World Enough, And Time
by thisiszircon

Summary

Professor Jeffrey Fairbrother is enjoying life in Wisconsin. He looks back with affection on his time at Maplins, but he knows that Entertainment Management was not for him. The USA is shaking loose some of those inhibitions. He's even making friends.

Gladys Dempster knows she has a lot to be thankful for. She has an exciting new life in Australia. She has a handsome and charming husband, a lovely home, and weather that puts the British Isles to shame.

Clive Dempster is very happy with his new wife, and glad to embrace the role of devoted husband. Almost all of the time.

Happy endings all round, then...

...so why does it feel so wrong?

Notes

With grateful thanks to lost_spook for the excellent beta-reading.

The title of this story is taken from the poem "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell.
Dear Friends,

By the time you read this I shall be in Wisconsin, where I have taken the Chair in Archaeology. I would like to thank you for all the wonderful times we had together last summer. I shall always look back on it with great affection. My good wishes to you all for the coming season, and especially to Gladys. She was a first-class right-hand-man.

Yours sincerely,

Jeffrey Fairbrother

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Dear Mother,

Apologies for the delay in writing this promised letter. Having arrived during the final weeks of the university's spring term, I found myself rather snowed under right from the off. This was all to the good, of course. Keeping busy is the best approach when finding one's way around a new working environment.

Now term is over for a two week break, and I find myself with the chance to pause and catch my breath. Madison is quite a charming city. The university campus is an historic one, at least by America's standards, with attractive buildings and pleasant open spaces between. We are situated along the southern edge of Lake Mendota. In fact, the building under construction which is intended to provide a new home for our department is right on the shore of said lake. One would find it hard to imagine a more picturesque setting. I can only hope that the architects had the good sense to situate all lecture theatres on the side of the building which does not offer distracting views over the water.

I have been provided with a small but comfortable apartment within the residential hall detailed in the address above. Most staff from the university live off campus, but it was suggested that I remain in situ, as it were, until I find my feet. I was glad to concur. Indeed, there has been little reason for me to leave campus at all this last three weeks: groceries, etc. have been organised by my able and reliable secretary, Mrs. Parsons, and Rust House itself offers a housekeeping service for its residents which sees to most of life's more mundane essentials. I do, however, look forward to using the next two weeks to get out and about. I feel I should better acquaint myself with the city that I now call home.
I shall write again when next I have news. In the meantime I trust this finds you well, the garden burgeoning in proper springtime fashion, and Rex and Brisket keeping you fit and active. Worry not, Mater, for all is well. In fact I have the strangest suspicion that I am going to be happy here.

Yours ever,
Jeffrey

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Three Beeches
Hazlemere
Buckinghamshire

19th May 1960

My dear Jeffrey,

No, I have not changed my mind, even after all your sentimental gushing about this Dairy State of yours. America is no place for an academic of any worth. You have a first-class mind, and I'm not sure you're wasting it any less in Wisconsin than you did at that squalid little holiday camp.

Still, as your mother I am glad to hear you are being adequately provided for. Please do try to eat well. Americans are not famous for the nutritional value of their national fare.

As for this purported vista of yours, well, Americans do tend towards the rather vulgar habit of trying to outdo everyone else. So enjoy your lake view from your modern concrete office. There will come a time when you remember gazing out across the Old Quad from your former rooms, and your priorities will begin to properly align once again. I only hope that this does not happen too late for you to right your mistakes.

I've received a letter addressed to you, postmarked Crimpton-on-Sea. I enclose it here, in spite of the excessive cost of sending letters via this 'air-mail' service. I can't imagine it is important, but there it is. Should further correspondence be anticipated, please provide the sender with your direct address. I am not your secretary.

The spaniels are well. Baxter is trying a new treatment for greenfly in the rose garden. Daphne has set a date with that Tewkesbury fellow, some time between Royal Ascot and Wimbledon; I won't be going, naturally, and I thought the announcement in the Times a touch rich given the second-hand nature of the union. Still, the old values seem to be further eroded daily and there isn't a thing one can do about it.

Do take care of yourself, dear.

Mother

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Maplins Holiday Camp
Crimpton-on-Sea

30th April 1960

Mr. Fairbrother,
I've waited long as I can to write this. I've tried to cool off. I think I can manage to say what I need to without resorting to language that might offend delicate ears.

Mr. Fairbrother, you're a coward and a rotter.

Gladys Pugh is a good woman. Her feelings for you were heartfelt and sincere. I know you never returned them - that's your business. You can't force someone to love you, and you two were hardly an obvious match. No one's having a go because you turned her down. No one's having a go because you buggered off, even. You made the best choice for yourself. We all understand that.

But you shouldn't have let her find out the way she did. One little line in a half-a-page letter? How do you think that made her feel? Honestly, you should have seen her, first day back before we heard from you. Proudly carrying the briefcase you gave her last season, so pleased and excited to see you. You might as well have shown up yourself and slapped her in the face. Might have hurt her less.

You were everything to Gladys, Mr. Fairbrother. And now she knows that she was just a great big nothing to you. Well good luck in your new job. Try not to break any more hearts with that sniffany attitude of yours. Believe me - it doesn't go down very well with us actual warm-blooded human beings.

I'd advise against returning to Crimpton-on-Sea, by the way. Not many people here would give you a welcome any more.

Spike Dixon

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Apartment 103
Rust House
University of Wisconsin
31st May 1960

Dear Charles,

I find I have not yet written you a line of thanks regarding the recommendation you made on my behalf to Professor Manninger. I must own that I was surprised to find myself with a job offer from across the Atlantic, but things seem to have come together nicely. Academia is, it seems, my lot in life, but here in Madison the life is altogether less stifling than I had come to find it in Cambridge.

Perhaps my season at Maplins last year cured me of my standoffishness, but much to my astonishment I appear to be making the odd friend. Professor Manninger is a busy man, of course, but his Associate Chair in Cultural Anthropology, my colleague Neil Weitzman, has been generous with his time. The Archaeology department has been well run hitherto, with a small but well-selected staff. We even have a specialist in osteoarchaeology whose extra-curricular activities have involved consulting with the Milwaukee Police Department. Dr. Robben has quite some tales to tell, I assure you!

The terms, or 'semesters', here in America are organised differently to the British academic calendar. For instance, the summer term is not a busy one. Many students use this time to undertake field work or summer placements. As such, the student populace in residence has
dropped off since my arrival back in April and I am making the most of this less hectic time for the university. I am lecturing once again, and after a nerve-racking start I find I'm enjoying it. Additionally, I have been charged with the Personal Tutorship of three students. This, naturally, gave me cause for concern, for while I can always assist with academic matters I am less able to offer guidance for matters pertaining to wider student life.

This, rather clumsily I fear, brings me to the real reason for this letter. I must request a word or two of advice, and throw myself upon your generosity of spirit in hoping you can provide.

One of the students for whom I act as Personal Tutor is a young woman in her second year. She is twenty years of age. Her work in the field of the protohistoric archaeology of the Paleoamericans is not only excellent but actively intriguing; her intellect is sound and her personality pleasant. To my concern, however, I have lately noticed an escalation in certain, shall we say, behaviours. Towards me, I mean.

It may well be that I am overreacting. But you see, Charles, the young lady in question has taken to lingering in my office after our weekly group meeting. She does so quite naturally; it took me three weeks before I recognised the pattern, so unforced were the conversations she initiated. The meeting, alas, concludes at half past five in the evening: a time when no further lecture or tutorial is scheduled. Time is on her side, and she has made a habit of using that time. Her topics of conversation are by no means inappropriate, but they certainly transgress the usual bounds of academic interest or student-tutor matters.

During these post-meeting conversations she no longer remains on the sofa which stands opposite my desk. Instead she has taken to wandering over and perching herself on a spare bit of desk, and leaning casually towards me as we speak. I have tried positioning items on my desk to discourage this proximity. My student merely moves them aside in order to claim her space. I have come to realise that it is not in my imagination that her chosen perch is drawing ever closer to me, week by week. I am inordinately worried that her goal is to conduct these conversations from my very lap.

Last Tuesday (our last group meeting) I decided to counter this encroachment. When she wandered over, chatting so easily after the other two students had departed my office, I stood and turned my back as if examining the view from my office window. This, alas, only encouraged her to join me, and there we stood, shoulder to shoulder. The more I edged away, the more she leaned closer. It really was most awkward.

As if this were not enough, there is something else. There is a small coffee shop I like to frequent on the periphery of the campus. At least twice a week I like to begin my day with a brisk walk and then a decent cup of coffee at my chosen retreat. However, on the last two occasions - no doubt you have guessed - my female student has been present when I arrived. Apparently 'surprised' to see me.

I have tried to discuss this with Professor Weitzman. As he is two years younger than I am and not, I am given to understand, hideous to behold, I felt sure he must have learned some way to navigate such matters. Alas, he merely questioned me on the young lady's age and then said something along the lines of, "You like her, great. You don't, then I probably wouldn't ask her out."

Forgive me, Charles. I have written at some length. I am at a loss, on two counts. Firstly, whether my concerns are even real, since a few minutes of pleasant conversation after a meeting is hardly an issue of 'vamping', and there may be good reason for my student to frequent the same coffee shop that I do. Secondly, what to do if the young lady in question has indeed developed an inappropriate attachment to me. Simply failing to 'ask her out', as Neil suggests, will do nothing to alleviate my discomfort with the situation. If I broach the subject and inform her that I am not
prepared to enter into any kind of intimacy with a student of mine, I risk embarrassing her, or angering her, or even hurting her. I also risk humiliating myself if I have read the situation wrongly. It seems that my only option, at present, is to change my favoured venue for coffee, and ensure that when my Tuesday meetings end I contrive other places to be, thereby removing the option for a personal chat.

Advise me, old friend. If you can stop sniggering long enough, that is. Please be aware, though - the last time I tried to let a woman down lightly, I made quite the mess of it.

With fond regards to you, Angela and the boys,

Jeff

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Apartment 103
Rust House
University of Wisconsin

4th June 1960

Dear Spike,

Thank you for your letter. I feel I must attempt an explanation for my behaviour, which I realise now must have appeared more callous than was meant.

I wrote to the staff at the camp because it seemed rude not to. I was aware that my decision to leave would cause Gladys some distress. It was my sincere hope that the letter I sent might make the best of a bad situation. In demonstrating that I had moved on from my role at Maplins, I wished Gladys to move on too. A more personal farewell would, I believe, only have made things worse.

Having said that, I confess that your accusations are not to be entirely refuted. If you will forgive my candour: cowardice in the face of emotional situations is a shortcoming I have long since recognised in myself.

It is comforting to know that Gladys has good friends around her. When you receive this you'll be well into the season; I trust that the support of her friends and colleagues has seen her through a difficult time. Any pain I caused was unintended, but I acknowledge it nonetheless.

I hope all goes well at Crimpton-on-Sea, and that the new Entertainments Manager has established a happy and fruitful working relationship with you all. I wish you the very best.

Yours sincerely,

Jeffrey Fairbrother

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3 Nursery Way
St. Ives

12th June

Dear Jeff,
Hello Jeffrey. Hope all goes well for you, over in the Americas. Young Frankie is convinced that you are spending most of your time wearing something called 'chaps' and spitting into an urn. Charles has failed miserably to disabuse his first-born of this notion.

You won't mind that Charles has informed me of your dilemma. Here is my reply: for a man of profound intellect, you are quite the idiot, are you not?

Yes, she likes you. Yes, every conversation which you do not end as swiftly as you can will convince her that you like her too. Crushes happen, old thing, and when a young American woman finds herself alone in an office with her tutor who is neither old, fat nor 'hideous to behold', and who has one of those delightful British accents to boot? Well. She's smitten. Acknowledging this does not make you arrogant or presumptuous. Refusing to take advantage makes you a gentleman. Your preference to avoid causing the young lady any upset makes you Jeffrey Fairbrother, my husband's best man and my son's godfather.

Here's what we're going to do. Next Tuesday week - the 21st June - at half past five (which, by the by, will be very late in the evening over here) I shall arrange for the long-distance operator to place a call to the university. You take the call, hopefully in the presence of the young lady. At some point during the conversation you should refer to me as your 'darling' or some such endearment, and tell me how you miss me. It's all right if you blush: you being you, it would be odd if you didn't.

This, I hope, will indicate to the young lady that you are unavailable, and allow her to move on from her crush. The situation is such that you need to be cruel to be kind. This way, you see, you can feign obliviousness to her passions, and she can retreat with her dignity, if not her heart, intact.

Talk to you soon. Until then, take care of yourself. We all send love.

A

And there you have it. The Missus has spoken. Do as she suggests, there's a good chap. It'll make both our lives easier and better.

Now then. I expect you're wanting all the college gossip and skullduggeries...

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Maplins Holiday Camp
Crimpton-on-Sea

20th June 1960

Dear Mr. Fairbrother,

Thank you for taking the trouble to reply to my last, in spite of the harsh words I had for you. I wanted to drop you another line to make sure you weren't worrying about the situation with Gladys, since I made so much of it when last I wrote.

Gladys has indeed moved on in her life. I wondered, earlier in the season, whether the way her
head was being turned by a new man was something to fret over. Back then she was as fragile as anyone is when their heart's been broken. I've been around long enough to know that when you feel like that it's the worst time to start some new affair.

But it looks like my concerns were all wrong. Gladys is in fine form, there's even talk of wedding bells, and we're all enjoying the season. I hope you'll accept my apologies for the tone of my earlier letter. We all felt protective of Gladys, knowing how hurt she had been. I suppose we underestimated that sturdy Welsh resilience!

Enjoy America, Mr. Fairbrother, and all good wishes to you.

Spike Dixon

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Telegram

To: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

From: Charles Winston-Eaves
St. Andrew's Street Post Office, Cambridge

Wednesday 22nd June 1960

ANGELA REPORTS SUCCESS. HOPE AFTERMATH NOT TOO FRAUGHT. INQUIRING MINDS ASK -- WHO ON EARTH IS GLADYS-DARLING?

CHARLES

~~~

Telegram

To: Charles Winston-Eaves
Pembroke College, Cambridge

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Thursday 23rd June 1960

SITUATION RESOLVED. COFFEE IN PEACE THIS MORNING. THANK ANGELA AND MYOB!

JEFF

~~~

Apartment 103
Rust House
University of Wisconsin

28th June 1960

Dear Gladys,
I should have written sooner: forgive me. I have never been accomplished when it comes to such things.

I hope that this finds you and the team well and happy. I think of you all often, and while I know that my place in this world is not, after all, that of Entertainments Manager for a seaside holiday camp, I shall always treasure the months we had together. They did me good. I learned a great deal about myself. I suspect, in years to come, that I will look back on my time at Maplins and know that the summer of 1959 was the making of me.

I am delighted to hear that the clumsy manner in which I brought my time at Maplins to a close has not permanently

I hear you have found a more worthy recipient for your affections than

Damn it

[Page torn across, crumpled in a ball and deposited in the wastepaper basket. Letter never sent.]
Dear Mam,

Thanks for your letter. It was my first one, here - funny to see my married name and address on an envelope. Like I'm a new person. Everything seemed to happen so quickly.

It's good to hear the new tablets are working for you. They can do such marvellous things these days, can't they? It's a shame Australia has no free medical care. One of the things I'm missing about home is the NHS. (That and proper fish and chips!) Still, for the time being, touch wood, we both have our health, and Clive's job brings in a good income should anything crop up.

I've thrown myself into setting up house, this last few weeks. Clive had to start work almost as soon as we were through immigration, so I've had no help from him, but that might be for the best! It's a smashing little bungalow we have, on a wide street all lined with trees, and with a nice garden at the back to enjoy the sunshine. Honestly, sitting outside with a glass of wine on a November afternoon still makes me giggle. The world has gone topsy-turvy!

We've decided to get Christmas out of the way before I start looking for work. I'm going to need something to do with myself, else the odd glass of wine in my garden might turn into something more. This is a sporty country, though. There are plenty of tennis clubs and such in Melbourne that ought to appreciate an experienced coach and organiser.

Really, Mam, you don't have to worry about me at all. I'm so happy with Clive. He's everything you could want in a husband - handsome, funny and attentive. After so long dividing my time between the flat in Pontypridd and a chalet at Crimpton-on-Sea, my new bungalow seems like a palace. Everything about Australia feels full of promise.

If I could change one thing, it would be the number of nights each month that Clive can't be home with me. (His flight schedule takes him all over Australia, and it's such a big country.) Not a bad life, is it, though, when that's all you have to complain about?

Take care of yourself,

love,
Gladys

~~~

Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club
Kooyong
7th January 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your enquiry regarding employment at the club. We currently have no vacancies on
our coaching staff, and I should advise you that we only employ qualified instructors who have the proper accreditation. You may, however, be interested in applying for a role in our administration department that is available, as detailed on the separate sheet attached.

Yours sincerely,

Errol Cross  
Club Secretary

~

Melbourne University Tennis Club  
Parkville Campus

8th January 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your letter expressing interest in employment here at Melbourne University. While I note the range of coaching roles you have undertaken during your time in the British leisure industry, I regret to inform you that we currently offer no vacancies which match with your experience.

Yours sincerely,

Darren Woodford

~

Yarra Bend Golf Course  
Fairfield

8th January 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your enquiry. The Club is not at present in need of additional staff. New vacancies are advertised in The Sun News-Pictorial.

Yours sincerely,

Frederick Lintle

~

123 Rowe Street  
Fitzroy North  
Melbourne

January 22nd 1961

Dear Nerys,

How good of you to write - I know how busy you always are with the children. Yes, I knew Mam was doing much better on her new tablets, and it's good to hear her weight is under control. (Of course I never ask her about it. The last thing she needs is to feel judged on her appearance.)
I'm glad the family is doing well. Rhyddyd's success in St. Wilfred's choir is obviously a source of pride for you. Please thank little Rhian for the painting from her nursery class. It's up on the kitchen wall now, and looks very colourful.

Clive and I have settled nicely here in Melbourne. The house is just about ship-shape, and I honestly can't remember how it was I ever endured that British weather. I'm making friends among my neighbours. Australians are more confident and outgoing than Brits, which means I fit right in. My next-door neighbour, Shirley, has coaxed me into joining a local cookery group that specialises in Asian cuisine, all very exotic, and I seem to have a knack for it. It's a long way from rationing and beans-on-toast!

You asked about what plans I have for finding work. Do you know, I've been so busy with everything, I haven't had chance to think about it. I'll get around to it eventually, but there's no hurry. Clive's salary is a very good one, and he's keen for me to avoid the humdrum of a Monday-to-Friday job. He believes I'll do better as a self-employed sports instructor, coaching one-to-one. He also has this funny idea of me writing up my experiences in a British holiday camp. Imagine, me, a writer! Nonsense, of course. You'd be the first to point out that my education ended at the age of fourteen. It's remarkable I'm able to speak in sentences, really.

Please give my love to Dafydd and the family, and remember that there is a standing invitation for you all to come and visit. (If the travel costs are too steep, you only have to say. We can offer as much help as you need.)

Your sister,

Gladys

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

January 22nd 1961

Dear Gareth,

Thank you for the letter. It's good to hear that you've met someone special. (I still remember the impression you made on Peggy at Crimpton-on-Sea. And I still cringe, remembering what I did. It wasn't my finest hour, was it?)

All is well here in Australia. The house is lovely, I'm making friends and there's so much to look forward to. It feels a little like I spent the last ten years of my life refusing, in a way, to grow up. Here I am, almost 36 years old, and this is the first time I've lived under my own roof! (I don't count the flat in Pontypidd, since it belongs to Aunty Bethan.) I suppose it was about time, really.

Do keep me posted on how things go with Doris, and with the new job in Porth. And tell Nerys that if she wants to bad-mouth my husband then she can do it to my face, rather than bending your ear with all her nasty little suspicions. For a woman who got twice the start in life that I was given, our younger sister is prone to jealousy.

Take care of yourself, Sospan-fach,

Glad
Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your interest in employment at ABC. Unfortunately we have no vacancies suitable to your limited radio experience. Should you wish to embark on a career in radio, we suggest you examine the entry-level roles occasionally advertised in the newspapers.

With all good wishes for your future career,

Jonathan Farthing

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Fairfield Community Tennis Club
Melbourne

8th February 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your letter. Our club is run by local volunteers and can offer you no paid employment. If you are interested in donating your time to help coach the children of Fairfield then we would be very happy to discuss this with you.

Yours,
Barbara Hopkins

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Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club
Kooyong

9th February 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your application to the post of administrative assistant. We regret to inform you that we cannot offer you an interview on this occasion as your qualifications do not meet our requirements.

Yours sincerely,
Errol Cross
Club Secretary

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18 Primrose Street
Tonypandy
Dearest Gladys,

Before I get to the news, I must get something off my chest. There's half of the planet between you and Nerys, these days - do you both have to keep doing your best to needle each other? Can't you try to get along? For your old Mam, if not for yourselves? I know you were upset that she couldn't come to your wedding last year, but do be fair - it was very short notice, and she has the two kiddies to think of.

Gladys, cariad. I love both of my girls dearly. It pains me to know that you can't speak to each other without both of you taking a turn for the spiteful.

Enough of that. I don't want to sour what little contact we have. I was very happy to hear about all your activities in North Fitzroy. You're making friends, and that's wonderful. If your Clive is happy enough with you as a lady of leisure, I say make the most of it. No point looking for work if you don't need the money or the distraction.

Thank you very much for the photographs you enclosed with your last. What a lovely garden! Puts the yard behind this old house to shame, doesn't it?

Well, I'd better get on and tell you the news from Primrose Street...

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

March 12th 1961

Dear Mam,

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause any upset. I know me and Nerys aren't exactly the close-knit sisters you'd hoped for, but that shouldn't reflect on you.

It wasn't just about the wedding, Mam. Honest. I admit, I was angry about that at the time. (I had to tell people I didn't have any other family, so no one would ask questions!) But I got over it.

Do you remember Nerys's wedding day at all? Maybe you remember it differently to me. She spent most of the reception at the Ty Mawr Hotel pointing out, to anyone who'd listen, that she was six years younger than me but she'd still beaten her sister to the altar! It was like she'd forgotten about Rhodri. I know she was very young during the war, but you'd think she'd remember her big sister's fiance getting killed.

So when Nerys said she wasn't coming to Crimpton for my wedding day, I knew it wasn't just because of the short notice. She was annoyed, Mam. One of her favourite taunts - that she's married and giving you grandkids, unlike poor, dried-up old Gladys - was being whisked away from her.

Even now she's doing her best to undermine what I've found with Clive. She's been bothering Gareth with it. Before we flew out, she tried to tell me Clive was going to be a bad husband! Trying to break us up before we even got going, and based on what? A couple of hours in his company when we all had dinner at the Brynffynon in Llanwonno? I mean, really. She won't mention his name in her letters, even though she throws a tantrum if I fail to mention Dafydd,
Rhyddyd and Rhian.

Well then, it seems I needed to get some things off my chest too. I've had my rant. And don't worry - I know you're right. I'm the older sister. I shouldn't let Nerys wind me up like she does. I'll try to do better, for you. Promise. The daft thing is, when she lords it over me she doesn't ever realise - I have always been so very proud of what she's achieved.

Anyway, I have a confession. When I told you I wasn't bothering with a job-hunt? I lied. I've been sending letters out to all sorts of places since the new year - more than thirty altogether. I've had a handful of polite replies, but no one wants a former holiday camp entertainer.

I suppose I'll keep trying, though I'm getting down about it all. Please don't tell Nerys. She'll write me a letter filled with fake sympathy, and that will hurt even more.

Don't start worrying, now. Everything else about life here in Melbourne is marvellous. I miss Clive when he's away, of course, but we have a routine. Twice a month he's gone for three nights. Those are the worst to cope with. Still, I have so much more here than I ever thought I'd have. I shouldn't complain.

It's funny, though. I keep thinking back to Crimpton-on-Sea. I remember that narrow bed in my dingy chalet. I think about those early starts, and the need to be cheerful even when you're feeling blue. And you know what? My clearest memory is of doing something good. People enjoyed their holiday at Maplins, and I was a part of that. I miss that feeling, Mam.

I miss my old friends, too. It's probably because we're getting towards April and the start of the new season. If things hadn't changed, I'd have been getting ready to travel back to Crimpton. I'd have been looking forward to seeing the old familiar faces. You know, even the ones I thought were annoying at the time make me feel wistful now.

Enough of my maudlin nonsense! Clive isn't back for another two days and I've got too much time on my hands.

Write again soon. I miss you,

love,
Gladys

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Flat 3A
14 Treadwell Road
Littlehampton

15th March 1961

Dear Gladys,

Hope this finds you and Clive enjoying life down under. I write to ask a favour. At the close of last season, before everything went pear-shaped, you were kind enough to suggest I might replace you as Chief Yellowcoat. Well, I'm currently in the running for the post of Entertainments Officer at a new caravan resort near Exmouth. I need a reference. May I give your details to Brendan Fuller, the resort manager?

Best wishes to you both,
Sylvia

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Better Days Ahead
Blyth Street Community Centre
Northcote

21st March 1961

Dear Mrs. Dempster,

Thank you for your application to the post of part-time Events Co-ordinator. Your experience in the British leisure industry is of interest to us, and we would like to invite you to attend an interview on April 4th at the community centre. Please confirm your attendance by telephone.

Richard Garth
Chairman

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

March 24th 1961

Dear Sylvia,

How nice to hear from you. Please do give any prospective employer my contact information, should a reference be required.

We certainly had some bumps in the road, you and I, during our time at Maplins. This move to Melbourne has given me a bit of perspective, though. When you applied yourself you were an excellent yellowcoat, and I meant what I said last season. Clive and I wish you every success with your job-hunt. I think you'll make a splendid Entertainments Officer.

Take care of yourself, and give my regards to any of the old gang you're still in touch with.

Gladys

~~~

Better Days Ahead
Blyth Street Community Centre
Northcote

12th April 1961

Dear Mr. Fairbrother,

I am the Chairman of the Melbourne-based charity 'Better Days Ahead', which organises events, outings and experiences for disadvantaged children. Your name has been provided to me by Mrs. Gladys Dempster, whom we would like - pending receipt of a suitable reference - to employ as our Events Co-ordinator.
Since Mrs. Dempster's most recent manager happens now to be her husband, there is an unavoidable conflict of interest in requesting a reference from him. As you are Mrs. Dempster's previous manager, I write to ask whether you might furnish us with a few lines regarding her competence and character.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Garth

---

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne
April 14th 1961

Dear Mr. Fuller,

I write in response to your enquiry regarding Sylvia Garnsey and her suitability for employment at your resort.

I worked with Miss Garnsey for six years. In that time she became a valued member of my team, popular with the campers and staff alike. She was able to turn her hand to all sorts of activities, though her talents were always most appreciated around the Olympic-sized swimming pool. During the last season we spent together at Maplins Holiday Camp at Crimpton-on-Sea I was already considering her as a possible replacement for myself. She had become a natural leader for the female entertainment staff, guiding and advising the younger girls who were just starting their careers.

I believe Miss Garnsey will do very well in a role with greater responsibility, and that she will prove an asset to your resort.

Yours sincerely,

Gladys Dempster

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Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin
20th April 1961

Dear Mr. Garth,

Thank you for your letter of the 12th. It is my very great pleasure to include here a signed testimonial regarding the array of skills and competences Mrs. Dempster brought to her role as Sports Organiser and Chief Yellowcoat during her time at the Crimpton-on-Sea Maplins resort. Perhaps, once you have perused the information, you could pass the testimonial on to Mrs. Dempster for any future requirements she might have.

I assure you, Mr. Garth, that appointing Mrs. Dempster to your team will be a wise decision.

If you would also pass on my regards to Mrs. Dempster, and my sincere congratulations on her
Postcard: Greetings from the beautiful resort of Devon Clifftops!

May 3rd 1961

Dear Gladys,

I got the job! Thanks for everything. They've got us entertainment staff in green blazers, here. Very smart, better cotton-mix, but for some reason I miss the yellow!

Best,
Sylvia

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

May 21st 1961

Dear Mam,

Thanks for the birthday parcel. Must have cost you a fortune, sending gift-wrapped presents all the way out here! Please look after that pension of yours! But the framed photos are lovely, and just the thing for our mantelpiece.

I had a smashing birthday, made all the nicer by knowing I'm finally back to work. I hadn't realised how much I would miss being useful. I'm now two weeks in to my role with 'Better Days Ahead'. Our first event was a small one: a local tennis tournament attended by a very special guest - none other than Harry Hopman! There were 23 kids there, some of them with stories that would just break your heart, and I'd like to think the event gave them all a reason to feel special and cheerful for at least an afternoon. Prizes were given out to all for taking part, and everyone seemed to have a good time. We got good publicity in the local press, thanks to yours truly, which has seen an increase in donations. Richard was very pleased with how it all went.

Our next event is in June and has required me to learn something of 'Australian Rules Football'. When in Rome, I suppose!

In other good news, Clive's performance at work over the last six months has seen the airline offer him a promotion. He's to fly larger aircraft on the Thailand and Singapore routes, via Perth. It means a bit more money, which is welcome given Clive's rather expensive tastes! But it will also mean Clive's twice-monthly stopovers will be five nights rather than three. Still, like Clive says, absence makes the heart grow fonder. It may even be a blessing in disguise - it'll keep our marriage fresh and exciting. I'd hate to think of us as one of those weary couples who can hardly
stand the sight of each other any more.

In any case, some of the upcoming events at work are going to require a bit of travel on my own part...

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53 Ormiston Avenue
Morecambe

13th July 1961

Dear Gladys,

Just to let you know, well in advance - we're having a get-together in December. Spike and April are finally tying the knot. She's persuaded him he needs more than a seasonal job, and he's persuaded her that performing isn't something he can give up. They ended up compromising. He works as under-manager at a joke shop in Brighton, learning the business. Meanwhile he's set himself up as a children's entertainer for evenings and weekends to keep his hand in: clown outfit, magic tricks, even taught himself some balloon animals. Been getting some gigs too.

The wedding's on the 2nd December at St. Patrick's on the Cambridge Road in Hove. You'll get your invite in due course. Since you and Clive must be flying back to Blighty at some point for a visit, thought I'd get in there and give you a date to aim at. We're all going to be there. Everyone's dead keen. Wouldn't be the same without you, Glad, and you wouldn't want to upset Spike on his big day, would you?

I'll leave it with you. Got to get cracking. I'm supporting Tiny Timmy Toodles at the Winter Gardens for the next two weeks, because apparently no one's told Morecambe it's the 1960s.

Take care, love,
Ted

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POSTCARD: Perth - Viewed from Mill Point

30th September 1961

My darling Clive,

I know I'm not supposed to write but I couldn't wait to tell you. I sold my first piece! Celebrations soon, yes?

Love and kisses, Helena

[Forwarded to Clive Dempster, 123 Rowe Street, c/o Central Offices of Antipodean Air, Melbourne Airport.]

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Familiar Faces, Worn-out Places

Chapter Notes

The chapter's title comes from the song "Mad World" which was written by Roland Orzabal for Tears for Fears.

Duke of Norfolk Public House, Western Road, Hove
2nd December 1961

"Sylvia!" The word was boomed across an already packed bar, and the boomer was unmistakably Ted Bovis. "Sylvia - over 'ere!"

