.'

CONCERNING WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Sniffles and Snuffles came home in Anne's coat pockets. When Quentin gave them back to her they were already mixed up so we never did discover which one it was that was stolen. Billy maintains that it was Sniffles though, he always said Sniffles had a hunted look about him ever since he was taken but sometimes he said that while looking at Snuffles so I think he was just as confused as the rest of us really.

When I got Sniffles and Snuffles back I hugged them both for ages. Billy gave me a packet of chocolate hamster treats that he said the pet store man had given him especially for them. Sniffles and Snuffles loved hamster treats.

I think I said that if I had space I would tell you what happened afterwards, and it seems I have a little bit of time after all.

Eventually information reached the government that Frank was a spy, or former spy by then, and he had to go back home to Russian. He had not realised but as part of his cover the book shop and the flat above it where he lived were in his name and property prices had soared since the

KGB gave him the money to buy them with. The KGB only wanted the initial price plus inflation back so he got to keep the difference. He bought a similar bookshop in Leningrad and lived quite happily there; he sends a postcard to The Three Cups every Christmas.

Calvin had a very long on again off again relationship with Natalia the barmaid. Currently I think they are off again but they will probably be on again by the time you read this. He joined the Milton Keynes murderball team for a while but eventually they had to chuck him out because he was too violent. He now teaches self defence to people in wheelchairs at the local sports centre.

Anne went out with Quentin for about a year but it did not last. Quentin quit his lab technician job and went back to the country music scene. These days he is based in London, but he travels a lot on the gig circuit and still drops by Bedford every so often.

Anne still teaches and still claims to hate it. Billy's mother eventually outed her as a smoker and she claims to have given up, though there is no way any of us would know if she has or not.

Billy's heavy metal medieval folk band never took off. Terry the drummer never found a drum kit, Billy never quite got round to writing any songs, and Glenn the guitarist moved to Milton Keynes and joined a Reggae Sea Shanty band with the old violinist from The Singing Oysters. Billy has hopes to start up as a solo act but, to be honest, he is not that good. He still lives from job to job, sometimes he even gets work as a private investigator.

Billy and Anne still live together in the same flat on Shakespeare road. Both of them are single at the moment and it is obvious to some of us that they should get together, but apparently not to them.

Me, well I grew up, in time Sniffles and Snuffles got old and died and I had other hamsters. I go back to

Bedford every so often and go back to the Three Cups to visit. It hasn't changed much.

That's about it I'm afraid. It was a bit of a silly sort of a story in the end but I think it needed telling.

So long, humans.