Sylvia Garnsey sidled around a few afternoon drinkers, avoided tripping over the easel which supported a child's blackboard bearing the message 'WEDDING DO UPSTAIRS', and found her way to the bar.

"Hello Ted," she said warmly. The rush of pleasure she felt at seeing her former colleague didn't come as any surprise. She'd been looking forward to this reunion for months.

Ted hugged her close, already smelling of ale and cigars. "How are you, love?"

"Doing just fine, thank you. Yourself?"

"Can't complain. Still working, still keeping the wolves from the door."

Sylvia glanced at Ted's outfit: a loud checked pattern of green and brown. "That'll be the suit, will it? Terrifying all and sundry, wolves included?"

"I'll have you know this is the finest modern polyester. Hard-wearing, low-maintenance and about as comfortable as sackcloth. Now what you having?"

"G&T, ice and slice."

"Ah, the more things change..."

"The more they stay the same. What can I say? I'm set in my ways."

Ted grinned. In a less booming voice he said, "It's great to see you, love."

"You too."

He ordered a drink, handed it to her, and pointed her in the direction of the stairs up to the pub's function room. "Up there," he said, tapping her rump and thus proving that he remained probably the only man in the world who could get away with doing so. "Cheese sandwiches, pickled onions, the happy couple...and one Gladys Dempster, née-Pugh, who has so far resisted all efforts I've made to work out just what the hell is wrong with her."

Sylvia glanced back at Ted. "Gladys is here?"
"Yep. Over for an early Christmas with the family."

"And Clive?"

"Nope. Had to work. He's due to join her in a week."

"And something's wrong."

"She's better at hiding it than she used to be. But she's not that good."

Sylvia propped one hand on her hip and glared at Ted. "And why would she tell me? She hated me."

"Poppycock. She felt threatened by you. But she always respected you. That was half the problem. Anyway, you parted on a good note, didn't you?"

Sylvia smiled. "We did. And she helped get me the job at Exmouth."

"There you go then. You're probably the nearest thing she has to a best pal, these days. Go and sort it."

Sylvia took a sip of pleasingly well-proportioned gin and tonic, then made her way upstairs.

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"Gladys. You're looking great! Melbourne must agree with you!"

Gladys glanced up. "Oh, hello Peggy. I didn't see you at the church."

Peggy gave a shrug and an eye-roll. " Couldn't get here in time for that. Had to do an early morning shift before I got the train." She shuffled in to sit down next to Gladys on the narrow bench around the corner table, and then paused to relish a sip of her port and lemon.

"You're still at Crimpton, then?" Gladys asked politely.

"Oh, yeah. Job's a job, innit? Mrs. Holloway's Boarding House got bought out this last summer. New owners made it a B&B. Got a job there, between seasons. Quiet enough, over the winter, but they still need someone to change and clean the rooms." Peggy shrugged once again; she'd long since discovered that this one physical gesture could dispel any number of life's various disappointments. Still, she felt the need to change the subject. "Is the Squadron Leader not with you?" Peggy looked hopefully around the function room, where Spike and April were still surrounded by gift-wrap and various presents, and a pristine wedding cake stood to one side waiting to be cut. Most of the people here weren't familiar. Probably family, and Brighton friends. A good dozen or so had turned up from the old team, though. Peggy was glad she'd splashed out on her train ticket.

"No," Gladys said. "No, my husband couldn't get away from work until next week. He's flying out to join me in Wales then."

"Oh, do they fly planes to Wales now?" Peggy asked, wide-eyed.

"They fly to most places, Peggy. There's an airport at Cardiff. But Clive will fly to Heathrow."

"Ah." Peggy grinned, and offered Gladys a cheeky nudge with an elbow. "And how's married life treating you, eh?"
"Oh, just fine," Gladys said, without even wincing at the nudge, even though Peggy knew she'd overdone it. Nerves. She always hid her nerves well, but they often turned into a bit of over-exuberance.

Peggy tilted her head to one side and studied Gladys. "Have you done something with your hair?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, it's a bit longer. Keeps the sun off my neck."

Peggy nodded as she peered through her glasses at the hairstyle in question. "Suits ya," she decided. "Looks more natural."

"Thanks."

"There's summat else different about you, in't there?"

Gladys lifted and lowered one half-hearted shoulder. "Nothing stays the same," she said, in an odd kind of voice.

"S'pose not. And we haven't seen each other for over a year, can you believe that?"

"Actually yes," Gladys said. "Feels like a long time."

Peggy sipped her drink again, then gave a sigh. "All right. I know I was only ever a chalet maid, and I know you didn't think much of me and you probably still don't. But I'm not daft. What's wrong?"

Gladys sat up straighter. She smiled and looked at Peggy, which made Peggy realise what was so different. Gladys Pugh—that-was had a trademark image: jet black hair, jet black eyes. Peggy wasn't sure she'd ever seen Gladys without the false eyelashes. Until now.

"Oh, don't go worrying yourself about me," Gladys told her. "I'm just tired. Jet lag, they call it. I live on the other side of the world, now, see. When it's daytime here it's nighttime there. Takes a bit of getting used to when you fly from one to the other."

"Oh. Makes sense." Peggy nodded her understanding.

"And Peggy - don't go supposing I don't think that much of you." A frown flickered between her eyes. "I think - in many ways - you're the best of all of us."

Peggy wasn't sure what that meant. She'd certainly never been the best-looking, or the best-paid, or the best at solving problems. Still, it was nice to get a compliment. "Thanks," she said. Gladys nodded vaguely. "Best at mucky basins, anyway!" she added cheerfully. But Gladys seemed ever more lost in her own thoughts, so Peggy tried to be sensitive and brought their conversation to a temporary close. "Well, it's lovely to see you again." She took up her drink and edged back out of the bench in the corner. "You know - you really do look smashing. Bet Clive can't believe his luck, eh!"

She spotted Gary standing over by the buffet table, and was surprised beyond measure when he caught her eye, grinned in recognition and beckoned her over. Peggy glanced back at Gladys, who gestured that she should go and have fun.

Peggy didn't need telling twice.

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"Here," Sylvia said to April, and handed over a small gift-wrapped box.

"You shouldn't have!" April said, while greedily tearing at the wrapping.

"Course she should," Spike put in. "One of the perks of getting wed, isn't it? Presents?"

"Not the best perk," April murmured, and gave Spike a smile.

Sylvia winked at Spike. "Sounds like you're on a promise. Mind you, if that wasn't true on your wedding day, I'd consider that cause for concern."

April blushed, ignored the comment, and then squealed in delight as she unwrapped a ceramic deer from its tissue paper. "Bambi!"

"Your favourite film," Sylvia acknowledged. She looked at Spike. "I'd have got you a toaster, but I figured you'd already have three or four.

Spike shrugged. "You made Mrs. Dixon smile. That'll always be gift enough for me."

April sighed up at Spike. "You're perfect, you know."

"So are you."

"You're more perfect."

"You're perfect-er still."

Sylvia rolled her eyes as the two faces inched closer. "Before you make the rest of us blush, darlings - here." She fished in her coat pocket and drew out the other box she'd brought with her. They'd cost her a week's wages, but April and Spike were old friends just starting out together.

Spike lifted the lid and looked down at a neat stack of one hundred business cards, printed in black and red, with a stylised image of a juggling clown in one corner. "Spike Dixon, Children's Entertainer," he read. "Making birthdays magical." He looked up, swallowed, said, "Oh, Sylv - these must have cost you a mint!"

"Use them wisely, Uncle Spikey," she said. "Just you two be wonderful to each other, okay?"

Spike and April looked at each other again. "Always," he murmured.

"Always, always," April countered, still clutching her ceramic Bambi.

"Sickening," Sylvia muttered, not unkindly, and wandered off around the room.

She found Betty first, and embraced her former roommate and had a chat. Then she saw Gary, who had Peggy gazing up at him as if he were a living Adonis and not a man who was trying to hide the way, post-thirty, he was thickening out and threatening jowls. Sylvia kept moving. She'd spotted Gladys the moment she'd arrived, of course, but to make a beeline for her former boss and nemesis would have looked obvious and strange.

Fred Quilley was in attendance, looking like the last year had been hard: he was thinner, and his hair was grey and cut harshly short. But he was cheerful when Sylvia voiced concern. After Maplins, he told her, he'd quickly found a new purpose and income. A sanctuary for retired racehorses - a real one rather than the short-lived version Joe Maplin had installed for the sake of good PR - had given him the opportunity to continue to work with the animals he adored. He hit Sylvia up for a donation to the charity that ran the sanctuary, saying they were almost at the target...
they'd set to allow work to commence on a further stable block. Sylvia parted with a few quid for old time's sake.

Yvonne wasn't present, but Barry had shown up. Now separated from Yvonne, of course, and rendered infinitely more human because of it. He confided to Sylvia, when she noted how relaxed and happy he looked, that he was 'flat-sharing' in Blackheath with a bar-tender named Harold. "It doesn't do," he said, "to deny one's very sense of self." Sylvia kissed his cheek and moved on.

The twins were aging much better than Gary was. Both had decided to leave the holiday industry when Joe Maplin's yellowcoats had been disbanded. Bruce was working backstage at the Manchester Opera House. Stanley was doing a night school course in vehicle maintenance.

It took almost half an hour before Sylvia slid in next to Gladys.

"Hello you," Sylvia said, slouching back as comfortably as she could and surveying the room.

"Hello yourself," Gladys replied.

Ted came over. He set a gin and tonic down in front of Sylvia, and a Babycham in front of Gladys. "Ladies," he said with a wink, and wandered off.

"Love the longer hairstyle," Sylvia said. "Suits you to a T."

Gladys looked at her guardedly. "Thank you."

"Sensible choice." Sylvia glanced at Gladys, then deliberately looked away. "They do say it's the hands and the neck you have to watch, at your time of life."

Gladys's voice grew sharp. "Do they now?"

"Mmm. Longer at the back will cover a multitude of sins."

There was a pause. Sylvia sensed Gladys preparing to round on her in outrage. She glanced again. Gladys's lips were parted, but it was as if she was out of practice, finding a bitchy comment to throw back.

Sylvia couldn't help but chuckle. "Oh, come on, Gladys, I'm teasing. Am I supposed to sit down next to you and say something nice? You'd wonder what on earth was wrong with me!"

Gladys sighed out the breath she'd been holding, and managed to make it sound like half a laugh. "Suppose so," she agreed.

"Seriously, you look great. I'm thinking of going shorter, myself. Hair-wise, I mean. Maybe a Mary Quant bob."

"Save you a fortune in hair-dye," Gladys said solemnly.

Sylvia almost fell into the old pattern of strenuously denying that she'd ever coloured her hair (although this had never been the god's honest truth) when she saw a small glint in Gladys's eyes. She snorted. Gladys smirked.

"Well, there's the pleasantries done," Sylvia observed with a grin. "What shall we talk about now?"

"How was the season?" Gladys asked. Mainly, Sylvia guessed, to ensure that she was directing the conversation.
"Quite good fun," Sylvia said. "It's a new resort, so the facilities are better than at Crimpton. Nice pool. Nice setting." She finished her first G&T and set the empty glass down. "People are okay too." She glanced sideways, a touch slyly. "I've just got the one greencoat who won't pull her weight. Constant complaining. Skiving off."

Gladys smiled a little. "There's always one."

"Hmm." Sylvia kept her face straight. "And they won't be told, will they?"

"Oh, they always know best."

They sipped their drinks for a while.

"Do you know why I was always such a cow to you?" Sylvia asked.

Surprised, Gladys turned her way. "Sheer talent?" she guessed.

Sylvia grinned. Never let it be said she couldn't take it as well as give. "Talent, certainly," she agreed. "We're all good at something."

Gladys sighed. "You were good at a lot of things. If I'd let on about that, once in a while, I suppose you'd have been less of a cow."

Sylvia hid a frown. Hearing Gladys Pugh - correction, Gladys Dempster - indulge in self-recriminations was not only strange, it was unsettling. The one thing Sylvia had never doubted was Gladys's confidence.

So she shook her head. "It wasn't about that. I was in awe of you," she said simply. "Everything you did at the camp was successful. The way you talked to the campers. The way you organised events. You were up an hour before the rest of us, every day, crack of dawn. But you never seemed to get tired." Sylvia shook her head. "Every time I said something unkind? I did it to drown out the voice in my head. The one that said I might as well give up. Throw it all in. Because I was never going to be as good at it as you."

Gladys was quiet for a long while before she said, "What's this about, Sylvia? Do you need another reference, or something?"

"Not sure what you mean."

"I mean, you were right - it sounds very strange when you're being nice."

Sylvia grinned. "Want me to say something bitchy?"

"Ohh, I don't have the energy," Gladys said. Sylvia looked at her, concerned, hearing the fatigue in Gladys's voice. It didn't sound like a physical tiredness.

"Gladys, what's wr-"

"Fine, then, if we're doing this. Do you know why I was such a cow to you?"

Sylvia allowed Gladys her successful evasion. "I was lazy and obnoxious?" she suggested.

But Gladys smiled wearily. "You were the best yellowcoat I had. You were tall, leggy, gorgeous. You made the campers feel like they were in Hollywood. You were always a natural." Gladys looked down at her drink, frowning. "I was twenty-five when I started at Maplins. Twenty-eight when I transferred to Crimpton-on-Sea. And for the next six years, I was twenty-six years old.
Every year. Without fail." She huffed a laugh. "Pathetic."

"We were all cooking the books when it came to our vitals," Sylvia assured her.

"I know. But you got away with a swift sauté. I needed a three-hour stew."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Clive Dempster could have had his pick of the female yellowcoats, and one or two others besides. He chose you."

Gladys looked sharply away, pinching at her lips.

Ah.

So that was the trouble. Unfortunately, Sylvia had seen it coming: ever since Gladys Pugh had, in classic rebound style, succumbed to the attentions of a man who knew as much about monogamy as Sylvia knew about being a fighter pilot.

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"Funny, in't it?" Peggy observed to Ted from the corner.

"What's that, Peg?"

"Them two," she said, gesturing to the table where Gladys and Sylvia were managing to talk to each other without any sign of narrowing eyes or curling lips. "It's like they're friends or summat."

"We're all friends," Ted said. "Every last one of us. Even them as don't like each other very much." He looked around the room. "For every argument we have, every up and every down, us lot here are closer than family. Even now, a year after it all fell apart." He drew himself up. "There's a bond, in showbiz. You can't break it once it's there."

"I was never in showbiz. I'm a cleaner."

"You came damn close. And you'll always be part of the family, Peggy."

"Oh. That's nice." Peggy smiled, only feeling a little bittersweet.

"Thing wi' Gladys and Sylvia, though," Ted went on. "They're more alike than they'd care to admit."

Peggy scrunched up her nose as she tried to see the similarity. "Not in height, they're not."

"No, not in height-"

"Or hair colour."

"I'm not talking about what they look like, Peggy!"

"Oh. You mean psychotically."

"Exactly." Ted nodded to himself. "Two beautiful women. Both talented, both able to charm the birds from the trees, both frightened to death of the talented and beautiful woman standing close by."

Peggy peered closer. "Which other beautiful woman? Do you mean Betty?"
After the silence between them began to stretch uncomfortably, Sylvia caved first.

"You might as well tell someone, you know," she told Gladys.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Look at it this way. Even if I wanted to betray the confidence, no one would believe me." She arched a brow at Gladys. "After all, we hate each other. It's a well known fact. Why would you tell me anything personal?"

"What are y-" Gladys stopped, dropped her chin and lifted a finger to rest beneath her nose, as if with this tiny gesture she could keep the emotions at bay. Finally she relaxed and gave a sigh. "Oh, Sylvia, I don't know what to do."

"First things first. Say it out loud."

"Well how's that going to help?"

"Makes it real. Stops it from being something you can ignore."

"And I repeat - how's that going to help?"

"Trust me, I've been there. This bit's important."

Sylvia waited. After perhaps thirty seconds, Gladys finished her Babycham and all but slammed the glass down on the table. "He's a rat."

"No doubt. Say it."

"My husband is having an affair." A tiny humourless laugh. "At least one."

Sylvia thought back to those first months of their final Maplins season. Clive Dempster, dashing and flirtatious, speeding about in his open-top car, spending money like water, drinking and smoking and shamelessly pursuing every woman who made even the briefest eye contact. Sylvia wondered whether Gladys knew about Dawn. She suspected not.

She shook the memories away. "When did you find out?"

"Oh, I knew months ago. Australia's a big place, but even the Sydney-Perth run is only five hours. There was no reason for Clive to be away from home more than the odd night."

"More?"

"Five nights, twice a month."

"Ah."

Gladys sighed again. "I saw it coming. I think everyone who ever met him did. He's a flirt. He's a lovable rogue. He can't help himself."

"He's a married man," Sylvia pointed out. "He didn't have to get married. He chose to. Forsaking all others, you know?"
Oh, I think he likes being married - he's surprised himself, there. It's nice for him, having a home and a warm bed to always come back to. Someone else to manage the boring necessities, like insurance and bills." Gladys's eyes narrowed a bit. "And laundry. And meals." She shook herself, perhaps before the resentment took a greater hold. "I even think he still likes me. He can be very affectionate. Very warm and appreciative." Another sigh. "It's just that he can't quite say no when the chance for something else comes along."

Sylvia nodded. This sounded like the Clive Dempster she remembered. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Gladys looked at Sylvia. "Why, do you think I ought to be giving him the benefit of the doubt?"

But the question was rhetorical, and the hardness of Gladys's tone told Sylvia that Gladys didn't need an answer.

"I was going to turn a blind eye," Gladys went on. "Long as he kept his extramarital business in another city. Long as he always came home to me."

"Some people live like that," Sylvia said neutrally, though she knew she'd never be satisfied with that arrangement herself. She finished her drink and set down her empty glass. At that point she saw two full replacements waiting at the edge of the table, and the rotund figure of Ted Bovis walking back towards the buffet table.

"Yes. Some people do. But then I got to thinking," Gladys said. "That it's just a matter of time. You know? Before the other cosy home starts to look better than his real one."

Sylvia reached for her third G&T and dragged it close. "Does he know you know?"

"No," Gladys said.

"Does she? The other woman?"

"She sent a very indiscreet postcard to his office, knowing it would be forwarded to his home address. I'm thinking she probably realises I know."

"So leave him."

Gladys shook her head. "How can I?"

"Easy. Phone him up. Tell him he's a faithless bastard and a sorry excuse for a man. Tell him to go and live with his bit on the side because you never want to see him, ever again."

"You know what divorce is like - it's the same over there as over here. Someone's got to be in the wrong."

"Um, forgive me for stating the obvious, but someone is."

"How do I prove it?"

"This postcard?"

Gladys looked sheepish. "I burned it."

"Ah."

She shook her head. "If I say anything, he'll just deny it. Or make something unlikely up that I'll
want to believe. But he's not stupid. He won't put himself in a position where I can prove he's at fault. It'll cost him."

"It bloody should! He's the one, can't keep it in his trousers."

"Fine. So I divorce him. What then?"

"Whatever you want! Come on, Gladys, where's that confidence? Where's the woman who used to intimidate the hell out of all us yellowcoats?"

"I got old, Sylvia," Gladys said, voice louder and quavering for a moment. All that Celtic passion; she'd always worn her heart on her sleeve. But she heard herself and quietened down. "So that's me, then, is it? Back on the shelf? One brief dusting-off, mid-thirties, but let's face it, the glaze is getting yellow and it's full of tiny, tiny cracks-"

At last, after an impressively stoical attitude to most of the conversation, Gladys's rigid expression slipped. The hand went again to the nose. Her chin fell to her chest. Sylvia shuffled closer and grabbed at Gladys's free hand.

"You want to get out of here? Go somewhere more private?" she asked.

Gladys's head shook, but the wrenching sobs that were so obviously needed never came. When she could speak, she said, "I'll be fine."

Sylvia didn't let go of Gladys's hand. "You shouldn't let him get away with this."

"I know. But I think I'm probably going to." She pulled her hand away from Sylvia's. "What are the choices? I can be humiliated and single, doomed to die alone. Or I can husband-share. Living a lie, but a nice one. A friendly one."

"Which is also humiliating."

Gladys sighed hard. "Yes." She pinched at her lips and then added in a small voice, "You know what the worst thing is?"

"That it all seems rather inevitable?" Sylvia guessed.

"Everyone else thought so," Gladys said gloomily. "But it's not that. Well - that's part of it." She looked straight at Sylvia. "The worst thing is the self-loathing."

"Self-...? Gladys, you have nothing to be ashamed of-"

"I've been a fool, Sylvia. Such a fool." A deep breath. "I held that postcard in my hand. Another woman's name, signed in her handwriting, calling my husband 'darling'. Solid proof. And it was like...it was like a veil was lifted. Like everything suddenly became clear and obvious."

"What was clear?" Sylvia prompted, when Gladys had paused in thought.

"Everything. All the things I'd told myself. All the things I'd forced myself to believe." A bitter laugh. "That Clive Dempster was a good man. A strong man, a principled man. Solid and heroic and dependable."

Sylvia nodded. This Clive Dempster was indeed a myth; in his role as Entertainments Manager there'd been nothing dependable about him. She could remember the business with Foster, the Camp Controller who'd tried to blackmail both Peggy and Gladys into sex. There were dozens of
other examples, less dramatic, of Clive Dempster failing to do his job. Failing to support his team. And of course, there was the fact that he'd been carrying on with Dawn, promising her that the whole business with Gladys was just a horrible misunderstanding, even while he was supposed to be engaged to be married.

"I wanted it too much, see," Gladys explained. "I wanted to believe it was the grand romance. That I was the woman to change him forever." She sneered at herself. "One look at me and he'd never want anyone else." She hung her head. "Stupid. Stupid, stupid woman." Her lips pinched together and she took a shaken breath. "It was all about the timing. He made me feel beautiful. He's good at that - he understands women only too well." Gladys glanced up at Sylvia. "And after the start to that last season? Oh, Sylvia - I really, really needed to feel beautiful."

Sylvia took a leap of faith. "Because this was never about Clive, was it? Not really."

Gladys looked at her. Sylvia looked back steadily. Then, very slowly, Gladys reached for the inside pocket of her blazer and pulled out a sheet of paper which she handed to Sylvia.

It read:

Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin

20th April 1961

To whom it may concern,

Gladys Dempster, formerly Gladys Pugh, worked at the Maplins Crimpton-on-Sea holiday camp for seven seasons. I worked with her during my tenure as Entertainments Manager in 1959.

Mrs. Dempster's role was that of Sports Organiser and the leader of the entertainment staff, known as the 'Yellowcoats'. Her organisational skills and her ability to lead her team were an integral part of the success she brought to this role, but it was her tireless energy, warmth and effortless charm when dealing with the visitors to the resort that I remember as most valuable.

In addition to Mrs. Dempster's sporting role, she was also the voice of 'Radio Maplin', providing up to date announcements alongside musical entertainment. These duties required Mrs. Dempster to begin her working day at an earlier hour than most of us, yet she met each day with zest and vigour.

In the day to day running of the camp, Mrs. Dempster was always supportive of me in my managerial role. She is an able problem-solver, and can reorganise a schedule at the drop of a hat: a talent much appreciated given the unpredictable nature of the Great British weather.

If you are reading this then you are considering Mrs. Dempster for a position in your organisation. I can be contacted at the above address should you have any specific queries. Please let this testimonial stand as proof of my very high regard for Mrs. Dempster. I would recommend her without reservation to any prospective employer.

Yours faithfully,

Jeffrey Fairbrother
Associate Chair, Archaeology
Sylvia handed back the testimonial. "That's...pretty glowing," she said.

"Yes."

"I wrote to him, you know. Jeff."

Gladys's response came too quickly. "Why?"

"I needed that reference. I thought if I asked you, you wouldn't be nice. So I wrote to Jeff. He wrote back and told me to write to you. Said he couldn't write a reference for anyone whose ability he wasn't sure of. Because it wouldn't be honest."

Gladys looked at the folded over paper. "Oh."

"What, you thought he was over-egging the omelette in that testimonial?"

"I thought he was trying to say sorry."

"He probably was. He'll have still meant every word. You know Jeff. If he's putting his signature to it, he'll have told it straight. Like he was under oath."

"Doesn't mean I've forgiven him," Gladys said, showing a whisper of her stubbornness.

"Course not. And the fact you're married to someone else doesn't mean you aren't still in love with him."

Gladys drew breath, let it out, let her shoulders slump. She tucked the piece of paper away again and reached for her fresh glass of Babycham.

"I haven't seen him for more than two years," she said.

"Out of sight, out of mind?" Sylvia suggested, knowing the opposite was true.

Gladys studied the light reflecting off her glass. "I still think about him," she said quietly.

"I see."

"Sometimes I wonder if it was even real."

"Loving Jeff?" Sylvia prompted.

Gladys shook her head. "Loving Clive."

"Ohh, Gladys."

Shoulders touching as they sat together, the two women sipped their drinks and let their eyes play around the happy scenes in the function room. But their thoughts were their own.

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Dear Mr. Fairbrother,

Just a line of thanks for the card you sent through for our wedding. It was ever so kind of you to take the time to remember us, especially since you never even met April during her season at Crimpton.

Anyway, we had a lovely day. Loads of the old gang turned up, much to my surprise. I thought people would have moved on to other things, but I reckon Ted did some arm-twisting on the side. Whatever the reason, everyone seemed to have a good time. You'll be glad to know we're all well and thriving. Even Gladys managed to time her first visit back to these shores to coincide with our big day. It was especially lovely to see her.

So thanks again, Mr. Fairbrother. Perhaps when you next come back to England for a spell, you could find the time to visit Brighton. You'd be very welcome to stop by for a cup of tea and a chat.

All the best,
Spike and April Dixon

Lombardino's Restaurant, University Avenue, Madison
15th December 1961

Jeffrey looked across the table at his dining partner. He smiled to himself as he watched an expression of pleasure suffuse her features. The students thought that Dr. Emilia Robben was a stern and fierce character, given the rules she laid down for the attendance of her lectures and the no-excuses policy she employed for coursework. But the students had never watched her eat perfectly fried squid with horseradish and lemon.

"You're looking at me," Emilia complained around her mouthful.

"Just wondering - how's the calamari?" he said.

She swallowed, snorted amusement, sipped the chilled Soave which accompanied their starters. "Yeah, 'cause I'm hard to read when we eat at Lombardino's, right?"

"Quite the poker face," he pretended to agree.

She grinned at him. "Calamari's good, as it is always good. How's the Caesar salad?"

He looked down at his untouched bowl and remembered to pick up his knife and fork. "Well it looks marvellous," he said.
"It's not just for looking. Get stuck in, English."

Jeffrey got stuck in. The flavours and textures were perfectly balanced. The coming together of lettuce, anchovies, Parmigiano, fresh olives and hard-boiled eggs: it was a symphony.

Emilia was still grinning over her wine glass. "Good?"

"Heavenly," he said after swallowing.

"Okay, that face you're making, right there?" She pointed vaguely with her glass. "You memorise that face. Practise it in front of the mirror if you have to. And when you're sitting between my mother and my Aunt Agnes on Christmas Day, and you take your first bite of Mom's green bean casserole? That's the expression you make. Got it?"

Jeffrey nodded, and ate, and then paused and drank. The wine was just acidic enough. He rolled it around his mouth and investigated the way it interacted with the strong flavours of his salad.

"You know, it's awfully good of your family to welcome an Englishman abroad for Christmas," he said. "I'm very grateful."

"Sure. So - how many more times are you gonna tell me that before you think I'm convinced you mean it?"

"Oh, um-"

"Because I've counted seventeen so far. One more and I'm gonna have to start telling you to shut up about it."

"Sorry." But she was smiling that comfortable smile, and he wasn't thrown. He'd been living in this country for over eighteen months, and he'd been going out for these friendly dinners with Emilia Robben for six of them. It had taken him two months to notice that he wasn't stuttering as much as he used to in her company. He'd never been properly friends with a woman before. It was different to masculine friendship. In some ways it was better. "I'll leave it at seventeen, then, and assume the proprieties have been observed."

She laughed. She actually laughed at his comment, as if his dry attempt at self-deprecating humour deserved the title of 'joke'. Jeffrey smiled in contentment and finished his salad.

"So this green bean thing," he said, after their plates had been cleared.

"What about it?"

"It's really made with tinned soup?"

"Canned, honey. We say canned. But - sure."

He wasn't even flinching at the terms of endearment she used with him any more. Mainly because he'd heard her use them with about six other people, and he'd decided that he had nothing to worry about there. "And some kind of processed onions from a box?" he pressed.

"Yup."

"And it's a holiday tradition?"

Emilia shrugged, relaxed as they chatted between courses. "Is now."
"Since when?"

"Few years ago. Fifties some time? This is America, Jeff. You should be getting used to the way we think of ten whole years ago as ancient history."

"So speaks the archaeologist."

"I'm a bundle of contradictions. It's what makes me exciting company." She arched a brow at Jeffrey. "That and my knowledge of Madison's best eating houses."

"You are all these things and more," he said, attempting chivalry in a manner that would have shocked the hell out of Daphne. Still, his ex-wife was no longer an issue, and Emilia simply beamed and poured more wine.

It was, Jeffrey decided, one of the greatest pleasures known to mankind: excellent food and drink, in relaxed and easy company. He would happily forgo the other pleasures life might offer so long as he could always claim a regular dose of this one.

"Now then," he said. "I need some information."

"Shoot."

"Gifts. If I were to attend another house on Christmas Day in England, I should feel obliged to bring gifts for all in attendance."

"Of course you would. You've been brought up right. You need a list of people?"

"That would be helpful."

"Hey - hang on. You didn't start Christmas shopping yet?"

"I have...one or two items already bought and wrapped," he said, aiming for 'secretive' and apparently hitting the target, if Emilia's pleased expression was anything to go by. "But I'll be finishing off this coming week, now the semester is over."

"Then I will furnish you with said list. I'll even mark it up according to age and likes and dislikes."

"That would also be helpful. Thank you. Can you, er, give me some indication as to budget?"

Emilia nodded. "I'll mark it up with that too. But no one's expecting Tiffany." Pause. "Okay, not saying I'd demand you take it right back to the store or anything, but no one's expecting Tiffany."

"I'm going to have to assume that 'Tiffany' represents expensive indulgence." Jeff shrugged apology.

"Jewellery, honey. Serious jewellery." There was another tiny pause, and Emilia's eyes glazed, just for a moment, as if she'd been struck by an unsettling thought. She lifted her wine glass and hid behind it, and added, "Not the stuff that'll make your skin go green."

"Ah."

Jeffrey looked around at their fellow diners. He pretended not to notice the tension in Emilia's frame. She was worrying that her reference to jewellery had been interpreted as pointed. Silly of her. Their friendship wasn't burdened by such implications and expectations.

"So how are you at charades, English?" she finally asked.
Dear Jeff,

Sorry you couldn't get over for Spike's big day, but I suppose you can't abandon your pupils in term time. Spike says you sent a card. You always were a decent sort.

We missed you at the reception. We missed all our old entertainment managers, actually, with you stuck in the States, and Bavistock serving time at Her Majesty's Pleasure. Gladys made it over but without Clive in tow.

I must admit, Gladys didn't look all that well. Not ill, but tired and upset about something or other. Seemed like she was a shadow of her former self. Sylvia had a chat with her and confirmed afterwards that there's trouble on its way. Gladys is too proud to ask for help, of course, but you can't help but worry, can you?

Spike and April had a terrific day, though, which was the main thing. I picked up the cake you ordered, and as promised I never told Spike who paid for it. He reckons we all chipped in. I'm guessing he doesn't know how much Fortnums charge.

So thanks for what you did for the two newlyweds. You may not have been there in person, but a glass or two was raised in your honour. It's been a while, I know, but you're still in our thoughts. Hope your ears weren't burning!

Look after yourself,
Ted B.

~

1043 Dresser Avenue, Waukesha, WS
24th December 1961

The night was cold, and snowflakes drifted thinly through the air. The back garden of this modest family home was already white with snowfall. Jeffrey stood on the porch beyond the back door, wondering how long he could make this time to himself last.

The problem was that he'd got used to being in his own company. He'd bought a house in Madison during the summer just gone, after a long chat with Professor Manninger had helped him realise that his long-term future was now in Wisconsin. Hints had been given that he'd be offered the Anthropology Department's Chair when Manninger retired next year. It had been enough to make him decide. He would stop living out of a suitcase in his apartment on campus. He would purchase a house and set down some roots. He'd turned forty in October; it was probably about time.

The house-buying process had made him recognise something about himself: he'd never actually
lived on his own before. Not as such, anyway. Not in a self-contained property, with no one to organise its upkeep unless he arranged it himself. First there'd been boarding school, then rooms at college, then better rooms at college. Then there'd been marriage, and Daphne, and a small townhouse just off the Queen's Road within two minutes of the Cam.

And then there'd been no more Daphne, and a weighty sense of failure and dissatisfaction with his life. Cue five months in a small chalet, one of a long line of chalets, in Crimpton-on-Sea.

So it had turned into a bit of an experiment, living on his own. That first night had been odd. Chadbourne Avenue was a nice, quiet, residential street. Jeff hadn't realised how much he'd found the comings and goings of a communal building a comforting background hum. Being suddenly without it had felt very strange and silent. Still, three nights in and he'd realised he was getting used to it. He'd enjoyed his first real opportunity to spread himself out. Really make the space his own.

The snow was thickening. He hadn't put his overcoat on when he'd stepped out for some air. Jeff pulled his jacket around himself more tightly, and blew at a snowflake that had the audacity to land on the tip of his nose.

Of course, the purchase of the house had allowed him the perfect excuse for not returning to England for Christmas. He hadn't told his mother the real reason why he'd avoided a visit: the fact that he'd spent most of the previous Christmas thinking up new and ever more ingenious ways to murder her. It hadn't seemed the most politic of things to mention.

Emilia's offer to spend a few days over Christmas with her family had been welcome, though. Avoiding another yuletide round of his mother's attempts to marry him off to any number of witless girls of impeccable breeding was one thing, spending Christmas Day alone was quite another. And after a few hours in the Robbens' company, Jeffrey decided that they were a splendid family, all very welcoming and easygoing, and the house was a pleasant place to be.

Still. It was nice to be on his own for a while, watching the snow fall.

The back door rattled and he turned to see Emilia leaning there. "Hey, English," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "Am I being rude?"

"Wanting ten minutes away from the mayhem? Hardly." She looked at the snow and pulled her cardigan closer. "Mind company?"

He did mind, rather. But he'd been brought up to value politeness beyond all other things, so he said, "Not at all."

She stepped out and let the door close, then she leaned alongside him on the back porch overlooking the garden.

"You gonna tell me what's up, or should I keep my nose out of your business?" she asked casually. Jeffrey swallowed. "Is it so obvious?"

"You're less enigmatic than you'd like to think."

"Ah." He drew breath through his nose. The ice in the air was beginning to bite. "It isn't any great cause for concern. I had a letter from an old friend yesterday morning."

"Bad news?"
"Don't know. Not sure." He frowned into the night. "Definitely none of my business."

"So why did this friend write to you?"

"Again - not sure."

There was a pause, then Emilia asked, "This friend. He or she?"

He glanced her way, startled. She shrugged but didn't evade his eyes. "You don't want to talk about it, it's fine."

In recent times he'd managed to overcome his tendency to retreat into himself when faced with a problem. His friendship with Emilia had played a part in his success. And the thing of it was, he did want to talk about the letter from Ted. Especially to a woman possessed of an emotional intelligence that likely beat his paltry skills hands down. There were, however, other issues to consider besides his own preferences.

"I'd like to," he told Emilia. "But I can't. Other people's problems. It, er, wouldn't be right."

She nodded. "Offer's there, if it helps." She nudged his shoulder with her own. "So here's the good news. My sister is in the process of scooping up her offspring. They're about to head out, which will give us a twelve-hour window for recovery before they show up tomorrow and demand presents and an unfeasible amount of sugar."

"Your niece and nephew are delightful," Jeffrey said politely. "Delightfully exuberant, anyway."

"My niece and nephew are both energy-sucking monsters who leave me feeling limp and in need of cognac. Speaking of which, I got a bottle of the good stuff in my luggage, and my parents will be hitting the hay about ten minutes after waving off Dorothea and the family. Want to risk somewhere warmer for a while?"

The snow was really coming down now. It made the world beyond the back porch all hazy, fuzzy, like a badly received television picture. Like it wasn't quite real.

Cognac and warmth sounded good. Jeffrey nodded his agreement and followed Emilia back inside.

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An hour later, and warmed inside and out, Jeffrey took advantage of a brief moment of solitude while Emilia went to powder her nose, and fished out Ted's letter once again. Unfortunately, re-reading it for the fifth time did not reveal any clues he had so far failed to glean. He sighed, rested his head back against the couch, and closed his eyes.

Analysis was all about what you knew and what you could extrapolate. So what did he know?

The letter itself was an excellent reminder that Ted had no gift for subtlety. It was fair to assume, therefore, that Ted's words had been intended to provoke a reaction.

Jeffrey knew that Ted was fond of Gladys. While in many contexts Ted Bovis was about as trustworthy as he was subtle, Jeff was convinced that Ted was trying to serve Gladys's best interests with this letter. Whether Ted was going about this in the right way, however, was another matter entirely.

He knew that Gladys had spoken to Sylvia about whatever problems she faced. Which seemed
unlikely, but he could think of no reason for Ted to lie about this.

What else?

Gladys was a married woman. This was an important factor in any analysis. She was now Mrs. Clive Dempster, and any problems she faced ought to be resolved with the help and support of the man who'd committed his life to hers.

It seemed that Ted did not adhere to the same view, since he was trying to involve Jeffrey. Extrapolation from this data led to one conclusion: if Dempster wasn't a source for help and support, then he was most likely the cause of Gladys's problems. This theory was given weight by the comment about Gladys attending Spike's wedding reception without her husband.

Jeff knew little of Clive Dempster, besides the fact that Dempster had replaced him as Entertainments Manager at Crimpton. Dempster had caught Gladys's eye, and a romance had eventually blossomed into a proposal.

And that ought to be that, as far as Jeffrey was concerned. Gladys had made her choice. For all he knew, it had been exactly the right one. Ted might have misunderstood. Sylvia might be making mischief at Gladys's expense.

He thumped the cushions of the couch. What the hell was Ted thinking, trying to drag him back into something that should remain in the past? Jeffrey hadn't seen his Maplins colleagues for over two years. Even if the feelings Gladys had entertained for him had been real, and not - as they now seemed - some pathological compulsion to flirt with the boss-

"Jeff?"

"What?" He shot the owner of the voice an annoyed look, even as his hand crushed Ted's letter into a ball.

"Wow. Merry Christmas to you too, honey. You wanna kick something? Next door's furball will be tomcatting around the avenue about now, and I never liked the damn thing."

He breathed a laugh and with it released some tension. Emilia sat down next to him rather than choosing the armchair she'd occupied for the last hour or so. But he didn't wonder at her new proximity. He was too busy trying to straighten out his correspondence so he could fold it away.

"Okay, that's it," Emilia said. "Look - I know you don't want to break the confidence of a friend. But it seems to me you really need to talk this one out."

He sighed. "You're probably right."

"Hand on heart - nothing you tell me will go any further."

"I know."

She waited. He couldn't quite broach the subject. Everything else besides, he'd realised how absurd it was to think that he retained any kind of connection with Gladys Dempster, who lived on another continent and who shared her life and her home and her bed with another man.

"I have no right," he murmured.

"To tell me what's on your mind?"
"Hmm? Oh. No, no, I-I-I have no right to interfere."

Emilia topped up their brandy balloons. "Okay. Change the names if it makes you feel better. But let's take this from the top."

He looked at her helplessly. "I can't."

"Damn - they really drill you on the confidentiality thing, huh?"

"It's not that."

With a twinge of pain in his side like a stitch, Jeffrey glimpsed the conversation that was about to happen between Emilia and himself. It had been coming for a good three months, if he was honest. He considered, just for a moment, getting up and quietly leaving the house. Running away.

He then remembered that he'd drunk wine with his evening meal, had enjoyed several brandies in the last hour; that his car was still in Madison because Emilia had run both of them over to her parents' home in this suburb of Milwaukee; and it was getting on for half past ten on Christmas Eve.

"Oh god," he muttered, disgusted with both himself and with life. He tried to apologise with just the look in his eyes for the things he was about to say.

"Oh," Emilia said. She gave a tiny sigh of concession. "It's that."

It took quite some courage, but he made himself nod.

"Want me to say it?" she went on, when he couldn't speak. "Since the words seem to be eluding you?"

"I-I-I'm not good at-at these kinds of words." He noticed peripherally that he'd begun to stutter.

Emilia exhaled hard. "Okay. You're fretting over this letter. An old friend's in trouble. You're reluctant to talk about it. Chances are, the old friend's an old flame."

"Not...exactly."

"Close enough though?"

"I suppose there were elements to our, er, er, interactions that went beyond the, er, professional."

"So you worked with this woman?" She did a double-take. "I'm making assumptions. It's a woman?"

He laughed tiredly at that. "I'm not homosexual, Emilia."

"Some have wondered. It's the insane politeness and the insistence on a good shave, I think."

"Even so."

"All of which means," she concluded, "that whatever this problem is, you can't talk to me about it without worrying about hurting my feelings." She held his gaze, and he forced himself not to look away. "Because, Jeffrey Fairbrother, you are repressed and shy and kind of neurotic, but you are not blind and you're not an idiot. You know how I've come to feel about you."
"No.  I-I-I mean, yes, I know.  And no, I'm not, er, blind."

There was a pause.  Both of them heard the way Emilia drew in a breath and then let it out in one shaken exhalation.  The poignancy of this shared acknowledgement settled over them like the snowfall outside.

"Okay," Emilia said.  "So this is why all my signals have bounced right off you?  It's all down to this woman you're still hung up on?"

"I was never-"  He stopped himself.  Though he hadn't anticipated this, it seemed he was in the process of having a completely honest conversation with a woman.  It was quite the first in his life.  He saw no reason to sully such an event by being dishonest with himself.  So he tried again.  "It was complicated."

"Yeah, so I see.  But can we deal with this first?  You and me?  See, right now, what you're doing - you're turning me down after I spent months trying to get you interested.  So it's a kindness if you tell me it's all because of another woman."  Emilia shrugged one shoulder.  "Easier to handle than the alternative."

"The alternative?"

"That I just don't do it for you."

Jeffrey slumped back and finally allowed himself the comfort of closing his eyes.  "Oh, Emilia."

"Right here," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I see that too.  But since I kind of forced the issue, I don't think you need to beat yourself up."

"I, er, I should have told you sooner."

"That you weren't interested?"

"That I'm not ready to pursue anything."  He made himself look at her again.  "I was being selfish.  I enjoy your company.  I didn't want to cause any upset.  Lose our friendship."

A small smile.  "Fortunately, I think we make pretty great friends."

"As do I."

"Which I guess brings us around full circle.  Something's worrying at you.  Wanna talk it over with a friend?"

And since they'd dealt with the elephant in the room, Jeffrey could no longer see any reason not to seek help where it was being offered.  He handed Ted's slightly crumpled letter to Emilia, waited while she read it, and then he said:

"Gladys Pugh was the reason I spent a season at a holiday camp without being sacked for incompetence.  I-I was the, er, proverbial fish out of water.  I knew nothing of the routines, the paperwork systems, the duties.  She carried me, without complaint, for the weeks it took before I got the hang of things."

"She was your assistant?"
"Effectively. My right-hand-man."

"Gimme some background. What's she like?"

"Oh. Well. She's in her thirties, though she'd never thank you for pointing that out. She was born and brought up in a small working-class mining town. She left school at fourteen. Her idea of great music is the 'Black and White Minstrels'. Her idea of great literature is the novels of 'Mills and Boon', the covers of which tend to feature provocatively posed young women being studied with intent by swarthy and rakish men. She and I have absolutely nothing in common, besides a job I did for a handful of months."

He paused for breath. Emilia was watching him with a mildly arched eyebrow.

"So what does she look like?" Emilia asked.

"Dark hair. Dark eyes. Not tall. Slim, but not angular." Soft curves. Skin which always smelled faintly of chlorine and Gladys's vanilla lotion. The way those voluptuous breasts would heave with every breath when she looked at him and challenged him and wanted him and-

"Hey. English."

He startled. "Sorry?"

"So I'm guessing from the look of wistful longing on your face that you never got your hands on that slim-but-not-angular body."

He felt himself blush. Did one night that might or might not have happened count? He didn't think so. "No."

"She wasn't interested?"

"O-o-on-the contrary. She was unequivocal about how very interested she was."

"So...?"

"I didn't ask for her attentions. I didn't encourage them. I think you know me well enough to understand that I am not given to flirtation."

"Well, you obviously liked her. Found her attractive. What was the problem?"

"I was going through a divorce. But even if I'd been a-a-a single man, it wouldn't have been fair."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't know how long I was going to stay at the camp. Because I knew there was no future in, er, er, in anything we might, er, you know."

"She was looking for long-term?"

"She...well, no, not as such. But I am not in the habit of indulging in flings."

"You might wanna try it some time. Might make you less neurotic."

He conceded the point with a glance, and then paused to drink some brandy. "Look, the point is, yes, there was an attraction. I refused to act upon it. Then I left. Between the end of one season and the beginning of the next, I took this job, over here." He grimaced. "It's er, possible I didn't
"Don't tell me. You wrote her a letter." Emilia looked unimpressed.

"Well, er, yes. That is, I-I wrote a letter. To everyone. The whole team." Jeff watched Emilia's eyes widen. "I mentioned Gladys especially!" Emilia was shaking her head at him, as if in disbelief. Defensively, he said, "I didn't have to do anything at all! I'd already submitted my resignation to head office. It wasn't my responsibility to keep the staff apprised of the situation."

Emilia set her glass down, then she turned to face him and whacked him hard on his arm.

"Ow!" he complained. "What on earth did you do that for?"

"You didn't even write to her personally?"

Still in defensive mood, even as he nursed a sore arm, Jeff said "Perhaps you've misunderstood the situation. Gladys and I were colleagues. Maybe a bit more familiar than manager and subordinate should have been, but there was nothing else between us. No understanding. No unspoken promises."

"You liked her."

"Of course I liked her. She's very likable!"

"Okay." Emilia rolled her eyes. "But for the record - you do realise you are all over the place, talking about her. Right? Which makes me wonder - were your dealings with her at this holiday camp the same? 'Cause you know, I'm starting to feel sorry for this poor woman."

His shoulders stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

She studied him a moment, then she tut-tutted. "You know - for a man blessed with a sound intellect, you lack wisdom."

"Well, that's as maybe," he grumbled. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps my emotions are 'all over the place' as you say. That's hardly relevant any more, because my departure from Crimpton didn't matter even to Gladys, in the end. She was involved with my successor once the next season got going."

"This is the guy she married?"

"Yes. So obviously the feelings she thought she had for me were transient things."

"Maybe," Emilia said. "Or maybe not."
"She got married to someone else!"

"Right after getting her heart broken."

"There's no need to dramatise things. God - you sound like the blurb from one of Gladys's awful novels."

"Don't be a jerk, English. You've been doing pretty good up till now."

"All right, then. Fine. I have my shortcomings. I acknowledge them. None of it changes the fact that I am no longer in a position to help Gladys in any way. She lives thousands of miles away. She is someone else's wife."

"So why did this Ted guy write to you?"

"I don't know!"

"So write back and ask him." Emilia glanced again at the letter. "Better yet, write to this Sylvia. Seems like she's the one with all the gen. You got her address?"

"She lives in Littlehampton between seasons. Um - yes. I think I still have her address."

"There you go, then. At least find out what the problem is before you get all in a dither about it. You can do that without even contacting Gladys."

"I suppose that's true."

"Then, when you know what's going on, you can make a more informed decision." She finished her brandy and put the glass down. "Heck, you can even come talk it over with me, if you want."

Jeffrey felt touched by Emilia's support, since the conversation had begun with a rejection. She really was a good friend. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," he said.

"Probably the same thing you did to make Gladys-of-the-dark-eyes so unequivocally interested." She shrugged. "You're a good guy, Jeff. Contrary to what they say in the movies, sometimes women just like good guys." She stood up and stretched her shoulders. "I'm heading for bed. You know where everything is, right?"

"Yes, your mother gave me the full, er, 'tour'. Earlier."

"I'll say good night, then."

"Good night."

He watched her walk from the room. Emilia Robben was tall, slender and graceful. Her skin was fair, her features pleasant. Her company was a rare and precious joy. And the fact of the matter was that he had a huge amount in common with her. They were both academics working in the same discipline. Their likes and dislikes intersected with remarkable regularity.

She was, all things considered, a match made in heaven. Especially when considered alongside Gladys.

And yet...
Sometimes, Jeffrey Fairbrother had to admit, he managed to confuse the hell out of himself.

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Dearest Sylvia,

I hope you and your family had a good Christmas. I wish you all the best for the coming year.

Please forgive the presumption of this letter, but I find myself in something of a quandary. Ted has written to me in the time since you all met up for Spike's wedding day. In his letter he mentioned that Gladys is dealing with some difficulties, and noted that you are the person she has spoken to about them. Ted gave me no other details beyond his concern for Gladys's well-being.

As Ted was clearly hoping to prompt some kind of response from myself, it seems to me the most sensible first step is to ascertain the nature of Gladys's problem. Of course, I am unsure how I can be of assistance when I live in Wisconsin and no longer have any contact with Gladys.

Your guidance in this matter would therefore be much appreciated.

With best wishes,
Jeffrey Fairbrother

---

To,

Dear Jeff,

Great to hear from you! Happy new year. Hope you had a good one.

Ted ought to know better than to stick his oar in like that. Sorry for the worry he's caused.

Yes, Gladys is having problems. It isn't for me to tell tales. Suffice to say that she was trying to work out what to do when I spoke to her at Spike's shindig. She's back in Melbourne now. We had another meet-up before she and Clive flew back. She's made her decision. Hopefully it'll work out for her.
I know I'm being vague. I can't help that. If anyone's going to give you the juicy details then it'll have to be Gladys herself.

I suppose it's up to you, Jeff. If you want to renew acquaintance with our Welsh dragon, her address is below. But don't worry yourself. Gladys knows where she can find help if she needs it, even from those friends of hers who live thousands of miles away.

All the best,
Sylvia

~~~

Chadbourne Avenue, Madison
13th January 1962

"I don't know what to do," Jeffrey confessed, when Emilia had finished reading Sylvia's letter.

"'Welsh dragon,' huh?" Emilia mused.

He smiled in reminiscence. "Gladys and Sylvia had rather a spiky relationship during the time I knew them."

"Well, Sylvia's clearly in protective mode now."

"Yes."

"And quite a neat little rebuke she gave you there, too."

He looked at Emilia forlornly. "You, er, picked up on that? I was hoping I was being oversensitive."

"Pretty sure she's pointing out that real friends don't withdraw help just because geography is an inconvenient issue."

Jeffrey felt a surge of irritation. "God, look, I am not the villain here! I-I-I knew all of them for barely six months back in 1959. It's not as if I worked closely with them for years on end. I'm hardly part of the inner circle."

"And yet you got an invite to the wedding. Seems like they all think of you as part of the gang."

"This is not something I have encouraged."

"Oh, grow up, English," Emilia snapped. Jeffrey was taken aback by her tone. "You're like a damn infant! So convinced that the way you feel is the only way that counts!"

"I don't know what you're getting at," he said.

"Think about it. You kept Gladys at arm's length when you were at the camp, so that's the deciding factor when you choose how to say goodbye, never mind her feelings. And now you've moved on to another job and another life, and you don't think about your old team so much any more. So it's irritating for you to hear that they still think about you. They still expect you to give a damn." She shook her head at him. "You know, you've honed this attitude of yours into quite
the talent. You conveniently forget that other people sometimes have a different view - one that
matters just as much as yours."

"Well that's not fair," he stated.

"Ohh, maybe it isn't. Not entirely fair." Emilia brushed hair out of her eyes and sat forward.
"Look, Jeff, I know you're upset. I know you're confused. I know the storm gathering on the
horizon is scaring the bejesus out of you. Your instinct is to retreat into standoffishness. Hope that
everyone gives up and goes away. Know what? You need to try harder than that."

He got up and went to his living room window, where he watched the January light begin to fade
over the trees that lined Chadbourne Avenue. Emilia gave him a few minutes of peace. When he
had centred his thoughts again, he turned around and gave her a rueful look.

"You've come to know me rather too well."

"Enough to know that you can do better."

"But should I?" he asked. When her eyes hardened, he waved a hand through the air between
them. "No, no, I-I'm not looking for an excuse to, er, indulge in standoffishness. I mean, truly -
might I not be making things a thousand times worse for Gladys if I renew contact with her?"

"You might," Emilia conceded. "We're working on pretty minimal data here, so it's hard to know.
But would Sylvia have given you the option to write to Gladys if she thought it was the wrong
thing to do?"

Jeffrey returned to the sofa and slumped down. "Fair point," he agreed. "So I can assume that the
world will not shatter to its core if I write to Gladys. But I do wish Sylvia had given me a clearer
indication. Would I do better to turn my back or-or-or-"

"Or renew acquaintance."

"Would that be so wrong?" He rubbed his chin. "I mean, I'm really asking. Emilia, if it were you
- how would you react?"

"Not sure. Not sure it'd help, even if I could answer. From what I know of your friend Gladys, she
and I aren't all that alike." Emilia leaned back in her armchair and crossed her legs at the ankle.
"Given the way you said goodbye, first thing I'd probably want to do is swear at you."

Jeff gave a curt nod. He'd already anticipated Gladys's anger.

"Maybe you should also consider how her husband might react," Emilia added, "if he found out
that his wife was back in touch with you."

This was, of course, something Jeffrey had already forced himself to consider. "I don't know that
either. I don't know if Gladys has ever even mentioned me to him."

"Okay. So we got a big pile of 'don't know's. Which brings us back to what Sylvia says. It's your
call. What do you want to do?"

He looked over Sylvia's letter again. "Logically speaking, on balance, it makes sense to keep my
distance."

"That's probably true. Logically speaking." Her voice was sarcastic; of course none of this had
much to do with logic. "Is that your decision? And if it is - will it help you sleep nights again?"
Emilia studied his face, which he knew betrayed the stress and insomnia of the last three weeks.

"Oh, god!" he despaired. "I don't even know why this means so much! I thought I'd moved on!"

"At least that's one thing you know for sure, then. You haven't."

"But it makes no sense! I mean, I-I didn't even spend this much time thinking about her when we lived three doors apart in a holiday camp!"

Emilia stood up and crossed his sparsely furnished living room. She held out a hand, and when he took it she pulled him up to his feet.

"Shall I make it easier?" she asked. He nodded. "This discussion we're having, right now? It isn't about figuring out the best way to proceed."

"It isn't?"

"No. No, all you're trying to do is come up with a sound reason to support the decision you've already made."

"I am?" he asked, confused.

"You want to write to her. I think you kind of need to. So here are three sound reasons. One - there's a good chance any problems she's having are at least partly your fault, so you need the chance to apologise. Two - you care about this woman, and she's in trouble, and you can no more ignore a friend in need than you could..." She searched her thoughts for a comparison and came up with, "...than you could drive a bulldozer into Stonehenge." He huffed a laugh at that. She squeezed his hand. "Three - and this is the doozy - you want her back in your life. Even just as a pen-pal. Because it might have taken you two years, but you've worked out that she was kind of special. And you miss her."

"I won't argue any of your points," Jeff said slowly. "But I could still be on the verge of making a mistake."

"Want me to try to talk you out of it? 'Cause I'm not sure I could, and I'm definitely not crazy about taking the responsibility. All else besides, my own motives would be questionable. I'm the one in a position to gain if it all goes bang."

Even if Jeffrey couldn't understand the reasons for Emilia's feelings for him, he could at least comprehend the sense in her position. "I shall take the responsibility for my own actions." He sighed. "At least if it turns out I've misjudged everything horribly, there's a nice big ocean between Gladys and myself."

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

14th January 1962

Dear Gladys,

I wish I had a convenient excuse for writing to you. I've been racking my brains for several hours, trying to contrive some tenuous justification for this letter. Needless to say, I've failed miserably.
So I may as well come straight to the point. Gladys, I write because I am concerned for you. It has been made clear to me that you are going through difficulties. I do not know their exact nature, nor would I presume to ask, but I am worried enough to put pen to paper.

If this letter causes you distress, or if you feel I am behaving improperly, please accept my sincere apology. Should I fail to hear back from you, I give you my word: I will not intrude upon your life again.

Alternatively, if my offer of support, or help, or simply a friendly and understanding ear is in any small way welcome, please know that I am at your service.

With all good wishes,
Jeffrey Fairbrother

---

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

January 21st 1962

Jeffrey Fairbrother. How dare you? How DARE YOU?

Over two years. Not one word. Like I stopped existing when you stepped out of the camp.

And now one raised finger and I come running, all over again, is it?

How dare you!

Go to hell. Do you have any idea how you hurt me? Go. To. Hell.

Bastard digwilydd. Oh, you're concerned for me? Oh, you're worried? Ti'n llawn cachu. You never gave a damn about my feelings when it mattered. Why start now?

No, all you want is to feel better about yourself. Rwyt ti'n esgys fach pathetic am dyn.

[Paper holed by the force of the pen strokes. Ink blotched by droplets of water. Ruined paper torn and crumpled and discarded. Letter never sent.]

---

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

January 24th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Thank you for your letter. It was a surprise to hear from you after all this time. I trust your life in America is all you hoped for.

I have no need of your help. I am capable of standing on my own two feet. Please inform Sylvia
that she has no further need to meddle in my affairs.

Unless there is anything else you wish to say to me, I will not expect to hear from you again.

Gladys Dempster (Mrs.)

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

3rd February 1962

Dear Gladys,

Forgive this further missive, but I must clear something up. It was not Sylvia who informed me that you were facing problems. Whatever you discussed with her remains quite confidential. In fact I received a letter from Ted after Spike's wedding day, in which he advised me that he was worried about you.

I will not pursue the matter further, since you assure me you are managing. One of the most abiding memories I have of my time at Crimpton is of your unshakable competence. My offer of help does, however, stand, if it should become useful at any point in the future.

As for the other things I might wish to say to you, I recognise that I owe you an apology. I cannot regret leaving Maplins, since it was the right thing to do, but I have come to regret the manner in which I informed you of my choice.

With my regards,

Jeffrey

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

February 15th 1962

Well, Professor,

I'd almost forgotten how mealy-mouthed you can be. Your time in America has done nothing to improve your ability to speak frankly.

You 'recognise' you owe me an apology, but you fail to make one.

You 'regret' the 'manner' in which you left. That's one way of putting it, isn't it? Nice and vague and safe - just the way you like it. Avoiding all the words that really mean something.

And now you're offering me help that I haven't asked for and don't need, just because you feel rotten about what you did. Looking to shed some of that guilt, are you?

I'll leave you to your spluttering, Jeffrey. Go away and convince yourself I have it all wrong. I'm just a simple woman from the Welsh valleys, aren't I? What kind of insight could I possibly have?
I'll say what I should have said in my first reply -- Go to hell, Jeffrey Fairbrother.

Gladys Dempster

---

Chadbourne Avenue, Madison
24th February 1962

"How can I advise you," Emilia asked, "when you won't let me read the letter?"

"I can't," he said. "It's private. And frankly shaming."

"Shaming for you?"

"Well of course for me!" he snapped. "Gladys has nothing to be ashamed of. She's merely being honest."

Emilia narrowed her eyes at him. "Okay. One - don't take it out on me. Two - don't presume upon my friendship too far. I want to help, but I'm starting to think maybe I've been too unselfish. Try to remember - you are asking a woman you have rejected, romantically, to advise you on how to recover another relationship you screwed up."

He wanted to tell her that he needed no such reminder, but the fact was that he had lost sight of this. Emilia had asserted friendship back at Christmas time, and that was all he wanted. Once again he was demonstrating an uncanny ability to disregard the feelings of others and focus only on his own. Emilia's ability to keep him emotionally honest was valuable, but it came at a price. Was he in the process of trying to salvage one friendship at the expense of another?

"Oh, god," he muttered. "I should have taken Holy bloody Orders."

"Yeah, women," Emilia pretended to grouch along with him. "What are we like, huh? Always complicating your nicely ordered life."

He grunted agreement, since this seemed one of the great truths of the universe.

"Except it's you, English. You're the one who complicates things." She sighed. "Your friend Gladys was clear about how she felt. She wasn't sneaky. She wasn't ambiguous. And you could have done any number of things to deal with that, but instead you let the whole thing linger. You took a simple situation and you tied it up in knots. And now you're doing the same with me."

"I hope I've been clear about the limits to my fondness for you," he said stiffly.

Emilia's face darkened. She opened her mouth to speak, but Jeffrey had already bolted to his feet. He snatched up Gladys's letter from where he'd last put it down.

"Dear god!" he cried. "She's right. She's one hundred per cent right. I am a-a-a godawful, pitiful excuse for a man." He flapped the letter at Emilia, who had gone from looking furious to bewildered in the last few seconds. "I stand accused of being mealy-mouthed. Of never speaking frankly. Of failing to offer words or apologies or comfort when they are so obviously called for."

His head had gone quite hot. Jeffrey wondered for a moment whether he was having a stroke, or
perhaps a nervous breakdown. Still, since part of him seemed hellbent on destroying whatever connection he had with the two women who most preoccupied his thoughts, he decided to see this through to the end.

He stalked over to Emilia and fell to his knees before her, right there on the rug. Her bewilderment became unease and she leaned away from him. He ignored this and took her hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I am so sorry. I am utterly useless at finding the words to express myself. I fall back on formality because it feels safe, it feels clinical and cold and risk-free, but it isn't any of those things at all, is it? It's harmful and-and insulting."

"Huh," she said. "Now you're getting it."

He nodded. "Emilia, you are beautiful and stimulating and clever and-and-and the kind of friend I want in my life until the day I die. If I could offer you more of myself then I would do so in a heartbeat." He exhaled. "But I can't."

"I'm not asking you to pretend to feel something you don't," she said quietly.

"I know." Jeff could feel his pulse thrumming in his ears. "I will try," he said, "to be more sensitive. This business with Gladys - i-i-i-it has me all at sea. I've felt grounded, reassured, by your support. I've been so grateful for it that I lost sight of how this must be very awkward for you. You've deserved better from me, and I shall strive to make it up to you."

There was a pause. His knees were beginning to ache. He squeezed her hand and glanced absently around his living room.

"All right, now I feel rather ridiculous," he added.

A smile edged at her mouth, then she snorted into chuckles. He breathed a laugh too, and managed to get to his feet without his knees protesting too much.

"Jeff," she said, as he stretched his back and wondered how soon it might be before his skin took on a more sensible colour. "Apology accepted."

"Thank you," he said fervently.

She glanced at the letter he still clutched. "And for whatever it's worth? Try some of that self-flagellation on Gladys. A bit of genuine remorse goes quite a way," she told him. Then she feigned a glare. "Even when the woman you're talking to is about to tell you to go jump in a lake."

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

24th February 1962

Dear Gladys,

You're right. You're usually right about me. Certainly about the things that matter. You have never lacked insight.

Gladys, I am so very sorry. Truly. I tried to write and tell you this in the summer of 1960, but I
couldn't find the words and so I stopped trying. When it comes to such things I have always been too swift to give up, to run away. So for once I'm going to make the effort to do this properly.

I should not have told you I was leaving in the way I did. Never mind bothering to write you a personal letter - I should have taken the train to Pontypridd, and looked you up, and told you face to face. Maybe we'd have got to enjoy those fish and chips as the sun went down over the colliery. Or maybe you'd have beaten me about the face with the nearest blunt object. Either way, it would have been the right thing to do.

I have no right to your forgiveness, but I ask for it anyway. I do so in the hope that your generosity of spirit remains intact, in spite of your recent trials.

With my regards,
Jeffrey

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

March 5th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Like you say, you don't deserve forgiveness. As I'm sure you were able to work out from the anger in my last - what you did hurt me very badly. You made me feel worthless.

And now I can't even stay cool and distant about it all, like I want to. When I think back to that time in 1960 I just choke up. I can't help it. I could pretend not to, I suppose, here, in this letter, since I'm writing this down and you can't see my face. But I've never been any good at pretending so I won't bother to try. I don't have the energy any more.

Thank you for the apology. It might have come two years too late, but it means something to me that you offer it at all. It also means something that you remember that conversation about Pontypridd. That makes me feel like maybe I was a bit less worthless.

It's funny. Now we've done that conversation, I'm not even sure what to say to you. Perhaps there's no point saying anything else. It isn't as if things are the same as they used to be, is it?

Go back to your university life and your fossils and tombs. You can have my forgiveness if it's what you need.

Gladys

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

13th March 1962

Dear Gladys,
No, I suppose things are not the same. So I will state here, for the record - should you truly wish for our contact to end, you need only discard this letter. My greatest concern is that in renewing our acquaintance I have caused you distress. I leave it up to you. If you don't reply, I'll take your silence as a request for me to desist and I shall not trouble you further.

If, however, you feel as I do - I would be delighted to keep this conversation going. There's much I'd like to tell you about the things that have happened in my life since leaving England.

I'd like to hear about your life, too. If you're still struggling to think of things you might say to me, you could tell what it's like to live in Melbourne. Or you could let me know whether you were offered the job with the charity group; the job description sounded right up your street.

Or you could reminisce about our time at Crimpton, if you like. Only the other day I was telling a pair of colleagues about the occasion when we managed to set a carnival float on fire, and had to employ four yellowcoats dressed as cavalry troops to tow the thing into the swimming pool. For some reason, this was deemed an odd and colourful event by the staff in the senior common room!

Well, there it is. To employ a metaphor with which you and your championship tennis racket will be quite comfortable - the ball is in your court.

With my regards,
Jeffrey

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

March 21st 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Well, I'll give you this - you're a lot more persistent than I remember. Wasn't it me, used to do all the pushing and the prodding?

In answer to your question - yes, I got the job with 'Better Days Ahead'; thank you for the testimonial. My work has given me energy and purpose these last few months, and much-needed it is too.

By all means tell me whatever you want about your life in America. I hope you're happy there. You're wrong, by the way, if you thought I wouldn't understand why you went back to your textbooks. Losing you was difficult, but I knew you weren't cut out for holiday entertainment.

I never told you this when we were at Maplins because I always tried to be encouraging. But your introductions were terrible, Jeff. No doubt you can hold your pupils spellbound when you teach them all about bones and mummies and things. But you couldn't gee-up a holiday crowd to save your life!

I don't mean to be rude. Actually I'm trying to tease you a bit. And if you're feeling glum, now, thinking about your time with Maplins, here's the other side of the coin. Last December at Spike's do, everyone agreed that you were the best of all our entertainment managers. For one season, and one season only, we had a manager who gave his best efforts for the team and the camp. In that regard, Jeffrey, you were a rare find.
I'll close now, before I let my thoughts run away with themselves.

Regards,
Gladys

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

29th March 1962

Dear Gladys,

Your teasing was met with good grace, I assure you! Yes, I was more than aware of my shortcomings in front of a microphone. There are times when my freshmen students struggle to remain engaged with my presentations too. Public speaking is a talent I simply do not have. How I used to envy you your ability to sound natural and energised over the speakers of Radio Maplin.

In any case, I'm touched (not to mention faintly disbelieving) that you and our colleagues remember my time at Crimpton so positively. I still cringe when I recall the way I let you all down over the issue with the hospital. I'll confess to you, Gladys, that this was a part of my reasoning when I decided to leave the camp. I did not like the kind of man I was becoming thanks to Joe Maplin's threats and manipulations. Holiday magnate he might be, but Maplin is also a man who brings out the worst qualities in those who come into contact with him.

Does that sound pompous? I hope it doesn't. I'd like to think I'm less prone to arrogance and snobbery than I used to be. America has been good for me. It has, as my colleagues here might say, "loosened me up." Though you'd still recognise in me a tendency to over-analyse and over-complicate things, I think. Some characteristics are just genetic, I suspect, and there's nothing one can do about them.

Well, let me tell you about the last two years. The life I have established for myself here feels like a good one. I have rediscovered a genuine enthusiasm for my subject. The University of Wisconsin is much less stifling than Cambridge, so the environment in which I work suits me well. I am writing again, and have published several articles to academic journals. I am also contributing to a book about the Pueblo people whose cliff dwellings can still be seen at Mesa Verde National Park.

Madison itself is a pleasant place to live. It has a relaxed atmosphere, and lots to recommend it to the casual visitor. The lakes which surround and shape the city offer a lovely backdrop to the urban landscape, and there are some genuinely attractive buildings, both on and off campus. I bought a house here last year, which I think goes some way to describe how comfortable I have come to feel in my adoptive home.

I must admit that the move away from England came at a good time for me. I don't need to remind you of all that happened with respect to my domestic life during 1959. Given my ex-wife's very public engagement and subsequent marriage, and her continued courtship of the society pages, not to mention my dear mother's desperate attempts to 'solve' the problem of her suddenly and shamefully unmarried son - well. The distance I was able to place between myself and all those things came as a relief.

I have run on at some length here, so I shall bring this letter to a close. I'll look forward to hearing
from you at your convenience, whether it's with some more reminiscing, another dose of teasing, or a glimpse of your new life in the southern hemisphere.

Best regards,
Jeffrey

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

April 7th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

If indeed you truly are Jeffrey Fairbrother. Looking back over the last few letters you sent, I have to wonder. A fine time you picked to untie your tongue!

I can't let myself get nostalgic about Crimpton, so I won't do any more reminiscing. It'll only get me maudlin, and I can't afford that. As for my life here in Melbourne - these letters have become a nice escape from that. So you'll forgive me, I hope, if I set that topic aside too.

It seems I'm still struggling with what to say to you. I think it's down to an old, familiar fear. If I start talking - really talking - to you, then I'll end up saying something that goes too far, and you'll get that startled-rabbit look, and then you'll turn tail and run. I think part of me wants to be sure that if our contact ends, I am the one who stops it. I'm not sure I could bear to be discarded by you again.

That is, of course, an unbefitting thing for a married woman to say. And if things have changed since last we knew each other, my marriage is surely top of that list. So. Now I've mentioned it, here, in our letters, will you run? Perhaps you will. Perhaps it's the proper thing to do.

Well, you'll do what you must. The problems I made for myself are not your responsibility. If that was your concern, and it's the reason you keep writing, then you can stop worrying. None of this was your fault, or whatever else it is you need to hear.

I'm sorry. I'm tired. It's been a bad week.

I don't think I've written this well. Sorry.

Gladys

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

14th April 1962

Dear Gladys,

No, I'm not going to turn tail and run. How could I? My friend is in trouble, and while she absolves me of guilt I feel it still. To have been even a minor contributor to the path you have
taken fills me with shame.

You are not happy. How I wish it were otherwise. I have met few people in my life who more richly deserved joy and contentment.

I have no right to pry into your personal circumstances, but I repeat the offer I made when first I wrote. I am, in the American vernacular, "here for you." I will listen, without comment if you prefer. Or I will make suggestions if there are practical things to suggest. I will sympathise, and support, and do all I can to ease your burdens. If there were less of the planet between us then I'd offer a comfortable sofa and a supply of good strong tea, and even a shoulder for you to lean on, if it helped. As it stands, I must restrict myself to the written-word equivalent.

Please let me help. Your strength and competence and independence are not in question. I am not trying to charge to the rescue of a damsel. (I am certainly not built for such things, as well you probably remember.) I simply find the notion of you struggling with difficulties, alone and isolated from your closest friends and family, unbearable.

Your friend,
Jeffrey

---

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne

April 26th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

I have been all torn up in the last few days, trying to work out what to do. I was brought up to believe certain things, see. Principles that good people live their lives by. Things like truth and loyalty and integrity. I've failed. Those values my parents tried to teach me - I've lost them all.

I'm here now, in this trouble, because I blinded myself to an obvious truth. My loyalty to the man I married has crumbled away, to the extent that I can barely look at him any more. And my integrity? Well. I'm writing this letter to you, aren't I?

I suppose it's absurd, really. Here I am, married to a man who keeps a mistress on the other side of the country. I know the shape of this other woman's handwriting. I know the smell of her perfume. I know her name and her livelihood. My husband does not know that I know these things. Perhaps he thinks I'm gullible to the point of stupidity, or perhaps he doesn't give a damn whether I know or not. Just so long as I keep his life comfortable.

And yet now, as I write to you confessing these problems, I feel as if I am breaking my wedding vows with every single word. So I need to do something that's very, very hard for me. I need to ask you to stop writing to me.

Jeffrey, you have no idea how much it has meant, these last few months, having your letters to look forward to. When you told me you were sorry about how things ended between us, it was like a weight had been lifted. And here we are, friends again, even thousands of miles apart, and it's given me such a boost. Instead of spending my days wallowing in gloomy thoughts, I find myself thinking of you.

I have to stop this before I make a mistake. Don't worry - you've done nothing improper,
obviously. It's just me. My imagination running away with itself. Maybe it's doing that out of habit. Or maybe it's a kneejerk reaction to being let down by my husband.

Whatever it is, I need to work it out, and I can't do that while I'm all caught up in this confusion. I know you want to help. The best way you can do that is to give me a bit of time to sort myself out.

Please understand.

Gladys

~~~~~~
Dear Sylvia,

I hope you are well, and the new season is off to a good start.

I write because I need some help. When we talked at Christmas time, you said you had doubts about my decision to live with Clive's indiscretions. I just waved your doubts off, as I recall. I thought I was making the right choice because the other one seemed so much worse.

You were right. I can't pretend it isn't happening. It gets worse every day. Earlier this month another postcard arrived. (No, I didn't burn this one.) It seems 'Helena' is getting impatient.

The point is, I'm ready to consider the future of my marriage. Properly, this time. To do that, I need to know the facts. Not just what Clive's been up to since we tied the knot. I need you to tell me some hard, nasty truths about what he got up to when I was engaged to him at Crimpton. I know, now, that I spent that whole season looking through rose-tinted glasses. It's time I took them off.

Will you help me with this? You used to be good at brutal honesty - shall we give it another go?

Gladys

~~~

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

5th May 1962

Dear Gladys,

Thanks for the letter. It was good to hear from you. I've been wondering how you were getting on.

So you need to know some 'hard, nasty truths' about Clive Dempster. I've got to ask - why? How can this make things any better?

Well, anyway, assuming you know what you're doing, here's what I remember.

Clive spent most of that season flirting with all of us female yellowcoats, not to mention half the cleaning and serving staff, the least rotund of the Happy Halibut girls and a good proportion of the female campers. I have no idea what his success rate was. But that's not what you're asking, is it? What you really want to know is whether me and Clive had a fling.

No, we didn't. We came close to it on a couple of occasions, but not so close that clothing was removed.

I do know that he offered every female yellowcoat a naughty night away at the country hotel with
the wooden beams - I'm guessing you got that line too? One of us accepted. Which means, of course, that he did have a proper, clothes-off fling with one of the other girls. It lasted a few weeks, mid-season. Don't ask me to name names. Yes, it was still going on while he was engaged to you. And yes, Clive always took her to the same hotel where you and he spent your wedding night. Sorry.

Look, Gladys - the fact is, Clive likes women. He likes sex. He's not going to stop pursuing those things any time soon. Do you really need to know more? He's already given you grounds for divorce. I get the feeling you're trying to punish yourself. I don't think it's right.

By the way, if you need to get away from Melbourne and you're looking for something to do, you might be interested to know there's a management-level vacancy at the Clifftops. Reasonable pay, nice resort, your own caravan with all mod cons. Think about it. Maybe a bit of time away could be a good thing.

I'll include the number for Brendan's office below, and I'll mention to him that if his luck is in, you'll call. One good turn deserves another, wouldn't you say?

Best,
Sylvia

~~~

Rowe Street, Melbourne
14th May 1962

Squadron Leader Clive Dempster drove his Jaguar down Rowe Street and took a moment to admire the autumn colours on the trees. Winter was due, but autumn had clung on for a few weeks more than last year. They'd been lucky with the rain, too. How he hated having to install the roof on the coupé! Sporty cars lost a certain something without the wind-in-your-hair factor.

The brakes squealed as he pulled in outside the bungalow. He did this for effect, of course, and noted Gladys's friend - Sheila? Shireen? Sharon? - standing at her front window, looking out at the road. Disapproving. He gave her a cheery wave before he clicked off the headlights. Shirley, that was it. Husband drove a grey Morris Minor, poor thing. No wonder she was always pouting.

Clive hopped out, grabbed his suitcase and hurried up the path. In truth, he was glad to be home. This wasn't always the case after one of his stopovers. For a few months last year it had been rather difficult to tear himself away from Perth. But all good things come to an end, and Clive had the notion that his dalliance with the beautiful Helena, she of the creative hands and the oh-so-eager mouth, was all but over. She'd spent the last few nights whining on about wanting to see more of him. It was becoming tedious.

Next time, he promised himself. He'd end things next time. Gently, of course. He'd tell her a nice, kind lie. Something like...like how he'd been thinking that their arrangement wasn't fair on her. Lovely young thing like her shouldn't be organising her life around an older married man. Yes, that's how he'd play it: he'd claim it was breaking his heart in two, but he'd decided not to be selfish any more. He couldn't leave his wife, so he had to give Helena the freedom to find something better.
A change was as good as a rest, or so they said. Perth could once again be a city of late evening drinks in hotel bars, of glances between strangers, the thrill of the chase, the exotic pleasure of a stolen night of passion: all those things that would fulfill his need for excitement, such that he could properly apply himself to the role of devoted husband when he returned to Melbourne.

Mind you, those creative hands, that eager mouth...

Well, if he didn't finish with Helena next time, it would probably be the time after that. He'd play it by ear.

Clive let himself in and called, "Home, darling!" He set his case in the hall, knowing that it would be magically removed, emptied and repacked by the time he needed it again. He loosened his tie and undid his top button as he wandered through to the living room. "Gladys?" He made for the drinks tray and poured himself a single malt, because mixing a Martini felt too much like hard work. He'd been up since eight thirty that morning, and it wasn't as if he'd slept a solid eight hours before that.

The whisky hit the spot; he sighed pleasure. He set the glass down and shrugged off his raincoat and uniform jacket. After tossing them over the arm of the sofa he remembered something and tut-tutted at himself. He picked up his jacket and reached into the inside pocket, to draw out a small jewellery box which he stuffed in his trouser pocket instead. Wouldn't do for Gladys to come across her birthday present before the day itself.

Jacket once more discarded, he picked up his drink again and frowned. Where was his wife? He crossed to the far door into the dining room, then into the kitchen beyond, then out the other door and back into the hall.

"Are you in the bath, dear?" he called, as inspiration struck. In the past, he'd occasionally arrived home from one of his absences to find Gladys waiting for him in the bathtub, smothered in bubbles and daring him to join her with those dark, sexy eyes of hers. She hadn't done that in quite some time, now he thought about it, which was a shame. Clive glanced at the carpet. There was no beckoning trail of discarded clothing, and no steaminess or fragrance in the air. Still, he checked the bathroom just in case.

"I'm in here," came her voice to his left.

He felt an odd twinge of relief; he'd almost begun to worry! Clive smiled and pushed open the door to their bedroom. Sometimes it was good to be reminded how much he delighted in coming home to Gladys. Never let it be said that he was a man who did not understand how damn lucky he was.

Was she already in bed? It was barely seven o'clock - god, he really shouldn't have tired himself out last night-

Clive stopped short.

Gladys was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed, to the extent that she was even wearing an overcoat. She clutched a handbag on her lap, and a suitcase stood at her feet. Her hands were clad in gloves.

There was an awkward silence as they looked at each other. Gladys's eyes were shining and sorrowful.

"What's this?" he asked, knowing he didn't want to know.
"You know what this is," she replied.

"Hardly, if you're not going to explain."

Gladys lifted her chin. "I'm leaving. I've got a plane ticket to Heathrow. Overnight, via Dubai. Check-in's at eight o'clock."

Clive grasped at a straw. "Is someone ill? Oh, lord, no one's died, have they?"

"I'm leaving you, Clive," Gladys clarified. "A trial separation, at least."

He stared at her a moment, then knocked back the rest of his whisky. He set the glass down, rubbed his hand through his hair, then he went to the bed and sat down beside her. The urge was strongly upon him to tell her that she'd picked a horrible time to do this. He was tired. He'd had a long day. Couldn't she have waited until he'd got some rest?

"Just like that," he said instead. "Out of the blue. You're not even going to tell me what's wrong?"

"We've been miserable for six months," she countered. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

Clive supposed he had sort of noticed. Gladys had been a lot less interested in sex, for one thing. Which had disappointed him, because one of the first joys of being married to her was discovering her extremely healthy libido.

Whatever was wrong, it had started at Christmas; he was fairly sure of that. He'd thought it was just sulking, after the way he'd excused himself from the visit to Pontypridd. Christmas in Wales around the coal-face just didn't appeal, but of course he couldn't take Gladys to the Hall. It had required a fairly monumental effort to take himself there. Next Christmas he was damn well going to make sure he had to work all the way through the holidays, never mind wheedling letters from his Uncle Charles about his father's failing health.

But come to think of it, the post-Christmas sulking had been going on for some time now. He was pretty sure Gladys wasn't pregnant, since he was careful about precautions; not that they were entirely infallible, but in the last two months or so it had barely been an issue anyway. They'd discussed children, of course, after first moving out here. They'd decided to wait a year until they were more settled before revisiting the subject. Actually he'd been thinking himself lucky that she hadn't broached it since Christmas.

Was that the problem? Was the poor old girl getting broody?

"Clive," Gladys said with a sigh. "You can talk or you can just sit there, but I'm still leaving in about ten minutes' time."

"Why?" He sounded petulant. He knew it. He didn't care.

"A whole lot of reasons," she replied. Sounded like she had a list; he rather expected her to produce one. "But they all started with Helena."

Clive's stomach made a sudden and weighty break for his feet. He shifted uncomfortably. Damn it. He should have realised that the girl wasn't going to play by the rules.

"Um - Helena who?" he asked casually.

"Oh, please don't," Gladys said, with such contempt and disgust in her voice that he had to look at her, startled.
"Oh - Helena from Perth?" he amended, switching tracks. "Nice girl. Artist, you know. What about her?"

"Clive-"

"Look, you've obviously got the wrong end of the stick, Glad. Helena's sweet, but she's very young and rather prone to fantasies. We met a few months ago, in perfectly innocent circumstances, but-"

"Clive, I swear, if you keep lying to me then I am ending this conversation right now."

He failed to see how that was much of a threat when Gladys had already told him she was leaving. Then he worked it out. She was offering him the chance to make her stay. He just needed to say the right things. And since he was suddenly brimming with the awareness of how much he cared for the woman he'd married, how much he appreciated having her in his life...

But he had to be careful. She had information. She needed him just honest enough, but with plenty of remorse for the bits he'd actually have to admit to. It was a balancing act. These kinds of conversations usually were.

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry. Look, I slipped. You told me once it would probably be inevitable. You were right. I wish it hadn't happened, but there it is."

"And I suppose it's all over, is it?" she said with this awful flatness to her tone that made him wish she was losing her temper.

"Well of course. It was never serious. Just a flirtation, got out of hand. You know me, darling-"

"I know you."

He swallowed hard. "You're making too much of this. It was only a couple of-"

Gladys stood up.

"Fine!" he said, raising his arms, panicking in a way that surprised him. "More than a couple of times."

"You've been seeing her for a good year or so. Regular as anything. That's not a flirtation that got out of hand. That's called a mistress, Clive."

How the hell did she know this? He looked at her, wondering what he was supposed to say now.

"She wrote," Gladys supplied, perhaps because of his look of confusion. "Couple of times now. The most recent one came last month. She was probably annoyed that her first postcard hadn't already forced this conversation." Gladys shook her head. "But I knew you had someone else, months before she ratted you out. Little clues, here and there. I got good at ignoring them."

Clive pinched at his eyes, horrified to find that there was a certain prickling therein. "Gladys, darling - I know I'm in the wrong. It's like an addiction. An illness. I know I must stop." He looked up at her. She remained on her feet, standing by her suitcase, looking sad but far from angry or betrayed. "Please. Don't leave me. I need you. I need your help."

She shook her head, unmoved. "Why I'm leaving - it started with Helena. But it grew from there."

"Well, what else is the problem? I've confessed. I'm sorry. Do you want me on my knees, begging you to stay?"
"No. What I want is to go back to 1960," she said. She drew in a shaken breath and forced her chin high. "I want to be a different Gladys Pugh. One who isn't so focused on throwing herself at you that she fails to see what kind of a man you truly are."

"Gladys!"

"You took money from Fred Quilley to help him get his jockey licence back. You had no intention of helping him, of course."

"What, ten measly quid?" he spluttered.

"Twenty. The police would call it fraud. Obtaining money under false pretences. I call it behaving like a louse."

Incredulously, he said, "You're leaving me because of some little scam I pulled with a mad old jockey? He wanted me to do something unethical! He got what he deserved." Clive shook his head. "Anyway. He got several months of hope out of that little sum of cash. That was a lot more than he had before. Seems to me it was a worthy investment - Gladys, how do you even know about this?"

"I saw him at Spike's wedding reception. He was collecting for a charity he works for. Asked me if you were going to be there. Said he was hoping he could ask for his money back."

"Oh. I see."

"It was a low thing to do, Clive."

Feeling indignant, he pointed out, "I was very short of cash!"

"And that justifies conning a man out of his savings, does it? You see, this is what I'm talking about. I used to think you were a hero. Noble. Decent. But you don't have any moral compass at all, do you? You just do what suits Clive Dempster. He's all that matters."

She said that like it was a bad thing. Like everyone wasn't exactly the same. Everyone was, of course. The only difference was that other people dressed up their more self-serving priorities with excuses and justifications, because they needed to feel better about themselves.

Clive had never had a problem with feeling good about himself, though. Until, perhaps, right now.

"Gladys," he tried, "I'm sorry about Fred. Look, I'll write him a cheque for his charity. I'll make it right."

"I defended you. Anyone who ever criticised you, I leapt to your defence. Even though they were right. You were lazy and self-centred and incapable of making decisions."

He frowned at her, quite bewildered. "All right, I'm losing track. This is now about how I wasn't very good at the job at Maplins? Oh, come on, Glad-"

"I thought I loved you," Gladys said.

Clive's stomach did the weighty thing again. "Well, I'm absolutely sure that I love you," he told her, with a tremor in his voice that sounded far from manly.

"I know," she said. "But that's really not the issue here, is it?"

"How can anything else be the issue?" he demanded. He tried one last push. "Gladys - maybe
what you say is true. I need to work harder to be the kind of man you wanted to marry. But I do love you. I do. And I need you, here, with me. Don't leave me. We can fix this. I can do better. With your help I can be better..."

She just shook her head. "I'll send a telegram to your office when I arrive, so you know I'm safe. And when I've decided what to do, long-term, I'll let you know."

"Well - you're coming back, aren't you?"

"I don't know, Clive. All I know is that I can't make a decision while I'm here, in this house. I need some distance. I need something familiar."

"This is your home! What's more familiar than that?"

"It's never been my home." She looked at him for a moment. "For a while, you were." Then she leaned down and picked up her suitcase. "Not any more."

She walked to the bedroom door.

"Gladys," Clive begged, voice choking up. She turned back, her eyes shining with tears, her lower lip tremulous. "Oh, hell, please don't do this."

"Shirley's driving me to the airport," she said. She sniffed, and lifted her handbag-hand up to her face, where the fist rested beneath the tip of her nose for a moment before she could speak on. "I've arranged for a small allowance to be wired each month from our current account. I hope you won't begrudge me that."

"I'll come out to join you," Clive said, seizing on an idea. "I'll take time off and fly out. We can sort this out. It was a mistake, coming here. This job, this new life - it was wrong of me to make you leave your family. But these are things we can fix! We can discuss them-"

"If you really do care for me at all," she said, "you'll give me some time to make my decision." She bit at her lip. "You owe me that. These problems - you made them, Clive. Not me."

She walked through the bedroom door and shut it behind her, then Clive heard the front door open and close.

In a burst of anguish he grabbed his empty glass and hurled it at the closed door, where it shattered into shards. Then he sat forward and put his head in his hands. As he did so, his trouser pocket pulled uncomfortably. He shifted and drew out the small jewellery box containing the earrings he'd bought for his wife's birthday.

Clive examined the box in his hands, and repressed the urge to laugh bitterly when he wondered whether high-end jewellers offered refunds.

~~~

Telegram

To: Richard Garth
Blyth Street Community Centre, Melbourne, Australia

From: Gladys Dempster
Post Office, Heathrow Oceanic Terminal, UK
Tuesday 15th May 1962

I REALLY DID IT. THANKS FOR SUPPORT & UNDERSTANDING. CAN BE REACHED C/O TONYPANDY IF PROBLEMS. GOOD LUCK WITH SOCCER-KIDS!

GLADYS

~~~

Primrose Street, Tonypandy
May 17th 1962

Nerys Roberts sat in the half-light of her mother's spare bedroom, quietly waiting for her big sister to wake up. It was almost four o'clock in the morning. The thin curtains did little to hold back the light of the streetlamp outside, and the dimness in the room was further defeated by the tiny orange glow of the candle she had just lit.

Gladys had apparently gone to bed at seven thirty yesterday evening, after travelling by train from London. Nerys knew, from years of bedroom-sharing, that Gladys was physically incapable of sleeping longer than eight hours. Even jet lag wouldn't defeat her. Nerys had faith in her sister's stubbornness if nothing else.

True to form, Gladys began to stir. A hitch in her breath as she stretched and relaxed under the covers demonstrated that she'd already remembered where she was and why she was there. Nerys gave a sigh, partly from sympathy, partly from annoyance that her warnings about Clive-ruddy-Dempster had gone unheeded, but mainly so her sister became aware that there was someone else in the room.

There was a moment of suspended quiet as the half-asleep woman in the bed processed all this information. Then Gladys met Nerys's sigh with one of her own.

Nerys supposed it was as good a way as any of saying hello to each other.

There was another pause, then the Gladys-shape under the blankets of the spare bed shuffled into a sitting position. Gladys blinked in the candlelight and looked blearily across at Nerys, who occupied the old bathchair in the corner: the one their Mam had needed to use for a while, back before her hypothyroidism had been diagnosed and treated.

"Is there a power cut?" Gladys asked.

Nerys smiled and stood up. She carried the candle, and the iced bun it was stuck in, over to the bed, where she sat down beside her sister.

"Happy birthday, Glad," Nerys said.

Gladys looked down at the offering, then back up at her sister. "Oh," she said. "I forgot about that."

"You forgot it was your birthday?"

"I've had a few things on my mind."
"You don't say."

They studied each other for a moment.

"Mam told you everything," Gladys guessed.

"Of course she did."

"Come to gloat, have you? Say 'I told you so'?"

Nerys felt a familiar urge to lash right back at Gladys. They constantly rubbed each other the wrong way. Still, after a long chat with their mother late yesterday evening, and a privileged look at a letter Gladys had sent to their mother last year, Nerys was prepared to put some effort into not turning this conversation into an argument.

"Is he coming over here?" Nerys asked, rather than replying.

"Don't think so." Gladys frowned at the question.

"So I need to pay for a plane ticket, do I?"

"What are you going on about?"

"This need I have." Nerys ground out the words through teeth that were involuntarily clenching. "To take a cheese-grater to Clive Dempster's face, and a sledgehammer to his balls."

Gladys's eyebrows shot up. She was never very good at colourful language: not when they spoke in English, anyway. Nerys tried to unclench her teeth.

"A cheese-grater," Gladys repeated.

"That or a wire-brush. Haven't decided."

"It's, er, imaginative, I suppose."

"Blow out your candle before it melts on your bun."

Gladys shrugged and puffed out the little candle. She was never very good at colourful language: not when they spoke in English, anyway. Nerys tried to unclench her teeth.

"So," Nerys said.

"So."

"Why didn't you tell me at Christmas?"

"Oh, Nerys, you know why."

Nerys blinked. She was astonished to find that she was on the verge of tears. "Did you marry him because I said those stupid things?" she asked, all of a rush.

Gladys took a moment to work out what the remark meant. Then she gave a soft smile, a big-sister smile, and reached for Nerys's hand.

"No," she said. "I married him because I convinced myself I loved him. Now why I did that -
that's a whole other story."

Nerys squeezed her sister's hand. "We could talk. If you like."

"It's the middle of the night, Nerys. What are you even doing by here?"

"I didn't want you to be on your own when you woke up."

"Oh." Gladys looked briefly surprised at this kindness. Then she nodded her understanding.

Then her shoulders jerked, and her spare hand reached for her nose, where it failed to stem the tide of distress that needed to spill forth.

Nerys leaned in and took her sister in a tight embrace. And as Gladys's sobs juddered, almost silent, against her shoulder, a thought struck Nerys that was both strange and yet beautiful. She'd spent her whole life resenting Gladys. Jealous of her, irritated by her. Gladys, who'd made so much out of nothing. Gladys, who'd begun her life with such heartbreak. Gladys, who was everyone's first choice when something needed sorting out. Gorgeous, smouldering, practical, marvellous Gladys.

There'd been times during Nerys's younger years when she'd wished fervently that she'd been born an only child. It would have been wonderful, she used to think, to live a life without being constantly overshadowed by her big sister.

And now here she was, in the still and silent pre-dawn hours of a Welsh valley morning, shedding these tears with her sister in her arms. For the very first time Nerys understood, with perfect clarity, that there was nobody - her own children aside - that she loved more fiercely than Gladys. No one in the world.

The thought that struck her after this one was less uplifting, but just as heartfelt. When Clive Dempster next dared show his face on this side of the planet, Nerys was definitely bringing a sledgehammer to the reunion.

~~~

123 Rowe Street
Fitzroy North
Melbourne
20/5/62

Ted,

I need your help. Damn it, Ted, Gladys has left me. Barely gave me five minutes' notice! Just took herself back off to the UK. I don't even know where. I've phoned her mother's house and her sister's house - nobody will tell me anything. Closing ranks on me. Shutting out the interloper. I'm her sodding husband!

At least you're on the same land-mass as Gladys. So I need you to find her for me. Tell me where I can ring her. Or write to her. In fact never mind that. Tell me where she is and I'll buy a bloody plane ticket. Ted, you have to tell her she needs to talk to me. We can't put this right if we don't even talk!

If you need money for expenses, I'll wire it to you. Find her for me and I'll wire you a bonus. How does five hundred quid sound?
I know you care about Gladys, so I know you'll help us. You know how much she means to me. God, she means everything. I've been so stupid. I'm an idiot. You can tell her that. I know I've been an idiot.

Ring me when you know something. Number's written at the bottom. Reverse the charges if you want. I don't care. Or send a telegram. Anything! Just let me know what the hell is going on!

Clive

~~~

Flat 2
36 Hardy Road
Doncaster

27th May 1962

Clive,

Well, I'm pleased that you know you're an idiot.

No, I'm not going to be your man in England. You're offering expenses - comes at a great time for me, since I'm between gigs until July - but even so, the answer's no.

I already know where Gladys is. She isn't in Wales any more, so you can stop bothering Mrs. Pugh. All you need to know is that Gladys is safe, and she's among friends. She needs time to think. Personally, if she decides to dump you for good I'll be cheering her on.

When you had that change of heart and decided Gladys was the woman for you, I helped you, you bastard. I trusted you to treat her well. I thought you'd at least have the basic decency to make sure she never found out about any hanky-panky. If you couldn't be a decent husband, could you not have been a competent adulterer?

You really want some advice? Try this on for size.

Finish with the fancy-woman. Stop the constant search for a bit of spare. Live clean. Keep the house tidy. Show Gladys you're properly sorry, and that you can behave like a grown man. Then, when she's ready to talk to you, she might just believe the following things:-

1 - You aren't going to go playing away from home any more.
2 - You know you need to spend a hell of a lot of time making things up to her.
3 - The reason you're desperate to have her back is not because you're too bloody lazy and stupid to do your own laundry and cook your own meals.

By the way, Clive - if you can't sign up to every single one of the points above, hand-on-heart? Then you stay the hell away from Gladys. Because if I see you near her, I'll rearrange your face for you.

Ted Bovis

~~~~~
Secret Agent

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

25th June 1962

Dear Jeff,

First of all, well done for actually writing to Gladys! I was pretty sure you wouldn't. That letter you sent me after Christmas, all stuck-up and terribly proper, sounded like you were keen for an excuse not to bother. So well done you. I know it meant a lot to Gladys.

Secondly, Gladys is fine. She's here with me, working at the resort and coming to terms with the way she's walked out on Clive. She's fragile, which is to be expected. She says that talking things through has helped. (Though it took 4 weeks before the log-jam broke. I was beginning to think I'd have to tie her to a chair and shine a lamp in her face just to get her started.)

Thirdly, don't take this letter as a request to resume contact. Gladys will write again when she's ready. She needs some breathing space. It took weeks for Clive to get that message. (Can you believe, he actually engaged a private detective to track Gladys down!) I'd like to think you'll be more understanding.

There we are, then: the three things I promised I'd say when Gladys gave me permission to write this.

Now here's the thing I didn't tell her I'd say.

I have no idea whether your fondness for Gladys goes beyond friendship, Jeff. You're hard to read in that respect. And that's fine - your feelings are your own. But I do have a request. Consider it an appeal to your decency, if you like.

If you don't want anything more than friendship with Gladys, let her know quickly and clearly as soon as she's back in touch. Don't keep her waiting and hoping like you did in '59. It really, really isn't fair.

(Don't panic. I might be jumping the gun here. Gladys has already given me about seven good reasons why she shouldn't 'trust' the feelings she thought she had for you. So this might come to nothing, after all.)

Think that's all I wanted to say. Chin up, Professor. Oh, and if you want a likely timeframe, Gladys's contract here runs until mid-September. She's given herself till then to work out whether to give Clive another chance or not.

All the best,
Sylvia

~~~

Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin
1st July 1962
"Is this gonna go on much longer?" Emilia murmured to Jeffrey out of the corner of her mouth.

"Hmm?" Jeff replied absently. His eyes were tracing the flight-path of a bird circling overhead in the patch of blue sky visible between the roof of the new building and the tall stone wall of the Carillon Tower.

"Never mind," she said.

"Hmm."

In front of them, on the makeshift podium that had been erected outside the brand new Social Science building, the Chancellor of the university droned on. Jeffrey ignored him and continued to watch the flight of the bird. Perhaps it had only just made it back to the lakeshores of Madison after some delay in its post-winter migration. He imagined the creature looking down at the landscape in puzzlement, trying to work out why all the green trees had been replaced by straight lines and square angles.

It was tricky to navigate a world that could change completely while your attention was elsewhere. Jeffrey sympathised with the challenge.

"Clap," Emilia murmured, rather insistently.

"Hmm?"

She nudged his shoulder hard, and Jeff tore his eyes from the bird. The world crashed into place, harsh and immediate with the sounds of applause. He startled and joined in with the clapping, as the Chancellor moved to cut a ribbon strung across the path which led to the main doors of the new building. The ribbon fell to the asphalt in two severed splashes of red, and everyone got to their feet, still clapping.

It seemed that the new Social Science building was open for business.

Everyone left their rickety folding chairs and filed down the path and into the building. Jeffrey and Emilia walked with the crowd to one of the larger conference halls, to partake of the buffet lunch. Neil Weitzman grinned at them as he shouldered past, keen to get first dibs on the sandwiches.

"You're kinda distracted today," Emilia said, once they'd found themselves some space near a wall to stand and balance their plates.

"Am I? Oh. Yes, I suppose so. Sorry."

"So would I be right," Emilia suggested, "in assuming you've finally had another letter?"

"Um - yes and no."

"Ooh. Mysterious. Also annoying. Explain."

He smiled a half-smile - the one he knew exaggerated the lopsidedness of his jaw, but he couldn't help his own physiology, now could he? - and came clean. "I got a letter from Sylvia, yesterday morning."

"Sylvia. Sylvia. Oh! The lady who gave you the dressing-down?"

The comment triggered an inadvertent memory, and he smiled again. "Goodness me, that takes
"Huh?"

"The Hawaiian Ballroom. Amazon night, or something. Leather bikinis. I think whips were involved."

Emilia's eyes went round. "Just what the hell went on at this holiday camp?"

Jeffrey lifted and examined a congealed *vol-au-vent*. "Sometimes I think the answer to that question is - not nearly enough."

"Okay, before this conversation gets any nearer the knuckle, why don't we rewind to the bit where you tell me about Sylvia's letter."

"Good idea." He put the pastry down. He really wasn't that hungry. "Gladys has left her husband. She is now in England, working at the resort where Sylvia works."

"And this is a good thing."

"Well, yes. She's with a friend. And she's closer to her family. She has access to some real support."

"Those are definitely good things. I meant the husband part."

Jeffrey looked at Emilia. Her expression was curious but not judgmental. "You're right," he conceded. "I shouldn't be rejoicing in the breakdown of a marriage."

"Oh, don't talk such rot. Of course you should, if the marriage stinks."

"Her husband has been keeping a mistress."

"Well, some marriages accommodate such things."

"Gladys deserves better."

"No doubt. But I'm not sure you're the one who gets to call it."

He smiled again at that. "You're right. I'm not. The important thing is that Gladys is the one who, er, 'calls it'."

"That's true."

"And as a society we're still not terribly good at-at empowering women to make these choices. We've trained them not to make waves. It takes a-a-a special kind of courage on the part of a woman to do this. Stand up for herself."

"Hey, English - are we turning you into a feminist?"

"Oh, I've always been a feminist. I just hide it well. For the sake of my mother, who still blanches whenever she sees female legs in trousers."

Emilia snorted. Jeffrey smiled with her, though he had not intended the comment as a joke but rather the reporting of a literal truth. Emilia had, however, never met his mother.

"Jeffrey! And Emilia!"
"Professor," Jeffrey greeted the Anthropology Chair, who shuffled up to join them. There were pastry crumbs in his beard and an elastoplast wrapped around one arm of his spectacles; Professor Manninger took 'absent-minded professor' to its natural extreme.

"Now Jeffrey," Manninger said, wrapping one arm around Jeffrey's shoulders: quite an impressive feat when the older academic was a good six inches shorter than Jeff. Emilia looked on, amused. "Emilia won't thank me for this, but I have to do something." Jeffrey glanced at Emilia, who was looking suddenly nervous. "You have to talk to her. We can't lose her, you know."

Jeffrey frowned, uncomfortable with his boss's amiable proximity, confused by the comments. "Lose her?"

Manninger stepped back and looked from one to the other. "Oh," he said. "I, er, assumed she's told you. You two are always thick as thieves, I just thought-"

"I've applied for another job," Emilia told Jeffrey, alternating her expression between apology aimed at him and daggers aimed at Manninger. "U-Penn. Assistant Professorship."

And the world, once again, was realigning its contours while he could only stand helplessly and watch. Jeff needed a few moments to process this bombshell.

"Pennsylvania?" he finally asked.

"That's the one."

"Pennsylvania on the east coast."

"Think that's where they put it down last."

Jeffrey shook his head. "When were you going to tell me?"

Emilia glared at Professor Manninger, respected and aged academic though he was. "Probably not in a room full of people eating mini-quiches," she growled.

Manninger raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry. Mea culpa. I retreat with good grace." He stepped back, and favoured Jeff with the tiniest glint from his eyes. Just enough to let Jeff know that the Professor's faux pas had been strategically planned and very deliberate.

Alone together again, Jeffrey looked at Emilia. "Why?" he asked, feeling hollow and bereft and abandoned, even though she was standing right beside him.

"Because I'm thirty-three years old," she said. "And Manninger has already offered me the Associate Chair in Archaeology when he bumps you up to Department Chair. And it's so very, very tempting."

"Well, what's the problem then? You'd make a superb Chair. And you deserve the Professorship."

"I did my degrees here," she said. "I live within forty-five minutes of my Mom and Dad's house. The occasional field project aside, I've never lived anywhere other than Wisconsin. I'm comfortable here."

"All these are supposed to be bad things?"

"I need to challenge myself. Lose the comfort-zone." She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "It's not just that, though."
"Then what is it? You should tell me. Anything you need to talk about. You've been here for me, these last few months. I-i-it works both ways, Em. Always."

She spent a moment just looking at him. He wasn't sure he'd noticed before how much blue was mixed with the grey of her eyes. "I'm seriously hung up on you, Jeff," she said quietly. "And I need to move on."

She touched his arm and gave it a squeeze, then turned to walk into the crowd.

~~~

11 Poynter Road
Hove
15th July 1962

Dear Mr. Fairbrother,

I hope I'm doing the right thing, writing to you. The thing is, I've just had a very odd visit from a man calling himself Andrews. He said he was a detective working on behalf of Clive Dempster. I don't know if you're aware or not, but Gladys has left Clive and come back to Britain. Apparently Clive doesn't know when or if she's going back.

This Andrews fellow said Clive's very worried about Gladys's behaviour. He used words like "desertion" and "erratic" and at one point "marital offence". I've no idea what the legalese means, but I had the feeling this Andrews was trying to put together some kind of case for Gladys being in the wrong. I didn't like the sound of it.

Andrews asked all sorts of odd questions about my "relationship" with Gladys. He referred to a misunderstanding that happened in the 1960 season, when Gladys and I were photographed for the newspaper and it was reported we were engaged to be married. Andrews also had wind of suggestions that Gladys and I did some "carrying on" while we were at Crimpton. I hardly need tell you there was nothing to those rumours.

Honestly, Mr. Fairbrother, I pride myself on being an even-tempered man, but this Andrews got my blood boiling. He was making all these remarks right in front of April, too! Well, I gave him his marching orders at that point. I didn't even let him finish his tea.

I don't want to bother Gladys with this, since she's got plenty on her plate already. I'd run it all past Ted, but he's on tour till September and it's tricky to contact him, though I've got his dates and venues and I'll keep trying.

I'm ever so worried. If this Andrews keeps digging, he might get wind of how fond Gladys was of you, back in 1959, and use it against her. Or he might contact Alex Foster, Joe Maplin's Camp Controller, who tried it on with Gladys in the most disgusting way, and who certainly can't be trusted to tell the truth if he sees an opportunity to stick the knife in instead.

Anyway, I thought the only thing I could do is write to warn you. Andrews did his level best to twist everything I said into something that sounded seedy and indecent, so be on your guard if he contacts you. And if you've any idea how I can best be of service to Gladys in this situation, I'd welcome your advice. You're an educated man, Mr. Fairbrother, and I trust you to always do your best by your friends.

With every good wish,
Spike Dixon
Telegram

To: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

From: Charles Winston-Eaves
St. Andrew's Street Post Office, Cambridge, UK

Monday 23rd July 1962

FURTHER TO PHONE CALL, ALL ARRANGED. ANGELA'S BROTHER READY TO OFFER ADVICE. KNOWS TO KEEP YOUR NAME OUT OF IT.

CHARLES

---

Telegram

To: Spike Dixon
Jolly Jokers, Gloucester Rd, Brighton, UK

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Monday 23rd July 1962

SOLICITOR STANDING BY TO ADVISE IF REQ'D. NAME OF FURNESS, OFFICE IN EXE ST. TEL: EXETER 3928. NO CHARGE FOR INITIAL CONSULT. THIS SHOULD COME FROM YOU OR TED, AS DISCUSSED. PHONE ANY TIME IF NEC.

J.F.

---

Clive,

You really are a pillock of gigantic proportions, aren't you?

For the record, setting a private dick on your estranged wife is not the best way of winning her back. Half the gang have had a visit. Everyone's livid. And I can tell you now, for nothing - he won't find anything that'll help you. Gladys is a good girl. You and I both know that.

"Desertion." Don't make me laugh. Might surprise you, but I know a thing or two about divorce law. For instance - when your behaviour has made your spouse up and leave their home, it is definitely considered desertion. But you're the one who's guilty of it. Law doesn't care who moved and who stayed put. They only care who caused the separation. Clive - that's you.

Gladys doesn't know your man is still making a nuisance of himself - you can consider it a
kindness that I haven't told her. She reckons the fact it's all gone quiet since he tracked her down means you actually paid attention when she told you to leave her alone.

Call your dog off. Otherwise, next time this Andrews bloke shoves his nose in somewhere and I get another phone call from an old pal, I am going to tell Gladys what's going on, and then I'm going to give her the name and number of a solicitor I know.

Don't bother writing back. I'm on tour and won't be in Rhyl after next week. Just take my advice and start showing your wife a bit more bloody respect.

Ted Bovis

~

Archaeology Chair's Office, Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin
30th July 1962

"You've been avoiding me," came a voice from the doorway of his new office.

Jeffrey glanced up and smiled as welcomingly as he could. "Hello, Emilia."

"Hi. Why've you been avoiding me?"

"I've, er, been trying it out, I suppose. Life without you to blither on to all the time."

Emilia stepped inside and swung the door half-closed behind her. She slumped into the corner of one of the two sofas that occupied the space between his desk and his door.

"I've let you down," she acknowledged.

"Not in the least."

"Feels like it."

"Actually i-i-it feels like I'm the culprit."

She managed a weary grin at him and threw his own words back. "Not in the least." A sigh. "Just one of those things, English."

Jeffrey nodded. "Any, er, news? On the Pennsylvania thing?"

"I'm on a short list. A very short one, apparently. They've invited me for some interviews as soon as the semester ends."

"You'll do splendidly. They'd be fools not to grab you with both hands."

"Is that what you are?"

"Quite, quite possibly."

She sat up, breathed hard, shook the conversation off her. "Okay. That's enough of that. It is what it is, Jeff, and there's no reason you and I can't damn well stay friends. You manage it with a
woman in Australia. You can manage it with me too."

"Promise," he said.

"Speaking of which - what's the latest with your Welsh dragon?"

"You're sure you want to know?" he asked. She nodded. "Well, it's all become rather fraught. I haven't written to Gladys since she asked me to stop. She's still with Sylvia in Exmouth, as I understand." He huffed a sigh. "In the meantime, her husband has refused to give her the time and space she needs to decide what best to do for the future. Instead he has employed a private eye of some kind, who has been haranguing all the Crimpton lot, wherever they've scattered to, in order to harvest as many rumours, insinuations and misplaced assumptions about Gladys that he can."

He stopped talking, since he realised that his voice had grown too loud. Emilia arched a brow at him, then reached out with one long leg and nudged the office door the rest of the way closed.

"Jeepers," she finally said.

"Indeed."

"This PI been in touch with you?"

"He tried." Jeff shot the telephone on his desk a filthy look. "I-I put the phone down on him. Do you know, that's the first time I've ever done that." He put his shoulders back. "It felt rather good."

"So what's the plan?"

"What can I do?" he asked. "I-I-I can't report this to Gladys, since I'm forbidden contact with her - for very good reason, I might add. If I contact Dempster and demand he treat Gladys with more respect, he'll immediately assume my connection with his wife is in some way, er..."

"Indecorous."

"Exactly."

"Which it is not."

"No."

"Not yet, anyway."

"Emilia!"

"Hey, this is me. Just trying to introduce a touch of reality here."

Jeffrey tut-tutted. "My own feelings, such as they are, are the least part of this. If Gladys tells me she is going back to her husband, and-and could I please refrain from contacting her ever again, then that is what I shall do."

"Sure. It'll eat you up inside, though."

"I'm sure I'll survive."

"There's a difference between survival and happiness, honey. Okay, so, you can't contact Gladys about this. What other options are there?"
"I've spoken to a mutual friend on the telephone. He's the one who tipped me off about this detective. And I've lined up a solicitor in Exeter, near where Gladys works. Just in case this man starts to make the kind of trouble that requires legal advice."

Emilia arched a brow. "Let me get this straight. You've arranged a divorce lawyer for the married woman who might or might not still be in love with you."

"Um - Emilia, you really do have a bald way of putting things, sometimes."

"Touch of reality, remember?"

He conceded with a glance. "In that case, yes. That is exactly what I have done."

"Nothin' like gettin' your ducks in a row."

"I have not done this with the intention of-of-of personal gain!"

"Course not. But you might get some personal gain out of it, anyway."

"I have arranged it through our mutual friend, such that my name stays out of it."

Emilia shrugged. "She'll be just as divorced, either way."

"I did not provoke this situation."

"But you can't let it alone, huh?"

Jeffrey pressed at the beginnings of a headache between his eyes. "This detective appears to be making a case for marital offence on Gladys's part. Presumably something which precedes and therefore partly mitigates her husband's marital offence. If the detective manages to make the case, then Gladys's reputation and settlement will be under threat."

"I get it."

"If I were in her situation, I would seek legal advice," Jeff concluded. "Therefore I have arranged for her to be able to do just that, but without the worrying fees that such advice would normally entail."

Emilia pulled a dubious expression. "So your mutual friend is pretending this solicitor is his contact."

"Yes."

"So basically you're lying to her."

He frowned. "I suppose so."

"Why not just write to Sylvia? Tell her about the solicitor. She can tell Gladys that the guy's there if she needs him."

"For two reasons. Firstly, even in such indirect terms, that would constitute a form of contact with Gladys. Secondly, because if Gladys knew I had arranged a solicitor for her then she would feel the need to refuse the offer. Simply on the grounds of-of-of not accepting charity."

Emilia puffed out her cheeks. "What tangled webs we weave."
"I'm not proud of the subterfuge. I merely see no alternative. I'm open to other suggestions."

"Sorry, English. I don't see what else you can do here. Get in touch with her, and you might be pushing too hard. Don't do anything, and she's vulnerable to this sneakiness her husband's up to."

He nodded. There was a companionable pause as they both let their thoughts wander.

"How could she go back to a man who's capable of doing this to her?" he mused, after a while.

"Does her husband even want her back? I mean, what're his motives for involving a detective? Covering his bases in case she sues for divorce? Or does he want blackmail-material? I mean - you're a guy, Jeff. Why would a man who has already been caught with his pants down do something this underhand?"

Jeffrey bit at his lip. "I-I worry that Dempster is the kind of man who views his wife as his property. When his ownership and control is challenged, he, er, lashes out."

"I hope you're wrong about that."

"Yes - so do I."

Nearing to change the subject, Jeffrey glanced at his wristwatch. It was almost half past six.

"Dinner?" he suggested.

"God, I thought you'd never ask."

He filed the paperwork he'd been pushing aimlessly around for the last hour, then stood up and collected his briefcase. The two of them left the building together and headed out into the summer evening.

~~~

Flat C
81 Shooters Hill Road
Blackheath
London

6th August 1962

Dear Spike,

Thank you for the warning about this Andrews fellow. He called today, bank holiday Monday apparently be damned. Harold, fortunately, was out at work. (I know how men like this Andrews work: they find what leverage they can, and then they heave-to.)

I didn't like to send him off with a flea in his ear, since I thought I could do more good trying to glean what information interested him most. You know me, Spike - I was never a one for cheap gossip, but living with Yvonne for all those years taught me a thing or two about the grand art of tattle.

For some reason Jeffrey Fairbrother's name came up. I'm not sure how that will serve any purpose, since he was long gone by the time Gladys met Dempster. I suppose if Dempster is trying to portray her as a serial flirt who snared him into marriage, it might work? There were such a lot of rumours about Jeffrey and Gladys, after all.
The other thing that Andrews mentioned was much more intriguing. He asked me about Gladys's early life - particularly during the late years of the war. I can't imagine she'd have been more than a slip of a thing, even in '45, and she certainly never mentioned any events from her youth to me or Yvonne. Andrews was very interested to learn who she might have confided in while she was at Crimpton-on-Sea. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't really suggest anyone. I'm not sure I ever heard Gladys sharing personal information.

Just one more thing. Andrews has obviously spoken to Yvonne, from the way he reacted to my surname and the question he asked about our marital status. I haven't spoken to Yvonne myself, circumstances being what they are, and perhaps I'm seeing shadows, but I must say - I detected just a hint of Yvonne's more subtle brand of poison in some of what Andrews said. So if you're still looking for the source of the rumours this man seems to be accumulating, I'd suggest you look no further than my estranged wife.

Let me know if I can help in any other way. Gladys is such a dear. She sent a thank-you letter and some flowers to Harold and me, after the night she stayed with us after flying in from Australia. Yvonne was always so concerned with social class that she failed to recognise real class. Gladys has it in spades.

Love to you and April both,
Barry

~~~

Telegram

To: Charles Dempster
Dempster Hall, Nr. Wisbech, Cambs., UK

From: Clive Dempster
Gore Street Post Shop, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia

Wednesday 8th August 1962

WHEN I OK'D YOUR MAN TO FIND GLADYS I DID NOT SIGN ON TO THIS! PI MAKING TROUBLE WITH MAPLINS GANG. ASSUME THIS YOUR DOING.

CALL OFF YOUR DOG! REFUSE & THIS WILL BE OUR FINAL CONVERSATION. EVER.

CLIVE

~~~

Telegram

To: Clive Dempster
123 Rowe St., Fitzroy North, Melbourne, Australia

From: Charles Dempster
Dempster Hall, Nr. Wisbech, Cambs., UK

Thursday 9th August 1962

ALL WELL & GOOD STAMPING YOUR FOOT, MY BOY. I'VE PAID OFF MY MAN. NOW AREN'T YOU INTERESTED IN WHAT HE FOUND OUT?
IF DIVORCE IS ON THE CARDS, YOU MAKE SURE IT'S HER FAULT OR IT'LL KILL YOUR FATHER - ASSUME YOU CARE ABOUT THAT?

UNCLE CHARLES

~~~~~~
Dear Nerys,

Thanks for the letter. Now **stop worrying**. You've done nothing wrong. Whatever this man Andrews is trying to find out about me - let him. The worst that can happen is that Clive feels he can ask me for a divorce, rather than the other way round. Frankly, knowing what I know now, I don't much care about the route so long as the destination is the same.

I'm sorry I didn't manage to warn you and Mam about this detective. I knew of him, because he tracked me down to the resort here back in June. Once that happened I had a couple of weeks of phone calls and telegrams from Clive, before he finally seemed to realise that his nagging was doing more harm than good. Then it all went quiet. I assumed the detective had been paid off.

As it turns out, that wasn't the end of it. Andrews has been on quite the tour of the country, giving the third degree to all the old Maplins gang. I only found out a few days ago. That lot from the holiday camp had decided not to bother me with it, thinking that I was dealing with enough already. (Yes, they're all idiots. They should have realised I needed to know so I could warn the other people in my life.)

The upshot is that I now have the name of a solicitor in Exeter. He's known to one of my former colleagues, and has offered an 'initial consultation' to lay out my options, waiving his fees. Good thing too, or I doubt I'd be able to afford it! I've got it all arranged for tomorrow afternoon.

Now then, you said this Andrews was asking about my time as a Land Girl, and you told him about Rhodri. That's fine. Clive doesn't know I was engaged once before, but that's hardly an issue. It was almost twenty years ago, and it isn't as if Rhodri is still in the picture, is it? Rest his soul.

You also say this detective wanted to know if I'm still in touch with any of the other Land Girls, and you gave him Phyllis's name. I haven't been in touch with Phyllis for years and years, and her father sold the tennis club not long after I left in '48. Andrews can sniff around Bristol all he likes; he won't turn up much there. So stop worrying. Nothing you said to him will do me any harm at all.

Best thing you can do now is let the rest of the family know what's going on. Don't forget Gareth - he's easily coaxed into talking if he's given a couple of drinks and a bit of encouragement. And tell everyone I can only apologise that you have to deal with this.

Honestly, Nerys, if I'd known Clive was the kind of man who'd do this, I'd never have gone near him. I'm still having trouble working out what on earth he thinks he'll gain.

I'll write again soon, when I've spoken to this solicitor and I know where I stand. For now, my love to you and Dafydd and the kids,

Gladys
To: Clive Dempster  
123 Rowe St., Fitzroy North, Melbourne, Australia  

From: Simon Dempster, Bishop of Ely  
Ely Cathedral, Cambs., UK  

Tuesday 14th August 1962  

UNABLE TO REACH YOU BY TELEPHONE. PLEASE CONTACT ME AT CATHEDRAL ASAP. SO SORRY, BUT YOU SHOULD PREPARE FOR BAD NEWS. 

UNCLE SIMON 

~~~

Office of Publicity Manager, Devon Clifftops Resort  
14th August 1962  

Sylvia leaned in the doorway to Gladys's office, waiting until the phone call Gladys was taking had finished. Gladys was speaking to 'Great British Holiday' magazine, from what Sylvia could tell, and seemed to be in the process of sweet-talking the editor into increasing an upcoming feature on the resort from a single page to a double-page spread. 

The phone call ended. Gladys replaced the receiver and, after a glance at the wall clock, looked at Sylvia. 

"Shouldn't you be hosting water-polo at the pool?" Gladys asked. 

Sylvia snorted, eased up from the doorway and threw herself down in the guest chair opposite Gladys's desk. "Really, Gladys? You still keep a track of the entertainment staff schedule?" 

Gladys smiled a wicked smile, looking quite her old self. "Just yours. And the question stands." 

"Martine's doing it. Mainly because she wants to impress Phil-the-lifeguard. And I'm letting her, mainly because I knew the admin block would be quiet this time of day, and you were cruel enough to avoid the cabaret hall last night."

Gladys sighed. "I was tired by the time I made it back. Ready for a cup of tea and a bit of time to myself."

"That's fine. But you're not going to make me wait any longer, are you?" Sylvia leaned forward, folding her arms on the desk and resting her chin on them. "How did it go?"

"It was strange," Gladys said. "I've only had to visit a solicitor once before - when my father died. That was an office above a laundrette in Pontypridd. Williams and Williams. One of the Williamses was no more, which was just as well because there was hardly room for the remaining one in that tiny office, let alone a client."

"I'm guessing Mr. Furness was a different proposition?"
"You could hold a concert in just the entrance hall," Gladys said. "Carpets so thick you could fall flat on your face and bounce right up again. Wood panels on the wall. Plants in pots. A reception girl who probably only qualified to answer the phone in a place like that after graduating from Oxbridge."

Sylvia arched a brow. "It sounds terrifying."

"It was. Right up to the moment I met Mr. Furness. He was younger than I was expecting. Probably only forty or so. He took me through to a conference room, and we sat down at one end of a table for meetings, just around a corner of it, nice and casual. And he spent about ten minutes chatting to me about the resort. Told me he brings his two little girls up on day-passes, because they love the swimming pool."

"He put you at ease," Sylvia deduced.

"Very deliberately." Gladys narrowed her eyes at Sylvia. "Spike's a nice boy, and I know he's got this steady job learning how to manage a shop, but I have to tell you - if Spike is friendly with Edward Furness and got me in there for a free consultation? I'm the Queen of Sheba."

Sylvia sat up and bobbed a fake curtsey while still sitting in her chair. "Your Majesty."

"I'm serious!"

"Well don't look at me. I don't know any more than you. Maybe Ted set it up?"

"Ted's even less likely to move in those circles."

The two women looked at each other for a moment, silently sharing suspicions. Then Sylvia sighed. "We both told him he shouldn't contact you. Perhaps he thought this was the only way."

Gladys nodded thoughtfully. Then she said, "Did you see the wedding cake at Spike's do last year?"

Sylvia startled with the apparent swerve in topic. "I don't really remember. There was a cake. A nice one. Is it important?"

"The box for it was under the table. Fortnum and Masons."

"Oh." Sylvia joined the dots. "Oh! Well. No wonder it looked nice."

"Spike thought we'd all chipped in," Gladys recalled.

"And Ted told us to let Spike think exactly that."

"But if Ted had been in charge of supplying a wedding cake..."

"...it definitely would not have come from Fortnums. He'd have claimed it cost ten quid, then found someone who'd do it for five." Sylvia huffed a laugh. "You think Jeff..."

"I think Jeff." Gladys breathed a self-deprecating laugh. "I think 'Jeff' most minutes of every day."

"We're getting off the subject," Sylvia reminded her. "Putting aside who might or might not have bought Spike and April's wedding cake, or who organised some decent legal advice for you - what did Mr. Furness tell you?"
"Lots of things. Useful things. Like for instance - if I decide to petition for divorce, I can't do it until August next year. The law won't allow it. It's the same in Britain and Australia. No divorce applications within the first three years of a marriage."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Why? How does that make sense?"

"I'm not sure the law is there to make sense for the likes of you and me."

"So what are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Not a lot I can do." Gladys shrugged. "It means Clive has to wait another year as well, if he's planning to sue for divorce. So he'll keep digging away, no doubt. Him and his nasty little weasel of a detective."

"You can't stop him?"

"Not unless the odious Mr. Andrews commits a crime. Trespass, theft, assault, anything like that. Until that happens, what Clive's doing is disgusting but it's still above board."

Sylvia considered Gladys across the desk. "You've decided, haven't you?"

"Clive made it easy, in the end," Gladys said. "I can't stay married to a man who treats me like this. I don't even recognise the man I married any more. So I'm not going back to Australia. At the end of the season I'll stay here for an extra two months. Brendan asked if I'd help out with some of the organising when the construction work starts in the north west corner. That'll take me up to November. Then I'll head back to Pontypridd."

Sylvia stretched a hand across the desk. "And you'll be back here next season?"

Gladys took the hand and squeezed it. "Brendan says he can't do without me."

"He fancies you, you know."

"I promised myself - no more flirting with the boss."

Sylvia sat back again. "And next August you'll file divorce papers."

"That's the plan. Mr. Furness tells me that unless Clive contests the adultery, the whole thing could go through in three months."

"You can't let Jeff pay for all of it."

"Of course not." Gladys looked indignant at the suggestion. "Mr. Furness suggested that nearer the time we draw up a contract where payment of his fee is postponed until it can be made as part of the settlement of the divorce."

"Wow. This is all sounding very promising."

Gladys smiled a warm, genuine smile. "It's like a weight's been lifted, Sylvia. It's what I needed. I just needed to make up my mind." The smile faded. "I mean, there's a part of me keeps saying I shouldn't feel so positive. It's still a failed marriage. It's still a mess."
"But not one of your making."

"Partly mine."

There was a pause. Sylvia considered her friend. "All right, then, Glad. Hit me with the big news. What are you going to do about Jeff?"

"I'm divorcing Clive for me," Gladys insisted. "Not for Jeffrey Fairbrother."

"But you think about him all the time."

"I do." Gladys pinched her lips together, somehow avoiding any damage to her lipstick in the process. "But there's still a good chance he wants nothing more than friendship."

"So ask him."

"I don't think I could do that," she said. "But I do think it's high time I wrote to him again." She clasped her hands and leaned closer over the desk. "All this detective business - it's the first time I've thought about certain things in years and years. Personal things. Things that happened when I was young."

Sylvia nodded solemnly. "The Great War was a troubled time," she pretended to agree.

Of course, these days jokes about Gladys's age were not met with outrage, but with a snort of humour and an eraser that came flying through the air and bounced off Sylvia's forehead.

"Point is," Gladys said, "there's a lot about me that Jeffrey doesn't know. No one knows. Some of it - not even my Mam and my sister."

"And maybe the best way to work out whether you and Jeff have a chance, once all this Clive idiocy is behind you..."

"...is to talk to each other," Gladys finished. "Really talk." She gave a shrug. "He might not be interested. He might run a mile." She smiled tightly. "He might do any number of things, many of which could break my heart all over again."

"Well, for what it's worth - I suspect not," Sylvia said. "In fact, I suspect he's sitting in his office in Wisconsin right now, thinking about you. Hoping that tomorrow morning will be the day another letter arrives from his dearest Gladys."

Gladys glanced at the wall clock to her right. "Unlikely. He's six hours behind us, this time of year. It's quarter past five in the morning, there."

Sylvia widened her eyes suggestively. "Ah. So he's lying in bed, thinking about you. Probably stirring from some exotic dream about his own dearest."

"I'm out of rubbers, Sylvia, do you really want me to throw a stapler at your head?"

Sylvia grinned and stood up. "Shall we grab a drink later, after goodnights? Celebrate a decision well made?"

"Why not."

"See you then."

Sylvia headed off into the sunny Devon morning, to go and see whether Martine, her lovestruck
greencoat, had succeeded in making an impression on the hunkiest of Devon Clifftops's lifeguards. Love was, after all, in the air.

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Telegram

To: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

From: Charles Winston-Eaves
St. Andrew's Street Post Office, Cambridge, UK

Wednesday 15th August 1962

ANGELA'S BROTHER HAS MET YOUR LADY. NO MORE INFO, NO MATTER HOW WE PUMPED. ROTTEN CONFIDENTIALITY! STILL, TRUST THIS GOOD NEWS.

CHARLES

~~~

Oceanic Terminal, Heathrow Airport, West London
18th August 1962

Clive moved like an automaton down the bland corridors of the airport. He clutched a single carry-on bag, because he hadn't had the time to pack more substantially. His face was as grey as the walls, and he was filled with a kind of nothingness. Perhaps this was the natural reaction when one lost one's father.

It was worse, knowing they hadn't liked each other all that much. It added guilt and a distasteful sense of hypocrisy to the mix. Still. The man had been Clive's father, and he'd loved him. Even if they hadn't agreed on anything for about thirty years.

At least when his mother had died, back in '47, Clive had been able to cry.

The customs officials ignored him, and beyond them the corridors funnelled the passengers through an arch and then a door which opened into the arrivals hall. Beyond the door, roped walkways meant that he still had to navigate obstacles before the exit to the airport was in sight. It was all very odd: this reminder of how it felt to use airports and aeroplanes as a traveller rather than a pilot. For almost two years he'd spent several hours of most days in one or the other. Now they felt like alien, oppressive places.

He finally cleared the crowds and paused for a moment to orient himself. It was around two o'clock in the afternoon, and he was pretty sure it was Saturday. That meant he had almost twenty-four hours before he needed to be in Leverington for the funeral. Could he postpone his arrival until nearer the time? He desperately wanted to avoid his aunt and uncles. More specifically, he wanted to avoid the argument that was bound to happen as soon as he and his Uncle Charles were within shouting distance of each other.

Clive knew how it was going to go. Charles probably did too, which made it seem rather
unnecessary for Clive even to be there. His father's death would be designated his fault, of course. Every recent choice he'd made would be equated with some kind of injury. He'd married the wrong woman; he'd tossed their threats of disinheri tance back in their faces and moved to Australia, where he'd had the damned audacity to earn a very nice income doing a job he was good at. All bad enough, but then he'd made a mess of his marriage, suffered the ignominy of separation, and he'd been stupid enough to confess to an affair.

To top it all off, just when his family had done their usual trick of intervening in the most underhand and unethical way, he'd raged right back at them. He'd told his father on the telephone that he didn't damn well care what Charles's private detective had found out about Gladys. If Gladys would take him back then he'd grovel on his knees before her in gratitude, and if she wouldn't then he'd take his punishment like a man and admit his marital offence.

His father had not taken that remark well at all. In fact, the tirade of Anglo-Saxon language Clive had heard before his father had slammed the phone down was the very last time they'd spoken.

Now they'd never speak again.

Which meant that in the world according to Uncle Charles, it would have been the stress and anger caused by Clive's refusal to play by the devious Dempster rules that had finished off Clive's father. Never mind Lord Dempster's congenitally weak heart. Never mind the fact that Uncle Simon had already told him his father had slipped on the grand staircase last Monday, and managed to have a third heart attack by the time he'd tumbled all the way to the entrance hall. Never mind that his death had been a combination of poor health and stupid accident.

Never mind any of that. Charles, and the rest of them, would view Clive as a son guilty of patricide.

"Clive, dear boy," came a voice to his left.

Clive stiffened, then turned in resignation to face Admiral Neville Dempster, who stood to attention in the middle of the bustling arrivals hall, in spite of the fact that he was not, thankfully, in uniform.

"Hello, Uncle Neville," Clive said.

"Thought you might need a lift," the Admiral announced. "I've got Perkins and the Daimler."

Bang went Clive's half-formed plan to book in to the Savoy and grab an evening to himself before heading up to the family seat. He won a small victory when he waylaid Uncle Neville's attempt to relieve him of his bag and instead switched it to his right hand.

"How did you know which flight I was on?" he asked, as they made their way to the exit.

"Nice chap at your office gave us all the details." Neville held open the door for Clive. The man couldn't help but take charge of every tiny situation he encountered. Clive pitied the groundsmen at Dempster Hall, once his father's body was returned to the earth of the family plot. They'd be taking lessons in shovel-work if Neville hung around. 'Now then, lads, put your backs into it. And-in-and-lift-and-turn-and-throw...'

He wanted to laugh at the thought, but it was hard to laugh when all you could hear was the sound of earth hitting a coffin...because his father was dead. That cold, lifeless body was frozen in a mortuary somewhere, waiting for tomorrow, when it would be laid out in a cushioned box and then buried in the ground.
Clive was never going to see his father again.

"Clive?"

He startled. He noted that he was standing on his own on the pavement outside the airport, and a large Daimler was purring just down the road, heedless of how its presence was causing a bottleneck for other vehicles to squeeze through. Uncle Neville was looking at him with irritation. Clive had been adrift in his thoughts.

"I can't do this," he murmured.

Neville returned to his side, the irritation turning to concern. "What's that, dear boy?"

"I can't do this!" Clive exclaimed, suddenly animated. "Damn it, I need Gladys! Where's Gladys? I need to find her. I need her help." He charged past Neville and threw himself and his bag into the back of the Daimler.

A few moments later, Neville settled beside him and murmured to Perkins that they should head for Dempster Hall.

Clive considered changing the instruction. Demanding they head for Devon. Then he sighed. "You're right." The awareness hit him like a pain. "She won't come."

Neville squared his shoulders. "We'll see about that."

Clive peered at his uncle. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Her husband's father has passed away. Her place is at your side."

Clive snorted. "You mean, the newspapers will have people at the funeral, and there'll be plenty of talk if they see the Honourable Clive in attendance without his wife."

"You are no longer the Honourable Clive," Neville said. "You are the sixth Lord Dempster, of Leverington. You're going to have to get used to that, my boy."

"Why?" Clive asked petulantly. "I have a return ticket to Melbourne and a job I'm good at. Give the title to cousin Jerry or something. I don't want it."

"This is not about what you want," Neville castigated him. "We'll discuss it when the funeral is out of the way. Tomorrow is about William. Can't you swallow your damn pride for one single weekend, boy? It's the last time your father will ever ask it of you."

Clive sneered, but he didn't respond. He just looked out of the window as the urban landscape moved by.

"We've all suffered a loss, Clive," Neville said more quietly. "Try to bear that in mind. Just for these two days. Give us that."

"She won't come," Clive murmured again.

"You're wrong." Neville favoured him with a pointed look when he turned his uncle's way. "Your Uncle Simon spoke to her on the telephone yesterday. Asked if she could see her way to putting in an appearance. He has a...a gentler way about him than most of us."

"What did she say?" Clive whispered, hardly daring to hope.
"She said that if you want her there, she'll be there."

Clive processed this comment. He felt the urge to laugh. He'd been wanting his wife back with him for the last three months! He'd been aching with her absence. Even with everything else that had gone on since Gladys had left - even with Helena and all the further complications in his life - he had never, not for one moment, stopped wanting to have Gladys at his side again.

Could this be the solution? Had his father done him one final favour, and contrived a set of circumstances where the impossible became possible? As Clive struggled with his grief and unhappiness, would Gladys's compassion carry her back into his life when her love had faltered?

"I want her there," Clive breathed.

"Yes, so I have observed."

"We need to go to Devon."

"Wisbech East."

"What?"

"She insisted on making her own way up to Cambridgeshire." Neville sighed. "She really is very headstrong. Isn't attractive in a woman."

"When does her train get in?"

"Oh, Perkins has all the info. Now, we've put you in the east wing. She also insisted on separate rooms, I'm afraid, old son, so it's the claret suite for you both. Do try to keep her in line tomorrow. Last thing we need is any of that rough-edged Celtic passion within earshot of the newshounds."

Clive found he was nervous as a schoolboy. Nervous and excited. "At least I'll have the chance to apologise," he said, mainly to himself. "Explain that the detective business wasn't my fault."

Neville snorted. "You were the one, asked Charles to track her down!"

"Only because I had no other options! And I didn't ask him to do anything else."

"Yes, Charles told me you'd turned your nose up at the detective chappie's findings."

"I don't care what he found. Dig around anyone and you'll find something. I don't care."

"She lied to you, Clive."

Clive huffed a disbelieving laugh. "Gladys is the most truthful person I've ever met. The most truthful, and the most true."

"Oh, so she told you she's been engaged before?" Neville looked away, pretending to study his fingernails. "She told you she once fell pregnant outside wedlock?" He squinted at his thumb. "She told you she can no longer have children, did she? Can't give you an heir? I'm glad she told you. Otherwise that'd constitute a marital offence, you see. Marrying you under false pretences, or something."

Clive stared in shock at his uncle as his brain tried to process all these bombshells.

Gladys had been engaged? Well, so what? It wasn't as if she'd already been married when they'd tied the knot.
She'd been pregnant at some point? All right, so it was a shame Gladys hadn't felt able to tell him about this, but who knew what the circumstances were? Women hid things like that. Society was still cruel to unmarried mothers...which was, of course, a notion he'd been thinking about a lot, of late.

Gladys could no longer have children.

And his uncle was sitting there, smug and pleased, thinking that he'd just dealt his nephew's estranged wife a death-blow. Divorce would happen, as the family were desperate for it to happen, but on their terms. Any marital offence had to be Gladys's, not his own.

Clive laughed a breathy laugh.

"This is no humorous matter, Clive, my boy. This is serious."


Neville struck him across the face - just a cuff - taking Clive by surprise. "That is my late brother you are speaking about. Show some bloody respect!"

Clive rubbed his jaw and shook his head. He wasn't going to offer this man any more information. The Dempsters were all the same. They'd manipulate and lie and assert their wealth and title and influence, and they'd get whatever they wanted. No matter who suffered.

Neville assumed that Clive's silence was sulking, and turned away to leave him to it. Clive, exhausted from twenty-four hours of aeroplane travel, emotionally battered by recent events, and yearning to see Gladys once again, settled in for the rest of the journey. The faint ache on his jaw meant nothing, because he was warmed by the knowledge that his unscrupulous family had just presented him with a gift of monumental significance. He knew what he was going to do, now.

He wouldn't use Gladys's secret to force her into divorce.

He'd use it to win her back.

~~~

THE SUNDAY TIMES
19th August 1962

The funeral was held today for Lord William Graeme Dempster, fifth Lord of Leverington in the county of Cambridgeshire. St. Leonard's Church in the village of Leverington held a well-attended service for close family and friends before Lord Dempster's final journey to the family burial ground at Dempster Hall.

Speaking in a press release earlier in the week, Lord Dempster's brother, Sir Charles Dempster, KBE, revealed that his brother had suffered a fatal heart attack after a year of failing health. 'My older brother was the strongest and most steadfast man it was ever my great privilege to know,' said Sir Charles, 'but even the best of us take our leave in the end. I am grateful that his passing was peaceful and dignified, as befitted a gentleman of his stature.' Sir Charles led the eulogies at the service with grace and eloquence.

Also in attendance were Lord Dempster's remaining siblings, General Sir Claude Dempster, whose
input into the success of the Special Operations Executive during the war has only recently become an open secret, Admiral Neville Dempster, who distinguished himself with the Mediterranean Fleet out of Alexandria during the war, and the Bishop of Ely, Simon Dempster, along with Lord Dempster's sister, the Honourable Winifred Dempster. Lord Dempster's only son and heir, the Honourable Clive Dempster, DFC, a distinguished Squadron Leader with the RAF during the war, was also in attendance with his wife.

All flowers have been donated to the children's ward at the Papworth Hospital, and the Dempster family express their gratitude for the many letters of condolence they have received. A memorial service is being arranged in Lord Dempster's honour, to take place later in the year at Ely Cathedral.
It was a good thing, Jeffrey considered, that the semester was over and his schedule was his own. Because he'd been sitting at his desk for almost twenty minutes now, and he had not so much as lifted a pen.

This was the problem with being isolated from news: all he could do was wait and worry. Weeks had passed since anyone had been in touch. Months had passed since his last letter from Gladys. In the meantime, all sorts of things could be happening across the Atlantic. Good things, bad things: he simply didn't know!

In the absence of actual news, his mind provided an endless reel of possibilities. He'd lose whole chunks of an hour as he watched the scenes play out: arguments and confrontations, courtroom drama, sometimes even comic farce. If he'd been this imaginative when he'd been in Footlights, Jeffrey thought he might have lasted more than one single revue.

Of course, he'd tried to be less fanciful about the whole thing. For several weeks he'd maintained a philosophical attitude about Gladys's request for him to take a step back. He'd even applauded her good sense. When one made life-changing decisions, one should do so with the proper amount of thought and objectivity. As much as he'd wanted to cast himself as Gladys's confidant, he'd seen the logic in her position.

But time had marched on, and he'd found himself returning again and again to Gladys's letters. When the familiar shape of those words had more or less imprinted itself on his mind, he'd gone back further and sought company in memories.

'It's not very easy being sympathetic with you. You're...you're all prickly!'

'We used to walk up the lane, and sit on a wall...and watch the sun go down over the colliery.'

'If you were going out with a dark, attractive, voluptuous female with a curvy figure, that looked like a French film star...'

"You're not the only one with morals, and scrupulosity..."

'You don't know much, do you? All you know about is dead things. Fossils and mummies.'

The memories could make him smile. And they could make him wince, and groan, and need to hide his head in his hands. There was the time she'd leapt into the fray to save him from false accusations of unsavoury conduct with a teenaged girl. Or the time she'd gone to the trouble of
arranging a temporary home for his dog, just in time to save him from instant dismissal given the
rumours flying about 'Bubbles'.

He remembered a cramped, uncomfortable night in the Three Bears' Cottage, because he'd asked
for her help and she'd given it. He remembered Gladys standing by him, even as the rest of the
team panicked and scattered, when the mission to save an elderly lady's house looked like it was
going to lead him straight to the police station.

When he thought about it, Jeff wasn't sure he'd ever known loyalty quite like Gladys's. He hadn't
paid much attention to it back in Crimpton; he'd spent so much time dwelling on the discomfort of
her come-hithers that he'd ignored everything else she offered. Why had he done that? Why had
he been so blinkered?

It hadn't always been plain-sailing between the two of them, of course. As the season had gone on,
they'd bickered more and more. Never full-fledged arguments, and never anything vicious or
cruel. But there'd been tiffs. He'd even found himself looking forward to them. They'd been
exciting: sharp words, flashing eyes, quickened breath. Lunge and riposte.

Easy to see why it had happened like that, in hindsight. The tension had built up to the point where
it had needed an outlet.

The tension remained, even now. It was ridiculous, really. Jeffrey hadn't seen Gladys in almost
three years. There was an ocean between them; she was married to another man. And still this
frisson swept through him when his thoughts turned to her. Not that he could trust it, of course. It
was based as much on daydreams as reality. How could it be about anything else, when he had
only half a dozen letters to go on?

Like any good academic, Jeffrey craved more data. Another letter, or even a telegram. Anything
that allowed him to make sense of his jumbled thoughts. He knew Gladys had been to see Angela's
brother, Edward Furness, which was something, he supposed. She wouldn't have done that unless
she'd discovered this business with the private detective; that was the arrangement he and Spike
had come to. Jeffrey was reasonably certain that Dempster's attempt to gather information in such a
duplicitous way would have destroyed any residual affection Gladys felt towards him. So surely -
surely - she must have come to a decision about her marriage by now.

Or did he have it wrong?

Jeffrey thumped the surface of his desk in frustration. How could he plan without information?
How could he assess, analyse, predict? How could he ensure that his actions were best designed
for the circumstances? It was impossible.

"Professor?"

He glanced up to see his secretary, Mrs. Parsons - whose first name he never used, since it was
'Jemima' which meant he couldn't say it without thinking 'Puddleduck' - standing in his doorway.

"Yes?" he asked, surreptitiously loosening the fist he'd made of his right hand.

"Is everything all right?"

"Perfectly."

She looked at him uncertainly, then nodded and turned back to her next-door office.

Jeffrey sighed at himself. He needed something to focus on. A distraction, to shake himself out of
this routine that had taken a hold. Because every day that now passed was spent the same way: early mornings were when he pretended that he was not waiting with bated breath for the tread of the mailman. Later mornings were when he dealt with the crippling disappointment of another day with no news. The rest of the day would then be spent sitting at his office desk, telling himself he was going to make a start on that paper he wanted to write, instead letting his mind drift through scenes of heartbreak or accusation or humiliation-

The phone rang, and it sounded unnaturally loud.

Jeffrey straightened his shoulders. A distraction. Excellent. Someone up there was listening after all.

He picked up the telephone receiver. "Yes," he announced, more sharply than was probably necessary.

Mrs. Parsons informed him, "Call for you, Professor. International."

The line clicked before he considered asking Mrs. Parsons for the name of his caller. It was a bit odd; he received international calls on a semi-regular basis, but usually they were pre-arranged. He glanced at his wristwatch and noted that it was two pm. If his caller was ringing from England, it would be evening for them: well past working hours.

"This is Jeffrey Fairbrother," he said, when the line had stopped clicking.

Silence.

Then a breath.

Then, with a familiar Welsh lilt, a female voice said, "Hello Jeffrey."

The silence this time was his. Jeff found he was gripping the edge of his desk, as though he'd been tossed into stormy seas. He swallowed, but his mouth had gone quite dry and the act made him want to cough.

"Gladys," he finally managed to say, all of an exhale.

"You recognise my voice, then?"

The question seemed absurd. She might as well have asked him if he still breathed oxygen, these days. "I-I'd know your voice in ten thousand," he told her, because paraphrasing Dickens never did anyone any harm.

She breathed a laugh, more - so he sensed - from exhilaration than humour, and said, "Likewise."

By that time the event was catching up with him. Wearing a broad smile, he sat forward at his desk and shook his head. "Gladys, it is so marvellous to hear your voice! I-I-I can't even tell you."

Silence. Perhaps she was as thrown by this as he was. He tried to fill in.

"I've been hoping to hear from you, of course. I-I've been waiting for a letter. It didn't occur to me that you'd make use of more modern technology."

Silence.

"Gladys? Are you all right?"
"I couldn't do this by letter," she said.

His heart beat faster. This was it, then. She'd decided to go ahead and divorce her recalcitrant husband, and the fact that she wanted to tell him in such an intimate way, her voice in his ear...

No. No, he would not push. He had lost all right to influence the pace and course she wished to set.

"It's all right," he heard himself say. "I-I know things won't be easy. Lord knows, I know better than most. You need only ask. Whatever you need. Consider me y-"

"Jeffrey, I'm going back to Clive."

The silence this time was long and lingering, and broken only when the sound of a tiny choked sob, swiftly smothered, came down the telephone line. Jeffrey stared, bewildered, at the office door that stood ajar a few feet in front of him. His face felt slack. His lips were parted.

Gladys sniffed and then exhaled. He could all but see her gathering herself.

"So I need to ask you a favour," she went on, this time with a tremble to her voice. "Jeffrey, please - please - don't ever let me know. If we...if you and I..." She sighed at the struggle she was having with the right words. "Just - don't tell me if your answer would have been 'yes'."

He screwed his eyes shut, but they were thankfully dry when he opened them again. He swallowed, then he said, "What happened?"

"Promise me," she insisted, ignoring the question. "I couldn't bear it if...I have to live with this. Rest of my life. Either way, it's better if I don't know. So promise me."

"I promise," he said shortly. "Tell me what happened."

"His father's died. He's a mess. He needs me. There's so much about him I can't rely on, Jeff, but his need - it's so real."

"What about his mistress?" Jeffrey asked, hating himself for the way he sounded: so wheedling, so petulant.

"He made a mistake. I think his remorse is real too." She sighed. "He'll do it again, obviously. It's my fault. I married him."

"It is not your fault!" he said, angry about this as he could not allow himself to be angry about anything else.

"Please don't shout." She choked back another sob. "It's the last time I'll ever hear your voice - don't make me remember you shouting."

"I'm sorry. You-you're right. Sorry." He tried to calm himself down. "Gladys, what about the detective? How could you forgive him for-"

"It wasn't him. It was that vicious, nasty family of his. He didn't even know what was happening until Ted wrote him an angry letter. Soon as he knew, he ordered his Uncle Charles to pay the man off."

Jeffrey felt the wind leave his sails. Suddenly Clive Dempster was not the man Jeff had built him up to be in his mind: the arrogant, controlling, abusive spouse. Dempster was just an idiot who'd
taken his pleasure on the wrong side of the sheets, and who'd recently lost his father, and who wanted Gladys back in his life. Because he was also an 'idiot' who had done what Jeff had failed to do: he'd recognised Gladys's value when it was right there in front of him, and he'd claimed it for himself.

Jeffrey had never considered himself the kind of man who'd build castles in the air, and yet there they were, crumbling to dust before his eyes.

"I see," he whispered.

"I married him, Jeff. I can't just change that because it's inconvenient. Marriage is supposed to mean more."

"I'm...not a stranger to such thoughts," he said. Because it would not help to point out that those very arguments had failed to save his own broken marriage.

"Do you see why I had to telephone?"

"Well. I-I suppose I'm, er, proof positive that doing this by letter never works very well."

"Jeffrey, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," he said. "When I wrote to you after Christmas it was with the intention of helping. But now I-I-I think I'm making this more difficult, and I can't allow that." He frowned hard at the surface of his desk. "Listen, as long as I'm alive I will always be at your service, if ever again you need a friend."

The sobs broke through the muffling that tried to contain them, and her voice sounded raw. "Oh, Jeffrey, don't, please!"

"I'm sorry, but it has to be said. If this truly is the last time..." He had to pause to bite his own lip. His throat felt as if it were expanding with a grief that seemed too big for his body. "Gladys, do what you must. I wish you only happiness. But you must know that you can always look to me for—"

"I can't!" she cried. "How can I stay with him when I let myself think about you? How can I be a wife to Clive when there's a part of me just waiting for the excuse to throw him aside? I don't love him, Jeffrey! So don't tell me there's always a chance, because I can't let there be a chance. Not ever."

"Gladys," he managed through the clamour of unwelcome emotion. "Oh, god—"

"Find someone, Jeff. Be happy. Forget about me."

"Gladys, the one thing you have always been is unforgettable," he said. He thought he was allowed that much.

Through the tears came a sad, breathy laugh. "Goodbye, Jeffrey."

'Don't go. Don't go. Don't go.' God, it was all he could do not to say it out loud...

"Goodbye," he said.

The connection held for long moments as they listened to each other breathe. Then the line clicked, and Jeff replaced the receiver on its cradle as if it were a stick of dynamite.
He spun his office chair around to face the window, and he let the grey-blue wash of Lake Mendota keep him company for a while.

~~~

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth
22nd August 1962

Dear Jeff,

I'm so sorry. I found Gladys in a right old state yesterday evening and she told me everything. I asked her if she minded if I write to you. She said that it's none of her business any more.

Jeff, her heart isn't just broken. It's pulverised. And she's still sure she's doing the right thing.

Problem is, of course, that Gladys is the most stubborn person I ever met. Now she's set her mind to doing things this way, no one's going to shift her from her course. I don't know whether she's got a martyr complex, or if she's got a ridiculously churchy view of marriage, or if she still wants to punish herself for failing to see Clive for who he really is. But she's convinced that her lot in life is to stay with a man she doesn't love. Someone who won't ever manage to be faithful.

There's something else. Something more. Maybe I shouldn't tell you. I mean, I'm not going to tell you the details, because when Gladys spilled the whole story last night I got the feeling she'd never have mentioned it in a thousand years if she hadn't been so beaten up with misery.

But I think you should know. You remember that detective, Andrews? The things that he found out - either Clive or his family were able to twist them to their advantage. I wouldn't call it out-and-out blackmail, exactly, but I'm pretty sure Clive managed to make Gladys feel terrible about something that happened ages ago. Something she'd never told him about.

It isn't as if we can do anything about it now, I suppose, even if I'd love the chance to give Clive a piece of my mind. What I can tell you is this. Before the news broke about Clive's father, Gladys had made up her mind to divorce him. Jeff, she was happy. She said a weight had been lifted. She'd also decided to start writing to you again, and this time 'really talk' - those were her words. All that detective business had made her think of things that she'd kept locked away for a long time. You were the person she wanted to trust with them.

Now I've said all that, I'm wondering if I should have kept it to myself. It isn't going to help you, is it? Sorry. But I needed to tell someone. Seemed sensible to tell the person Gladys herself was ready to trust.

I don't know what else I can say to you, apart from sending my sympathies. Chin up, and if you ever need to talk to someone then consider me a friend, even though I'm an ocean away.

All the best,
Sylvia

~~~

Lakeshore Path, University of Wisconsin
28th August 1962
The shadows cast by the trees of Muir Woods, just to the east of the Social Science building, offered a welcome sense of coolness under the bright summer sun. Jeffrey had walked this path many times, sometimes all the way out west past the sports grounds, around University Bay and up to the picnic point on the thin spur of land that stretched into Lake Mendota like the arm of a metronome.

In recent weeks, Jeffrey had sometimes imagined walking the lakeshore path with Gladys beside him. He'd be carrying a bag containing a decent bottle of wine and perhaps some good cheese and the rosette rolls that the Italian deli on Jenifer Street sold. She'd be free of the past, looking to the future, and so would he. They'd have world enough, and time. Time to get to know each other. Time to work out whether all the daydreams had distorted the truth, or if there was truly a foundation on which they might build something real.

That would never happen, now. It felt like a bereavement, even though the only loss he'd suffered was that of possibility.

The path was free of bicycling or wandering students, given the time of year. It was nice to be alone with the chiaroscuro of the woods. There was a bench up ahead, not far from the turn-off that would lead back towards the Social Science building. He made for it and sat down, then he looked out across the lake.

Sunlight on water. Beautiful. And for some unfathomable reason, poignant and touching, too.

Jeff wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there, lost in his own thoughts, when he sensed someone sit down next to him. He came back to the here and now with a start, then relaxed.

"Oh. Hello Em," he said. "I didn't know you were back."

"Flew back Sunday," she said. "Stayed with Mom and Dad for a couple nights. They say hi."

"Give them my best."

"Sure."

He sensed her studying him, but he couldn't turn to meet her eyes.

"Oh, Jeff," she said, with what sounded like genuine sympathy. "When Mrs. P said you'd gone for a walk, I was hoping for the heart-skippety-at-one-with-the-world kind."

He lifted and lowered a shoulder. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"She's gone back to him," Emilia pressed, as though she needed any more confirmation.

"She has," he agreed shortly.

"Why?"

"Misunderstandings. Duty. Guilt." He looked down at his hands as he clasped them between his knees. "She's, er, she's just like me. She thinks marriage ought to mean something."

"This is the woman you have nothing in common with?"

He turned to look at her. "Yes, I'm quite aware that I'm a fool."
"Hey." Emilia lifted a hand and pressed it against his cheek for a moment. "I'm so sorry, honey."

"Way of the world." He sat up straighter. "How did things go in Philadelphia?"

"They want me to start next semester."

"Well of course they do. They're not fools."

"Professor Manninger says he'll release me in time to move, but only if I agree to come back once every semester to give a guest lecture."

"Will they go for that? U-Penn?"

"I think it's already been negotiated behind the scenes. I'm surprised you haven't been in on it."

"Manninger knows we're close," Jeffrey said. "He told me it wouldn't be fair, asking me to make these decisions. And he's right."

"I guess."

"He said he wanted everything neat and organised when he hands the department over to me in October."


"Possibly. Probably. All I have to do is accept the job."

"You haven't done that yet?"

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing in particular. A feeling, maybe. That I'm making the right choice."

"Ah."

"Right now, though, I'm waiting for a signal from my friend Jeffrey. Turns out he's in a pretty bad place. I'm not gonna abandon him to it if he needs me to stay."

Jeffrey looked at Emilia incredulously. "You can't turn down a professorship because I'm feeling a bit down in the dumps!"

"Can if I want," she said back. "Look, if I don't take the job at U-Penn, there'll be another post comes up next year, or the year after that."

"No. No, I-I won't allow that. Make your decision based on what's best for you. I should not figure in your reasoning."

"Why not? I love you."

Jeffrey blinked.

"Um..." Emilia shifted uncomfortably. "That was a good-friends 'I love you' and not a take-me-I'm-yours 'I love you'. For the record."

Emilia looked at him steadily for a moment, then she cracked a grin and chuckled. Jeff found himself laughing for the first time in days.

"Yes, I know," he added. "I am beyond useless at the words that matter."

"I wouldn't say that."

Emilia shuffled closer on the bench and rested her head against his shoulder. The two of them sat there in companionable silence for a while.

"You should go to Pennsylvania," he said eventually. "If only because I'll spend the rest of my career steeped in guilt if you don't."

"Guess I'll be visiting often enough. We could still have dinner sometimes."

"And I could visit you. Once you've uncovered Philadelphia's best restaurants."

"It's always good to have a project."

"Hmm."

Emilia lifted her head to glance up at him. "You okay?"

"I will be."

"Woman's an idiot."

"I, er-"

"No. This is my job. I'm your friend. I get to bad-mouth the people who hurt you. Don't care about the mitigating circumstances. So I say - the woman is an idiot."

"Ah. Well - thank you for the support."

Warm against each other, they watched the sunlight on the water.
Dinner and Redemption

Telegram

To: Gladys Dempster
Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort, Nr. Exmouth, Devon

From: Clive Dempster
Dempster Hall, Nr. Wisbech, Cambs.

Thursday 30th August 1962

FLYING BACK SUNDAY. THOUGHT I'D TAKE THE LONG ROUTE TO HEATHROW - DINNER TOMORROW IN EXMOUTH? NOT SURE I CAN WAIT TWO WEEKS BEFORE I SEE YOU AGAIN.

CLIVE

~~~

The Four Crosses Inn, Exmouth
31st August 1962

Clive Dempster sat at the bar, nursing a Martini. He was thinking that while he never usually agreed with his Uncle Neville on any matter - more or less as a point of principle - he had to concede that the adjective 'headstrong', when applied to Gladys, was not entirely misplaced.

He'd rented a car; he had transport. But was he allowed to pick up his wife from the caravan resort ten minutes up the road? Of course not. There was a bus service into Exmouth, and Gladys was "perfectly capable of using it." It was as if, having agreed to give their marriage another try, she was determined to demonstrate how little she needed him.

Well, that was fine. He needed her, and he was happy to admit it. It was his need that she'd responded to, two weekends ago at the funeral. Women liked to feel needed. It wasn't even as if he'd had to fake the emotion just to get her back.

She'd responded to other things as well. There was the sadness and the disappointment he'd been able to muster when he'd revealed he knew all about her youthful misadventures. Those things had been slightly faked, but only slightly, and it had felt very satisfying to be the one claiming the moral high ground for once.

She'd been impressed, too, by the way he'd told his Uncle Charles that there was no way in hell he was going to give up his career and move back to England. Oh, the insults had been flying over the Limoges crystal and the vintage port that night! It had been marvellous. He'd told Charles they could damn well disinherit him for all he cared, and give the rotten title to Claude's oldest, the chinless wonder, Jerry Dempster. (Since the subsidies that came from Jerry's lucrative job in the city kept the Hall from bankruptcy most months of the year, the look of panic in his uncles' eyes at this suggestion had been nothing short of hilarious.)
Clive had even managed to embellish all this with the comment that it was Gladys who had taught him there were more important things to be had from life than money, influence and title. This was completely untrue, of course; he'd worked out that he didn't want to become Lord Dempster by the time he was about nine, and the family coffers were all but bare, so there wasn't any money anyway. The Hall only kept trundling along because of its various tourist attractions, topped up by the largesse of Jerry. Clive had been an entertainments manager once, however, and found it not to his liking.

So that, at least, had been a terrific evening. Good times. Just about the best Clive had enjoyed at Dempster Hall in recent memory. He had impressed Gladys, and yet he had needed to surrender nothing that he wouldn't have turned his back on anyway.

Of course, once Gladys had returned to Exmouth he'd been trapped at the Hall for more than a week, while his uncles and aunt all tried various strategies to convince him to accept his inheritance and 'do his duty'. That had been a lot less fun. Over now, though. Here he was, free of the Dempster clan, a ten minute drive away from the woman he adored: the dark-haired Venus with deep, liquid eyes and soft, feminine curves.

Clive checked his watch; it was still only ten past seven. Twenty bloody minutes to wait. He was never this early: not for anything! What the hell had Gladys turned him into?

He finished his Martini and beckoned to the barman to order another one. He'd taken the best room at this coaching inn for the night, so it wasn't as if he had to worry about driving up to town later on. Of course, if the meal went as he hoped and Gladys remembered how to enjoy his company, perhaps the detrimental effects of alcohol might prompt other concerns...Clive made a mental note for this Martini to be his last, and to go easy on the wine. If he was to be lucky enough to get Gladys into bed tonight, he wanted to ensure that his performance was in no way lacking.

They'd always been good together in bed. That had to count for something, didn't it?

"Clive," a voice said behind him, just as he accepted his drink.

He turned around to see a tall, attractive blonde looking at him with ice in her eyes. Clive smiled widely, overcome for a moment with nostalgia and affection. "Sylvia Garnsey!" he greeted her. "You look utterly fantastic." Then he frowned, remembering where he was. It took him a few moments to join the dots. "Oh. You, er...you're at the resort too?"

"It was me who told Gladys about the job."

Was it indeed? Well, that made Sylvia Garnsey quite the treacherous harpy.

Clive gave a smooth smile and lied through his teeth. "Then I owe you a debt of thanks."

She shot him a dubious look. "Oh yes?"

"I let her down very badly. You gave her a safe place to go. So thank you." He looked around. "Isn't Gladys with you?"

"No. She's coming on the bus. She doesn't know I'm here."

Clive arched an eyebrow. "How very cloak-and-dagger. Well, you obviously have something to say to me, so you may as well have a drink." He beckoned to the barman again.

"I don't want to drink with you, Clive," Sylvia said coldly. "I have higher standards, these days." The barman flushed with embarrassment on Clive's behalf and immediately turned away,
pretending not to have heard. "I just want you to shut up and listen."

Clive picked up his drink and stood up. He indicated to Sylvia that they make their way over to the table set in the furthest corner from the doorway, where they could claim some privacy. He was angry and unsettled at Sylvia's attitude, but he had a role to play: the contrite husband, remorseful after being found out, grateful beyond words at being given another chance. It wasn't a difficult role, since it was also the truth.

Once they'd sat down, Sylvia didn't beat about the bush. "Gladys doesn't love you," she said.

He really resented it when people said that. Love was not something that could be switched on and off. Gladys had loved him once - she'd declared it with passion on any number of occasions - and therefore she loved him still. The love had just been shrouded by her sense of betrayal. This was only a temporary setback. It would shine through again, once the anger had faded; he was convinced.

"What am I supposed to say to that?" he asked.

"Nothing. I told you - shut up and listen. You seduced her at Crimpton, just like you tried to seduce anything that had ovaries. I know what happened with Dawn - remember that." She grimaced. "I know how close you and I came to the odd spot of afternoon delight..."

Ah yes. Lingering looks, flirtatious comments, and didn't he remember an attempt to get Sylvia to match his day off, so they could scoot off somewhere and-

"God!" she exclaimed, dragging him back to the here and now. "Don't look at me like that! Even now? You're seeing your wife in fifteen minutes! Remember her? The woman who left you because you can't keep your hands off the rest of her gender?"

"I didn't say anything!"

"You didn't have to - you just perked right up at the mention of illicit lovemaking." She sighed in disgust. "Have you finished things with the bitch in Perth?"

"Well of course I have," he lied. Because he really didn't need Sylvia to know just how complicated that situation was. It was certainly going to take a major pay-out to keep things quiet.

"And will you spend the rest of your married life being faithful and devoted to Gladys?"

"That is what I intend."

She snorted. "Except it won't happen, will it? Good god, Clive, even you can't be that delusional. Oh, you'll give it a go. Might even manage a spot of monogamy for six months. A year, maybe."

Sylvia sat forward, eyes flashing. Irritatingly, she looked rather gorgeous in her outrage. "But you know as well as I do that your resolve will slip. Eventually. You'll see an opportunity for a bit of variety, and you'll tell yourself - Gladys need never know. You'll be much more careful about that, this time. You'll make up all sorts of excuses. Like how you'll be a better husband to Gladys if you release that tension with the odd one-night stand. You'll probably convince yourself that playing around is something you have to do. For the good of your marriage."

Clive looked at Sylvia for a long moment, silent and rigid, loathing this woman for being so spot-on accurate with her assessment. All the reasoning she described was familiar to him. But the arguments sounded a lot less plausible when she said them.

She wasn't finished. "Gladys organises," Sylvia said. "She takes things that are messy and chaotic


"But her skills in that regard make your life better, don't they?"

Again she'd presented him with a statement he couldn't honestly contend, so he huffed and changed the subject. "Are you finished? Or is there more on my charge-sheet?"

Sylvia sat up straighter. "I saw her last December, when she first told me you were cheating on her. She was miserable, but not because you'd betrayed her. She hated herself for marrying you in the first place."

Clive tut-tutted and glanced across the room to the doorway. He didn't want to listen to any of this. His stomach was starting to ache.

"And then I saw her when she came to the resort," Sylvia went on. "She was miserable then, as well. Not because she missed you. Because she didn't. Because of the guilt." Sylvia shook her head, as if in response to her own thoughts. "Crazy, I know, but Gladys felt guilty. It was such a relief for her to be back in Britain, where she could see her family and her friends. Where she didn't have to spend every day looking at you. Knowing what an absolute shambles she'd made of her life."

"Well, you're writing quite the script here," Clive said. "But you're not Gladys, are you? So it's all nonsense."

"Nonsense?! I've been here with Gladys, the last three months," Sylvia threw back. "I've got eyes, haven't I? Are you trying to tell me that when Gladys feels something, it isn't blatantly obvious?"

He frowned and sipped his Martini, mainly so he didn't have to look at her.

"I've got ears, too," Sylvia said. "We've talked - oh, believe me, Clive, Gladys and I have talked. Intimately." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "She's even told me about Rhodri. Does that convince you?"

Damn it. The bloody woman kept on coming up with arguments he couldn't refute.

Sylvia sat back, satisfied by his silence that she'd convinced him. "The point is, over the last three months I've watched Gladys improve. All that misery has become strength. She's realised she's her own person; she can live her own life."

"God, Sylvia, I am not trying to deny Gladys her sense of self! Try to get it through that head of yours - I do actually love her, you know!"

"Before she saw you at the funeral, she'd decided to divorce you."

He sat back and sighed. "Yes, I know."

"She'd seen a solicitor."

"She told me."

"And once she'd made that decision she was happy. Relieved. She was back on form. The Gladys I remembered from all those years at Maplins."
He briefly clenched his teeth, then he said, "As I recall, you didn't even like her all that much."

"Gladys and I have come a long way in the last two years. And don't change the subject. She'd made up her mind. She was leaving you for good. It made her happy."

"Well she shouldn't have married me in the first place, then, should she?"

"Oh, you're preaching to the converted."

"And what's done is done," he said. "We're married. I screwed up. I'm very, very sorry. But she's agreed to give it another go, because marriage does actually mean something to Gladys--"

"You know what it means? It means years of unhappiness. If you've really won this one, Clive - if you're really going to take her back to Australia and pretend to play happy families - then you should know what you're doing to her. You are ruining her life."

Clive dug his fingernails into his palms as his hands made fists. "I am not a bad man, Sylvia. I will do my best to make her happy."

"You can't. Not any more. Weren't you listening? She. Doesn't. Love. You."

"Then I'll have to love her enough for the both of us!"

Sylvia looked at him a moment, narrow-eyed and considering. Then she nodded. "You're a philandering bastard, Clive, and you're good at lying. To yourself, as much as anyone else. But I do believe you love Gladys."

He let out a breath and tried to relax. "Good. Because it's true."

"The thing with love," Sylvia went on. "The real kind, the honest kind? It makes you care more about someone else than you do about yourself."

He frowned. He didn't like where this was going.

"I'm telling you, Clive, here and now. No uncertain terms." Sylvia stood up from her chair and looked down at him. "If your love for Gladys is real, then there's only one thing you should be looking to do. Much as it might hurt you. And that? That is to set her free."

"I don't think I can do that," he said quietly.

"No? Don't you want to prove you can be the kind of man Gladys thought she'd married? Noble? Selfless? Clive - trust me. This is the last chance you'll ever have to make Gladys happy. Are you going to take it? Let her go. Please. Take your philandering and your lies and your poisonous bloody family far away from her."

The two of them looked at each other. Clive hated the fact that Sylvia's words had the ring of truth. Was he truly such an over-privileged, self-serving bounder?

He wondered what Sylvia - and, indeed, Gladys - would think of him if they knew about Helena.

"Do the right thing, Clive," Sylvia said. "For once in your life."

She turned and walked towards the door, reaching it just as it opened. Gladys stepped through, saw Sylvia and stopped short. The two women exchanged words that Clive couldn't hear. Then Sylvia touched Gladys's arm in a gesture of reassurance or support or something, and moved past her to the door. Gladys's eyes followed her, still confused, before she turned back to the room and
found him where he sat.

Clive stood up and went to meet her.

"What was all that about?" Gladys asked.

"Sylvia wanted to give me a piece of her mind," he said, as mildly as he could.

"Oh." She stood there, quiescent as he leaned in and placed a dry kiss of welcome on her cheek. He took her jacket and hung it near the doorway, then he guided her to the bar and ordered a Babycham. "Oh, no - I'll have a dry sherry, thank you," she told the barman. Then to Clive, "Babycham got a bit sickly, after a while."

The change in routine unsettled him. Perhaps it was true that he didn't know Gladys as well as he thought. All the things he'd relied on, all the constants he'd associated with his wife, were being undermined. And now he examined her face he could see dark circles under her eyes and a hollowness to her cheekbones, as if she'd spent the last two weeks failing to eat or sleep properly.

She'd decided to divorce him. She'd been happy. Then she'd gone to his father's funeral and been persuaded to change her mind, and the happiness had been replaced by this despondency. There was the proof, before his eyes.

"What?" she asked, noting his scrutiny.

The lie sprang to his lips. 'You look beautiful, darling. You're a sight for sore eyes.' He swallowed it down.

Of course, the fact remained that he'd heard only Sylvia's side of this story. Gladys's side mattered more. He ignored the tiny, pressing comment in his head that said Gladys was much more likely to lie about the things that would hurt him. Her version was bound to be kinder than Sylvia's.

Clive drew a deep breath and said, "Gladys, darling, don't take this the wrong way, but you look done in."

~~~

After they'd ordered from the menu, Clive decided on an obvious course of action. If Gladys was feeling blue then it was up to him, as her devoted husband, to remind her of all the good things they had in store. Their marriage might have suffered a hiccup, but it wasn't defined by such an event. Surely.

"It's been quite a mild winter in Melbourne," he told her. "Spring will be in the air when you get back home."

Gladys looked confused for a moment, before nodding. "Yes. I suppose it will," she said. She gave a brief smile that didn't reach her eyes and added, "That's nice."

"I've, er, done my best to keep the garden tidy. I know it's much more your territory than mine, but I took some advice from Ron, next door. Got some mulch down around the more delicate shrubs. Frost protection." Actually he'd paid a local service to do it. But that wasn't the point.

"I haven't thought much about the garden," Gladys admitted.

"Of course. No reason you should." He sat up, inspiration striking. "Remember that first day we were in Rowe Street? Late October, it was, and you took a break from the boxes and the deliveries
and you went out to the garden and saw crocuses pushing up, all around the borders. In October! You came dashing in to tell me about it.” He smiled fondly. "You were like a kid at a birthday party."

"Was I?" Gladys frowned, as if she didn't even recognise the memory.

Damn it, she wasn't making any effort at all. Mind you, was gardening really the best he could come up with, to tempt her with the rosy glow of the future?

"Shirley says she misses you at the cookery club thing," he told her.

"Yes, I know. Shirley and I write."

Of course they did.

"Did, er, the charity say if they'd hold off on replacing you?"

Gladys shrugged. "I put some work in with Richard before I flew back here. Did a lot of organising up front for the events through the winter. He said he'd be able to keep going without me until I knew what I was doing."

"Oh, well, that's excellent. You'll have your old job to walk back into. I know he thinks very highly of you, does, er, does..." What was the name of the man? She'd just bloody said it, too-

"Richard."

"Yes. Yes, he thinks very highly of you."

Gladys cracked a smile that seemed tinged with bitterness. "Don't know what it is about me. Everywhere I go, seems I become indispensable."

"Oh?"

"The resort manager here wanted me to stay on another two months."

Clive felt a crease of panic in his gut. "You said your contract ended mid-September."

"It does." She sighed. "It's all right - I told Brendan I can't manage the extension."

"Oh. Good." He gave a nervous laugh. "Not sure I could stand to go another two months!"

She nodded vaguely and looked around the restaurant, examining the various brass plates and maritime accoutrements mounted on the walls. Clive hid a sigh and tried to calm a wave of anger. He couldn't do this alone! He needed some help from Gladys.

Almost challenging her, he said, "I suppose I should tell you. I had a word with Pemberton. We'll be reorganising my schedule. No more five-night stopovers."

Her look was far from joyful, or even relieved. Her look said, 'I always knew you'd set that up for your own convenience.'

"Oh," she said. "Right ho."

It was like she didn't even care. Maybe he should have told her, 'By the way - those stopovers in Perth? They've got to double in length.' Just to try to get a reaction.
"Gladys," he said, adopting a serious tone, "I know I have a lot to make up for. When you come home, I'm not expecting things to be just as they once were. It'll take time. I realise that."

"I'm sure we'll manage," she said, obviously trying to reassure, even though the words didn't match the look of hopelessness in her eyes. Gladys's biggest failing, Clive decided, was that she was terrible at any kind of pretence.

Just like Sylvia had said.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure."

Fine then. Fine. If he couldn't coax her into a more cheerful frame of mind with the possibilities of the future, perhaps he should revisit the ghosts of the ancient past. It wasn't likely to cheer her up, but if he got anything resembling an emotional reaction, at this point he'd be grateful.

The waiter brought their starters.

At least they didn't have to talk while they ate.

~~~

As he finished his meal, Clive realised he hadn't bothered to taste the trout he'd ordered as his main course. Gladys had only pushed her food around her plate, but Clive didn't want to come across like some kind of mother hen and chastise her for failing to eat. Especially since it had become ever more obvious that he was the cause of this lack of appetite.

It was like she was in possession of her own personal storm cloud: grey, threatening, weighty. The sense of depression was oddly infectious.

He put his knife and fork together and propped his chin on his hands. Mother always used to berate him for elbows-on-table at dinner. Of course, dinner tables at Dempster Hall also regularly included Archbishops, Dukes and Captains of Industry. Apparently they set much greater store by elbows than Clive did.

"There's something I didn't say when we spoke, the other weekend," he told Gladys. This comment was the culmination of ten minutes of planning.

She glanced up, saw he'd finished his meal, gave up the pretence of eating and relinquished her cutlery. "What's that, then?"

"Gladys, I'm so very, very sorry."

She frowned and shook her head, irritated. "You said that."

"I'm not talking about my mistakes. I'm talking about Rhodri."

The frown deepened. She didn't like him saying the name. This realisation cut Clive to the quick.

"It was all a long time ago," she said.

"He was your first love," Clive pointed out.

"I was just a girl."

"Doesn't make what you had with him any less real." He tried for some honesty, some sense of connection. He needed more from this conversation than Gladys had yet offered. "Gladys, I was
only a year older than you were in the war. I know what it was like for our generation. I mean, yes, it was frightening, and hard work, and terribly, terribly uncertain. Early starts, bad food, all the rest of it. But there was this thrilling kind of romance about it too. Just knowing that any given day could well be your last - I don't know about you, Glad, but I rather embraced the immediacy of it all."

She looked distant. "I suppose there was something of that in what I found with Rhodri." Her eyebrows lifted in remembrance. "In fact that was the argument I used when he was on leave. Christmas 1944. When I told him we shouldn't wait any longer." She smiled to herself. Her distant memories were obviously better company than he was.

Clive poured more wine for them. "You were working at this estate in Cardiff, as a Land Girl," he prompted her.

"St. Fagans Castle."

"They must have had all you Land Girls billeted somewhere on the estate, then."

"Converted stables," Gladys said. "Bunk beds, three beds high. Six to a room." She smiled in reminiscence. "Top bunk was cold, because the roof wasn't well insulated. Bottom was cold because of the draught across the floors. Middle was best."

"So where were you able to meet your young man?"

"Well, we couldn't go to his father's shop. His dad was there all the time, see." She looked at Clive. "And at nineteen, on our pay, even if we'd clubbed together we couldn't afford a hotel."

"So?"

She looked curiously at him. "You're really asking me to describe the location where I lost my virginity?"

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

"Do I even want to know yours?" she asked a little sharply, making Clive realise that his own personal tale of allowing Enid the laundry maid, who was an exotic seven years older than he, to take him in hand and then more besides, three days before his sixteenth birthday, was probably not going to match the charm of Gladys's tragic wartime romance.

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "I just thought - I thought, after everything, we ought to try to get to know each other better. That business with the private detective, Andrews, was awful, I know that, but it did prove a point. There's so much we don't know about each other."

Gladys considered this a moment. They both paused while a waiter cleared their plates from the table. When they had their privacy again, she nodded. "All right, fine. There was a little storeroom, in the building in the middle of the nurseries. There were sacks in there. Bark chippings and straw and the like, as well as other supplies. They were comfortable enough to sit on and have a cup of tea during the day." A tiny smile. "And they made a makeshift bed, when I smuggled Rhodri in to the estate."

He smiled too. "The headiness of youthful passion," he mused.

"Of course," she said, "I can't remember the storeroom with much fondness now."

"Oh?"
"That room - it's where I lost the baby," she said. Then she excused herself and walked away from the table, heading for the ladies.

Clive sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Damn," he muttered.

~~~

Gladys had declined dessert when the waiter came by. Clive ordered apple pie, not because he was still hungry but because he thought that Gladys would feel obliged to stay with him while he ate it.

He didn't know what to say to her. How do you move the conversation on from a miscarriage?

Eventually Gladys filled the silence herself.

"I got the letter about Rhodri on February 15th. Day after Valentine's. A Thursday, it was. The girls rallied round, and I tried to keep it together. I wasn't the first Land Girl who'd got a letter like that."

Clive nodded. "It must have still been devastating."

"More so because by then I knew I was pregnant."

Damn it, he hadn't meant to prompt this conversation. Not over dinner. Not in the downstairs restaurant of a coaching inn, with a pleasant double room upstairs and the rest of the night to enjoy.

What could he say? He tried for something neutral. "Had you been to the doctor?"

Gladys looked at him askance. "When you're nineteen and unmarried, you don't go to the doctor with something like that. At least, not in the forties, you didn't. No, I just knew. I was banking on Rhodri getting leave before I started to show. We could get a special licence then."

He gave her a knowing smile. "The war was most certainly the era of the special licence."

She blinked, then looked down at the way her hands were folded tightly on the table. "Yes, I suppose that's true."

It seemed that he had said the wrong thing. God, he really didn't want to pursue this; the grislier aspects to the female reproductive cycle were not an attractive subject for conversation. And yet he'd worked hard to get Gladys talking at all. Maybe he could gloss over the gory details. Maybe she'd respond to compassion in the same way he'd earned hers at the funeral.

So he said, "I'm so sorry you had to go through such a terrible thing, darling."

Gladys looked across the table at him. Her weary eyes were shining with remembered grief, and she looked worn and older than she'd ever looked before. "It started in the middle of that Thursday night. I think I knew what was happening straight away."

"Of course." He busied himself with the wine bottle. Gladys had hardly touched her glass since the last time he'd poured.

"One of the girls had gone out for a cigarette and saw me sneak off. She followed me. Carol Griffiths, her name was. I'm guessing she's the one your uncle's man managed to track down."

"She helped you?" he asked, because he didn't want Gladys's thoughts lingering on the detective who'd invaded her privacy.
"She did. As far as she could." Gladys lifted her hand to her nose and breathed deeply for a moment.

"Don't say any more." 'God,' he thought, 'please don't say any more.' "I didn't mean to cause any upset."

Gladys nodded shortly. "Anyway, we got through the night. But the next day I was still...well, I collapsed. I was taken to the doctor in Pentrebane. Carol went with me."

"At least you got some treatment."

"I got some iron supplements," she said. "And the doctor told me what to expect. But there were complications."

"I see."

Gladys looked at him. "Since Carol already knew what had happened, I told her what the doctor told me. There was a small chance something had been messed up inside me. Enough to make it hard for me to have a baby in the future."

"Yes. Yes, I see."

"But like I told you at the funeral - it wasn't ever a definite. And since that time I've never had chance to put it to the test. Even since we were married. I mean, you and I usually used...well, you know."

"Yes, I know." Not, of course, that disposable condoms were exactly foolproof in such matters, as he now knew to his cost. Clive set the thought aside. "It's all right, Gladys."

"Is it? At the Hall you seemed upset about it."

"Oh. I was, er, I was more concerned that you didn't trust me. That was the issue. Not the children, er, thing."

"Well now you know. I wouldn't have kept this from you. You must realise that. If we'd been trying for a baby with no luck, I'd have told you everything. But you never mentioned children after that first talk we had. And by the time we'd been in Melbourne a year I knew you were..."

She shrugged, and rather euphemistically finished, "...you were interested in other things."

"Do you want children, Gladys?" he asked gently.

She made him wait a long time, then she said, "I'll try to give you your heir, if that's what you want."

In the days to come, Clive would look back and recognise that sentence as one that marked a very specific moment. It was the moment he finally admitted to himself that his wife did not, and would never again, love him.

The waiter brought him a slice of apple pie and a small jug of cream. The smell of fruit and cloves and fresh-baked pastry was unbearable. Clive excused himself to the lavatory, swallowing bile, suspecting that he'd never be able to eat apple pie again.

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Over coffee, Gladys said, "You know my most sordid secret now."
"I don't think it's sordid," he told her. "I think it's tragic."

"So does it work both ways?" she asked. "This idea that we should get to know each other better?"

Oh. Damn. He should have seen that one coming. He tried his smoothest smile. "Of course."

"What do you want to tell me, then?"

"Doesn't seem fair that I get to choose," he said, mainly to delay answering. "You didn't get any choice."

"No, I didn't," she agreed. "Your Uncle Charles stomped all over my privacy. And he doesn't even feel bad about it."

"I'm not him."

"I know."

He could feel her slipping away from him. Feeling desperate, he asked, "Gladys, why are you coming back to me when it's obvious you're unhappy with the idea?"

"I married you. The mistake was mine, not yours. And you told me you need me."

She wouldn't even lie about it. Her answers were just the unvarnished truth. For the first time, Clive considered whether he really wanted to spend the rest of his life with a woman who didn't want to be with him.

The churning emotions inside him were making him less cautious. "Who's Jeffrey Fairbrother?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. She hadn't expected the question. Even being able to wipe the gloomy, dull-eyed expression from her face for an instant felt like a victory.

She bit her lip. Her jaw was trembling. With a start, Clive realised that Gladys was on the verge of breaking down.

Still, she managed to reply, "He was your predecessor at Maplins."

He thought back. He vaguely remembered a reference Gladys had made to the entertainments manager before him. Someone who hadn't been able to keep his hands off her, or something.

Clive experienced a surge of anger as he married this memory with the distress in his wife's eyes. "What did he do to you?" he demanded.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but tears escaped all the same. Gladys lifted her handbag to her lap and fished out a clean handkerchief to attend to this emotional betrayal. Her hands shook. Clive waited for her to gather herself.

When she looked at him, he repeated the question, though in a gentler tone. "Gladys - what did this man Fairbrother do to you?"

"Nothing at all," she told him. She smiled a wistful smile through the tears. "No matter how I begged him with my eyes and my body - nothing at all."

"I don't understand."
"You don't have to. He moved to America before I even met you, and I haven't seen him since."

All well and good, but Gladys had become animated and interested at the mention of this man's name. This seemed notable after a conversation over dinner that had lacked any similar reaction.

"Gladys, I don't know what to say to you," he despaired.

"I know you don't." She sipped at her coffee once she'd tucked her handkerchief up her sleeve. "You told me you hated your father and uncle for employing that detective, but you've happily spent all evening making the most of the secrets the man turned up. And when I offered you the chance to trust me with a secret of your own, you moved the conversation on, nice and smooth." Gladys sighed. "I know you're not like your Uncle Charles, Clive. But you were brought up a Dempster. You can't help yourself. You're always looking for the advantage."

What the hell was it with this evening? It seemed to be filled with women pointing out hard, undeniable truths. He was not happy about it.

"I do love you, you know," Clive said, because in truth it was the only card he had to play.

"I know."

"You really don't love me, do you?"

"I'm sorry. Maybe it'll get better."

"Did you ever love me?"

"I certainly thought I did. Don't ask me any more. Everything's confusing, just now."

There was a ringing in his ears. A lightheadedness suffused him. He heard his own voice saying words that would end everything:

'Gladys - Helena is pregnant. I'm going to be a father after all.'

He stared at Gladys, waiting for her to react. It took him a few seconds to realise that he hadn't spoken the words out loud.

Sylvia had told him he should do the right thing and let Gladys go. But if he did that, he'd lose the only woman he'd genuinely loved in his whole life. He didn't love Helena. How could he commit himself to her, and to the child growing inside her, when he didn't love her?

How could Gladys commit herself to him when she didn't love him? When she broke down at the sound of another man's name?

Clive felt something inside himself shift and turn and settle again, as if his very physical being had undergone some kind of reconfiguration.

Shaken, he gestured to the waiter and asked for the bill. Gladys finished her coffee, unaware that her recreant husband had just experienced the first glimmer of redemption he'd known in his whole sorry, selfish life.

~~~~~~
Dear Mrs. Dempster,

At the instruction of our client, The Hon. Clive Dempster, a hearing has been arranged at Her Majesty's High Court of Justice with Judge Atkin of the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division. The purpose of this hearing is to obtain permission to petition for divorce.

Under current divorce law, as enshrined in the 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act, you may be aware that petitioning for divorce is prohibited within the first three years of a marriage. The law does, however, provide for those circumstances where a delay will cause 'exceptional hardship'. In such circumstances a High Court Judge may rule, within his own absolute discretion, whether a divorce petition may proceed before three years of the marriage have elapsed.

The hearing is scheduled for 3:30pm on Monday the 10th September. As the petitioner, your presence will be required. We recommend you take legal advice on the matter.

If you would please instruct your solicitor to contact our office, we can supply all necessary information.

Yours sincerely,

Bertrand Yeats

My darling Gladys,

Forgive me. Forgive my selfishness. Forgive my weakness.

You will soon receive a letter from my solicitor. I have instructed him to put the wheels in motion, so that I can give you the divorce I know you truly want. I will try to do this with as much speed and painlessness as can be managed.

I will not contest your grounds. You will need to provide proof of my adultery. If you no longer have the postcards Helena admits she sent, I will secure the proof myself on your behalf. Should my solicitor succeed in moving up the timescales for us, I suspect such proof will be needed sooner rather than later.

Gladys, you asked about my secrets when we met for dinner last Friday. Here is the one I know to be the most shaming.

Helena is pregnant with my child.
She wrote that second postcard out of desperation, after recognising what had happened. I learned of her condition two weeks after you left me, when next I had a stopover in Perth. My intention at that time was to end my relationship with her. I did not do so, because of this bombshell.

Up until last Friday, I had it in mind to pay Helena off via the family, so that you would never learn of this development.

In the last few days, however, I have taken a long, hard look at myself. I know you are right in everything you've said about me. I dismissed Helena's condition as her problem, and no responsibility of mine, and I left her alone and frightened in order to come running after you. I freely manipulated your sense of duty and guilt to make you come back to me, even though I was sentencing you to a lifetime of unhappiness.

I have been, rather busily, demonstrating every negative quality you ever noted in me.

I cannot put right the wrongs I have done. I can only try to do better in the future. To this end, Gladys, I offer you a blameless exit from our marriage in the hope that you can find happiness elsewhere.

I know I should have discussed all this with you before starting the ball rolling. I simply didn't know how to. It's been tricky enough getting everything organised without tipping off my family. Fortunately, they believe I flew back to Melbourne yesterday, so I have some time in hand.

I will be staying at the Mews here for the next week or two, at which point I sincerely hope that we will be in possession of a Decree Nisi. I then intend to return to Australia, and to offer what support I may to Helena. I failed in my duty as a husband to you. Perhaps I can make a better show of it for her.

You are the woman who taught me how to love, Gladys. For that I will always be grateful.

I shall, I hope, see you in court.

Clive

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Telegram

To: Ted Bovis
Flat 2, 36 Hardy Rd., Doncaster

From: Clive Dempster
Grosvenor Street Post Office, London W1

Tuesday 4th September 1962

PHONE ME ON MAYFAIR 2003 ASAP. GLADYS’S FUTURE HAPPINESS AT STAKE. CAN WE GET HOLD OF REV. THORNTON FROM BUXTED MAGNA?

CLIVE

~~~

Frank's Coffee House, Nr. Exeter Cathedral
7th September 1962

Sylvia checked her watch for the fifth time. It was just before four o'clock. She stirred the dregs of her cup of coffee and wondered whether she could stomach another one.

She couldn’t. In fact she wasn’t sure there was any room in her for more coffee. This suggested an obvious way of wasting five further minutes.

By the time Sylvia returned to her table, having availed herself of the café’s facilities, her empty cup had been cleared away. She thanked the proprietor of the coffee shop, who waved a congenial goodbye from a cloud of steam behind the counter, and she left the building to stand for a moment in the late summer sunshine, just below the impressive edifice of Exeter Cathedral.

She and Gladys had agreed to meet here once Gladys had kept her appointment with Mr. Furness. Gladys had suggested any time after half past three, which would have given her an hour with the solicitor. It seemed that there had been more than an hour’s worth of divorce shenanigans to talk about.

Sylvia wandered across the road and took the time to examine the gardens surrounding the cathedral. The place wasn’t as busy as it might have been, since the schools were back this week. It was nice to see the greenery without having to navigate racing children waving ice creams. She kept an eye on the coffee shop, checking to see when Gladys might arrive.

It had been an odd week. Sylvia wasn’t sure she trusted the reality of what was happening any more than Gladys did. It had all been such a swift and unexpected turnaround. Still, Sylvia supposed that Clive had a track record when it came to emotional U-turns. He’d spent most of the summer of 1960 trying to extricate himself from Gladys’s passionate embrace, only to decide that her embrace was exactly where he wanted to be, the moment he’d shaken her off. Perhaps he was one of those people who never really knew what they wanted. Perhaps that was why he tried to have everything at once: he was still working out the bits that were important.

Still, if there was nothing else to be said for this whole Gladys-and-Clive misadventure, at least it had allowed Jeffrey Fairbrother back into the picture. Yes, and there was another man who was taking an absurdly long time to work out what he wanted.

Perhaps it was a gender thing: a malady affecting those of the male persuasion. Mind you, Sylvia wasn’t immune. She had, after all, been quite ready to seduce Jeff, and Clive. If Brendan Fuller at Devon Clifftops were to give her the time of day then she probably wouldn’t say no, either. At thirty-one years of age, however, it was becoming clear to her that developing a crush on the boss was a bad way of managing your love life.

Maybe when she got back to Littlehampton later this month she should stop teasing and then turning down the nice-looking bookish chap who lived across the hall from her sister’s flat...

A familiar beige raincoat bustled down the pavement from the direction of Exe Street, and Sylvia put her thoughts to one side. She hurried back across the road and met Gladys outside the coffee shop. Gladys’s face was as worn and wearied as it had been for over two weeks now. But there was a sparkle in her eyes that told Sylvia there was life in the Welsh dragon yet.

"How did it go?” Sylvia demanded.

"Mr. Furness thinks they can pull it off,” Gladys said. Which was a rather swift way of
summarising a meeting with your solicitor that had lasted over an hour and a half, but it was the only information Sylvia needed.

"So. London on Monday."

"Mr. Furness will collect me at nine o'clock and drive me himself."

"Nervous?"

"Terrified," Gladys admitted.

Sylvia nodded at the café. "Want a cup of tea?"

"No. I had some at the office. I just want to get back, now."

"Station, then."

They turned to walk in the direction of Exeter Central, where they could pick up the branch line to Exmouth.

"Any advice on Jeff?" Sylvia asked.

"Well, I wouldn't put him in front of a microphone."

She arched her brows in surprise. "Gladys!"

"Hmm?"

"You just made a joke!"

"Sorry."

"You must be feeling better." Sylvia nudged Gladys's shoulder as they walked. "I meant - as well you know - did Mr. Furness give you any advice on what to do about Jeff?"

"He doesn't see a problem. If Clive's family end up wading in, trying to mess things up, there's not much they can say. Even if they start throwing Jeffrey's name around."

"Oh. Good."

"Hard to make a case for an affair when Jeffrey and I haven't spent a single day on the same continent in over two years."

"That would make it tricky," Sylvia agreed. "And what does Mr. Furness say about contacting Jeff?"

"It was tactfully suggested that I might want to wait until we know whether this 'exceptional circumstances' thing will go through. For now, the fewer entanglements, the better."

"You and Jeff have become rather tangled," Sylvia said, hiding a smirk. "So when you're free to write to him again, what are you going to say?"

"I don't know. I can't think that far ahead." Gladys gave a smile. "I do know our last conversation will be a hard act to follow. Talking to him again might be an anticlimax."

"Oh, you don't believe that for a minute."
"Well, I was pretty adamant that he didn't tell me how he felt. At the time I just didn't want to know what I was turning my back on."

"Right. So he didn't say the words. And therefore it was all very ambiguous and unclear, was it?"

Gladys shot Sylvia a look. "I'm beginning to think your interest in my personal life is unnatural, Sylvia."

"Oh, it is. Completely. This is what happens when you don't have a personal life of your own."

Gladys took Sylvia's arm as they neared the doors to the station, since the paved area in front of the building was crowded. "Thing is," she said, "by the time I can contact Jeffrey again, a month will have gone by since I spoke to him. Anything could have happened."

"Anything?"

"Well - you know. If he knew I wasn't...I mean, if he'd been holding back on other options, waiting for me to-" Gladys stopped short. "Maybe there's someone else. I don't know."

"This is the same Jeffrey Fairbrother we're talking about, is it?" Sylvia asked. "Mr. Thinks-everything-through-from-seventeen-angles?"

"We need to choose him a better nickname," Gladys deadpanned.

"Give Jeff a month," Sylvia declared, "and he might just decide whether to wear the striped tie or the plain."

"Oh go on."

"A month is definitely not enough time for him to get something going with a new woman. Not after his Welsh passion-pot left him brokenhearted."

"Sylvia Garnsey, it is just as well I am no longer your manager!"

Sylvia grinned. "Couldn't agree more." She looked at Gladys. "If you were, you probably wouldn't be my friend. And I like you as my friend."

Gladys tried to smile, but there was a tremble to her lips and she looked away. She clutched Sylvia's arm more tightly, though, as the two of them found their way to the Exmouth train.

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Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

September 11th 1962

Dear Nerys,

Sorry I didn't manage to telephone until so late last night. You sounded like you were just about dropping off while I was talking! I'd have waited until this evening, except I know Tuesdays are busy with Rhyddyd's choir practice, and I did promise to phone as soon as I got back. I didn't want you worrying.

Here's what happened, anyway, in 'glorious Technicolor' like you asked for.
Mr. Furness and I got up to London in the early afternoon, after a pleasant drive in his motor car. We chatted a bit on the way, which was nice. He always seems to find subjects we can talk about. I think it's one of the things that makes him a good solicitor - he makes you trust him.

Mr. Furness parked at one of the posh hotels in the centre of London, where we had a late lunch and finally talked about what to expect when we got to the court. He'd been holding off on that subject all through the journey. Didn't want me fretting, I suppose.

Then we walked to the Strand, glad to stretch our legs, ready for the hearing. Clive and his solicitor were waiting for us outside the Royal Courts of Justice. Clive looked haggard. (Have you been busy with that cheese-grater?) We all shook hands, even my husband and I, very civilised, very absurd. Very British, I suppose.

Then we went up some steps into the foyer of the building. This room is terrifying, Nerys. Magnificent, but terrifying. You have to walk across a mosaic on the floor to get anywhere. I had to tiptoe - seemed rude to do anything else. We were directed to a court, though it turned out to be little more than a small room with a desk and chairs for the judge and clerk and the woman with the machine that writes it all down, and then tables and chairs for each of the parties. I suppose I shouldn't have expected a press gallery and wood panelling and burgundy upholstery, and raised podiums like you see in the films - not for a tiny hearing like ours - but it was still sort of a let down.

We got started right on the dot. Most of the talking was done by the solicitors - we weren't even expected to have barristers with those funny wigs and gowns. Clive could hardly meet my eyes. I wish I knew what had happened to make him change his mind. (When I asked Sylvia what she'd said to him at the restaurant, she said, "The god's honest truth, sweetie." I'm glad she knows what that is, because I'm not so sure I do after the last few months.)

I only had to confirm my name and current address, and then agree that I supported Clive's appeal. Other than that, Mr. Furness answered all the questions, and he handled the awkward bit of showing the judge the postcard from Clive's fancy-woman and then witnessing the 'proof of marital offence' that Clive himself had provided. We'd been going along for about forty minutes, and it seemed like everything had more or less been presented. The judge was due to go off to review the paperwork with his legal clerk, when something a bit dramatic happened.

The door to the room was flung open, and Clive's Uncle Charles stormed in. He was purple in the face, and started waving a piece of paper around, shouting something about 'diminished responsibility' and 'unsound mind'. I thought he was talking about me for a moment. God knows, Nerys, there've been times in the last few months when I've wondered whether my mind was entirely sound! But no, it was Clive who was supposed to have gone doolally.

And do you know, with his uncle trying to disrupt our quiet little marital tragedy, all of a sudden Clive found some backbone. He stood up and said that his family had tried this before. (Apparently they'd done their best to stop our wedding with the same tactic.)

The judge took charge then. He rebuked Sir Charles for interrupting Her Majesty's justice. Clive's uncle got even more livid at this, and shouted out something rude about Clive going out of his way to 'pick the right judge'. (I found out later what he meant by that - he meant Clive had made sure to avoid any of the three High Court Judges that the Dempsters keep in their pocket.) Clive, wisely, kept quiet and let his uncle dig his own grave.

The judge read out Sir Charles's letter, which was signed by a Rodney Fareham, who turned out to be a Dempster cousin and a psychiatrist to boot. The letter claimed that Clive was suffering with a combination of mental ailments, including combat stress reaction following his experiences as a
pilot in the war, a nervous breakdown following his wife's 'appalling lies, behaviour and subsequent desertion' and, presumably in case that wasn't enough to convince the judge, a 'congenital proclivity towards attacks of panic and bouts of psychosis'. The letter was dated the weekend of Clive's father's funeral.

The judge asked Clive when he'd seen this psychiatrist. Clive said he hadn't seen 'Cousin Rodney' in more than five years, and certainly not at the funeral, since apparently the man doesn't like crowds. Or the open air. Or, in fact, leaving the house. Clive then produced another letter, old and all crumpled up, and laid that in front of the judge. He told the judge that this was the letter his family had used to try to stop our wedding, back in 1960.

The judge compared the two letters, which were almost identical. He asked Sir Charles why, if the family were so concerned for Clive's mental state, did the diagnosis only crop up at 'such convenient moments?' Sir Charles stuttered a bit and then accused Clive of faking the earlier letter to make the current one look dodgy. Clive offered the judge a signed letter from the vicar at Buxted Magna, confirming the scene that Clive's family had made at (as it turns out) the wrong wedding in 1960. Apparently Sir Charles had thrown the first letter down in disgust when he'd realised they'd missed their chance to scupper our wedding. The vicar had picked it up and contacted Clive the next day.

Everything got sorted out quickly after that. The judge told Sir Charles that one of two things was about to happen. Either Sir Charles was going to withdraw his accusation, apologise for disturbing the proceedings and leave. Or the judge was going to rule that Sir Charles Dempster was in 'contempt of court' and as such would face either jail or a fine, and in addition, this ruling would require a thorough investigation of the two letters. Should it be discovered that these letters had been written without due process, Sir Charles could then be charged with 'Fraud by False Representation' and the criminal courts would deal with him.

Sir Charles went even more purple. Then he went to get his letter back from the judge. Judge Atkin placed a hand on the paper and looked steadily at Clive's uncle, who coughed and stuttered and then, begrudgingly, stated that he had been mistaken and he was very sorry to have wasted the court's time. The judge dismissed him from the room without giving him his letter back. Clive sat down and breathed quite hard. I realised I was holding very tightly to Mr. Furness's hand, and let him go with an apology.

The hearing finished. The judge passed the slanderous letters to Clive, and his solicitor tucked them away. Then the judge withdrew to consider the evidence. Mr. Furness and I left the building and found refreshment at a small tea-shop a few minutes down the Strand.

I told Mr. Furness I had no idea why Clive's family were upset about the hearing. They've wanted me out of his life since the moment they first knew we were involved, so you'd think they'd be pleased a divorce is on the cards. Mr. Furness told me that Clive's solicitor had, 'off the record', warned him of the possibility of a disruption. It seems that Clive's family don't object to the divorce so much as the way Clive's admitting it's his fault. It's to do with the way the settlement gets worked out, as much as anything else.

We all met back at the courts at five o'clock to learn whether a decision could be made on the day, or whether the judge needed to give the matter more consideration. Judge Atkin returned and told us he was happy that the case had been made for 'exceptional hardship' - though it's unusual that the hardship isn't going to be suffered by the petitioner. Of course in our circumstances it's Helena and her unborn child who'll suffer with any delay to the divorce. But it was enough to convince the judge. He said some judgy things to Clive about how his behaviour had 'denigrated the institution of marriage' and how he hoped sincerely that Clive would refrain from repeating such
mistakes in the future. He also made a couple of side comments about how Clive would do very well to keep as far away from his influential family as he can, and Australia seemed like a splendid idea.

And that was that. We left the Royal Courts at about twenty past five. Clive took my hand and told me he was sorry for the trouble his family had caused, and even sorrier for everything else. I realised there was a good chance I'd never see him again - we're neither of us required to appear at the court for the divorce hearing proper, given that Clive isn't contesting anything.

Honestly, Nerys, it was a strange moment. For months, now, I haven't known how to feel about Clive. I've been angry and disappointed, and even disgusted by him. And at the same time I've felt awful about my own mistakes, so there's been a part of me that felt quite sorry for him. But as I stood with him on the Strand, basically saying goodbye, Clive became a whole new person to me. Not my cheating husband. Not the chancer he's always been, swift to grab what he can for himself, never mind the consequences. He was just a man I knew, someone I was fond of in spite of myself.

I told him not to mess things up with Helena, and he said he'd do his best, and I said he'd have to do better than that this time round. But I was smiling, and he smiled too, and he put his arms around me and we embraced, right there on the pavement.

He's got lots of faults, Nerys - you don't need to start reminding me. But when you think about the toxic people he grew up with, and everything he learned from them about life - well, it seems to me that he actually turned out quite well.

So here's how the next week or two should go.

Mr. Furness is seeing me on Friday, so we can review the paperwork he's putting together in talks with Clive's solicitor. Clive will be doing the same up in London. Any queries or disagreements will be handled, hopefully quickly, next week. As soon as we have papers both of us are willing to sign up to, the date for the court hearing will be set. Assuming no other spanners-in-the-works, that should get us a Decree Nisi.

Once that's done, there's a three month wait before we can swap the Decree Nisi for a Decree Absolute. At that point I won't be married any more.

Well then. That was my Monday. How was yours?

love to all,
Gladys

~~~~~~
Dear Jeffrey,

Surprise.

I have here, on my little table in my caravan, a document known as a Decree Nisi. That's probably the only time you'll ever hear me use Latin.

Suffice to say, things have changed in the last few weeks. I'd tell you how it all happened, but I'm so fed up with the whole thing, I can't find the energy.

I wouldn't blame you if you're thinking, "Please, no, not again!" Maybe you've decided, since we spoke on the telephone, that ending our contact was a blessing in disguise. I didn't realise, back when we first exchanged letters, how much of a palaver it would become.

Anyway, it's up to you where we go from here. I'm stronger, though, than I was before. If you need to tell me in your own nice, polite way that I'm far more trouble than I'm worth, then I'll take it on the chin.

Still - in case you're willing to give the letter-writing another go:

About a month ago, before everything turned into such a mess, I'd made up my mind about some things. One of them was this - see, I knew there were things I wanted to tell you, about me and my life and so on. I'd like to do that now, seeing as I've got time on my hands. Three months of it, since that's how long I have to wait before my proper divorce comes through. What do you think? Are you willing to play?

I'll start by telling you something you probably don't know about me.

I can drive a tractor.

Well, then, I'll leave it up to you to see how, and if, this conversation progresses.

Gladys

~~~

Dear Gladys,

Indeed, yes, that came as a surprise! When I saw an envelope addressed in your familiar hand with my morning mail, I did wonder for a moment whether I was dreaming.
Oh, Gladys. "A blessing in disguise"? "More trouble than you're worth"? Are you being coy, inviting compliments? Or have you been so bruised by the trials of recent months that you genuinely believe I am ready to throw our friendship aside and search for calmer climes?

Here, then, is my answer. No, I do not want to discard our correspondence and every good feeling it has given me. I want, rather, to embrace that correspondence. And your notion of sharing thoughts, experiences, even perhaps secrets, is a notion I support. It suggests you feel as I do: that it is time we learned more about each other than those things we gleaned from our summer in Crimpton-on-Sea, and from half a dozen letters.

I hope this leaves you reassured, whatever the reason for your uncertainty.

A Decree Nisi. It feels odd to offer congratulations, and odder still to consider commiserations. At least I can claim to understand the ambivalence you probably feel. So - tell me how it happened in your own time. Please, for now, just assure me that you are all right. I know the rigmarole is an exhausting one, and you are not the only person in this correspondence who is prone to anxiousness.

Now then, to this game you suggest.

Since I am unsure of how a career path can progress from farmhand to sports organiser, you will need to explain how it was you learned to drive a tractor. Consider me intrigued.

And since I hope that this dialogue is a two-way street, here is an offering of my own.

I am expert with needle and thread, to the extent that the quality of my invisible mending has impressed a Savile Row tailor. (It was one of the Nortons, if this matters.)

With my regards,
Jeffrey

~~~

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

October 7th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Thank you for your reassurances, and for realising I needed to hear them. I meant it when I said I'm stronger than I was before, but that doesn't mean I haven't been battered about by events.

I promise you, Jeffrey - I am all right. All is well. I'm staying on at the resort until late November, weather permitting, since there's work here for me to do and it's as well for me to keep busy. Sylvia left for Littlehampton a week ago, which has left me feeling a bit lonely. But there are other staff members still here, and I've had nothing but support from everyone.

Well, now, to answer your question. In March 1941 I was fifteen years old and fed up with my job at a hotel in Pontypridd. I wanted to do something useful for the war effort. I was too young for the Land Army, so I asked a friend of my father's who owned a farm near Maerdy, and who was short-handed because of conscription, if he'd give me the chance to get some experience. I worked on that farm for 14 months before I enlisted as a Land Girl, and that's where I learned to drive a tractor.
As for our conversation - of course it works both ways! I'm relieved you want to share your history too. These conversations stutter to a stop when they're one-sided.

So you can sew, can you? However did a man of your background discover a talent like that? I thought you had people for that kind of thing. Tell me more.

Here's another one from me.

When I was four years old I got whooping cough. I was very sick. It lasted three months. It was during this illness that I managed to break a bone in my body for the first (and, so far, only) time. I coughed so hard I cracked a rib! Never do things by halves, me.

Until next time,
Gladys

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

14th October 1962

Dear Gladys,

Your letters are raising more questions than they provide answers! With every detail you describe, I need to know more. You say you were a Land Girl. Now I want to know where you were posted, and what you did, and how those experiences shaped your youthful self. (Of course I'm willing to offer, in response, a précis of my own wartime experiences, if they are of interest.)

I cannot match your three-month bout of whooping cough, nor its accompanying cracked rib. My worst childhood illness was a dose of scarlet fever which struck me at the age of six, and which was complicated by the unfortunate discovery that I am allergic to penicillin. So, where you do not do things by halves, I can state, for myself, that if there is a way to be awkward then I shall probably find it.

You asked about my needlework. I taught myself to sew at boarding school, where I was sent from the age of seven. When you are a skinny, bookish boy with a teddy bear named Molly, you find yourself prone to the rough-and-tumble meted out by less skinny, less bookish boys with bears named Gruff and Fang.

These skirmishes meant, of course, that my clothing regularly required attention - so often, in fact, that I became embarrassed to take every new tear and lost button and unstitched hem to Matron. I had watched her work a few times. So I used my allowance to purchase needle and thread rather than toys and sweets, and I learned to fend for myself.

I owe you another secret before I close. This one more resembles a confession, I think.

Edward Furness is the brother-in-law of my oldest friend from Cambridge. Spike Dixon wrote to me when it became clear this private detective business was becoming a nuisance, and between us we arranged for Edward to stand ready to offer help.

If you are angry at my subterfuge, I am sorry. I should point out - Edward would not have treated you very much differently if you had telephoned him out of the blue, a perfect stranger, and asked for an initial meeting with a view to engaging his services. I have not been required to foot any
bills on your behalf.

It is time I sign off. I trust the autumn weather is treating your caravan with respect, and your work at the resort is keeping you happily occupied.

Fond regards,
Jeffrey

~~~

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

October 20th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

So many questions! If I answer them all at once, these letters of ours will start to need an aeroplane all of their own! I'll get on to my Land Girl career in a while, since I've been working up to that. Some of the really important things that happened to me are part and parcel of that time in my life.

So you tell me that Edward Furness is not a friend of Spike's, after all? Gracious me, and I was so completely fooled. It never occurred to me that Spike doesn't actually move in the same circles as a man who has a business account and a parking space at the Dorchester Hotel.

Really, Jeffrey. Credit me with some basic common sense!

Mr. Furness was good enough to confess all when we had dinner together after my one and only appearance at the Royal Courts of Justice. I surprised the poor man into his confession when I asked him if Jeffrey Fairbrother would be picking up the bill for dinner as well. Mr. Furness is a very nice man, and he's been a godsend these last few weeks. And of course I understand why you couldn't arrange his help in a less hush-hush kind of way, so we'll say no more about it.

So your teddy-bear was called Molly. I thought you said they didn't have girls at your boarding school. How did you smuggle her in - dress her in trousers and a false moustache?

Sewing skills are useful skills to have, though, and they'd have come in handy with Dewi. That was my bear's name. I inherited him from my half-brother Gareth when I was born, and I passed him on to my little sister Nerys when I was six. Dewi has seen some service in our family, and as such has gone through three new sets of eyes and an impressive amount of replacement stuffing. (We're fortunate, in that my Aunt Bethan owns a haberdashery!)

Well then, and on to St. Fagans Castle and estate, which is near Cardiff, and the place I was billeted as a Land Girl from the summer of 1942 through to the end of the war. There's lots to tell, so I'll give it you in stages. It'll give me chance to work up to some of the harder stories.

There were two teams of twelve of us working that estate. In rotating shifts, we'd work the nurseries and the outlying farms (where my tractor experience came in handy - I was famous for the neatness of my plough-lines). We produced a lot of food. It might not seem like much, not glamorous or dangerous or anything, but I was proud of what we achieved.

While I was at St. Fagans I met a young man named Rhodri Llewellyn. Early 1943 it was, and I was 17 years old. He was the son of the baker in Pentrebane, a small hamlet on the western outskirts of Cardiff that has since been swallowed up by the city. He used to bring the bread
deliveries for the whole of the estate on a rickety old bicycle with this funny bodged-up trailer he'd made from an old bathchair.

Rhodri was so handsome: dark hair, good shoulders, soft brown eyes. I was smitten, and - shamelessly - made sure I was always on hand to take receipt of the deliveries. On my eighteenth birthday, Rhodri delivered not only the bread but also a gift-wrapped box for me. He'd found out my birthday from one of the other girls. I still remember what that gift was: Bronnley's bath soap, with the scent of verbena. Nice soap was a rare commodity in those days, of course. Even better than the gift, though, was the way Rhodri stumbled through an invitation to go to the pictures with him the following Saturday afternoon. We went to see "The More the Merrier" and Rhodri honestly didn't know where to look when Joel McCrea and Jean Arthur finally had their passionate clinch.

It took him six weeks until he plucked up the courage to kiss me. But it was worth waiting for.

Rhodri was working with his father in the bakery all this time, and very cross about it too, he was. He wanted to enlist, but as his father's apprentice he had a reserved occupation, so they turned him down. Rhodri used to get so paranoid, thinking people would see him about, out of uniform, and assume he was a conchie. He volunteered with the Home Guard, though, and he'd even helped man the anti-aircraft guns at Cardiff Bay.

It all changed just before my nineteenth birthday, in 1944. Some high-up from the War Office came to the area to witness an exercise that various units of the Home Guard were doing, and while he was there Rhodri pleaded his case. He pointed out that he wasn't really a baker, and it wasn't as if bread wouldn't be made if he enlisted because his dad was still there, so couldn't he serve his country better than he was? This officer decided that Rhodri's situation was worth looking into, and his case went before a tribunal.

Two months later, Ordinary Seaman Llewellyn began his first tour with the Royal Navy on H.M.S. Milne, escorting essential supplies to the Soviet Union on the Arctic Convoys.

Oh. I should probably mention that in June 1944, before Rhodri left for his training, he proposed to me and I accepted.

I think that's enough for now, isn't it? I'll close, and send this to you with fond regards,

Gladys

P.S. I also send my warmest wishes for a very happy birthday, Jeffrey, though they'll probably arrive two days late. I hope you had a lovely day.

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

27th October 1962

Dear Gladys,

This has been a frightening week. I have no knowledge of how the news bulletins in Britain have reported the developments here in America, so I'll explain in case you're unaware. On Monday there was a broadcast from President Kennedy, informing us that hostilities between the U.S. and the Soviet Union have escalated, resulting in Soviet nuclear missiles being installed in Cuba.
It's almost as if the country has frozen. I think this is the first time many Americans have felt as if their location in the world isn't actually untouchable. I've been feeling the fear myself, mainly because I've followed the developing situation all through the year, and I can see how readily the stand-off might collapse into war. If one of those missiles is launched, I fear for the world entire.

I must admit that all through this week I have wanted to hear your voice. On several occasions I've reached for the telephone and then forced myself to turn away. In the end I decided it was best not to cause you undue worry, since the missile crisis might have passed you by.

So I turn to your letter now, glad to read your words and distract myself from the political posturing on the world's stage.

I'm glad to know you saw through my subterfuge with Edward Furness. I was very uneasy with the deceit. That he has been of help and support in recent months is marvellous news. I hope, however, that you will not keep me waiting too long before you explain this comment about an appearance at the Royal Courts of Justice!

You have caught me out with regard to my boarding school's rules on female residents. Can you believe that the issue of my bear's gender did not even come up? You'd think there'd have been checks of some kind.

You have siblings, I note. I'm intrigued to learn more. Do you share with your half-brother a mother or father? Are you and your younger sister alike? I sometimes wonder, Gladys, whether I'd have ended up a more well-rounded human being, less prone to the maladjustments so obvious in my character, if I'd had a brother or sister beside me as I grew up. I have observed that they seem to be a steadying influence, and provide much-needed perspective.

And so I come to the first installment of your wartime story. You need not emphasise the importance of the Women's Land Army during the war. I am well aware of the vital role you and your colleagues played.

I would tell you how eager I am to learn more of your time at St. Fagans Castle, and of your youthful romance with Mr. Llewellyn, but of course - given the context of this story, not to mention the grammatical tense you employ when speaking of him - I fear the worst. May I also state, here and now, that I consider myself privileged indeed that you trust me with this tale.

I will wait until your story is complete before I offer my own. Your history deserves my full focus.

It is late on Saturday evening, and the house feels very still. I shall make myself some cocoa and retire, I think, in the hope that tomorrow might be the day this missile crisis is resolved.

Yours,
Jeffrey

P.S. It is now Sunday, and I am delighted to say that my hopes have been rewarded! An agreement has been reached between President Kennedy and Khrushchev which will see the dismantling of the missiles in Cuba.

I forgot to say thank you for the birthday wishes, so I do so now. A few colleagues from the Senior Common Room took me out for a drink and then a meal, and a good time was had by all. Forty-one looks remarkably similar to forty, to be honest, but I am not a man to ever turn down the opportunity for a good meal in convivial company!

J
Dear Jeffrey,

Well, for two people who are prone to feeling anxious, aren't we the pair of stiff-upper-lips? I spent the whole of last week in a frenzy of terror for your safety, thanks to the news reports on the wireless. (Oddly enough, the B.B.C. considers the threat of imminent nuclear devastation worth including on its bulletins.)

I, too, reached over and over for the telephone, and again and again I refused to place the call. I was afraid that if I heard your voice I'd say everything all at once, and it'd be too much.

I wish I'd telephoned, now. I don't like thinking of you alone in your house in the quiet of the evening, only your worst fears and imaginings to keep you company. No - I don't like that at all.

Now then. I was at the Royal Courts of Justice because you're not allowed a divorce within three years of marrying, other than in special circumstances. There was a hearing. Clive presented a good reason for speeding things up. The judge was convinced, and we were allowed to proceed. Hence the Decree Nisi.

You asked about my family. My half-brother shares a mother with Nerys and myself. His dad died in the trenches of Amiens when Gareth was too young to remember him. Mam married again in 1922. My father had been in the trenches as well, and suffered badly with shell shock. Still, he was a good man, not a coward at all, and he was a loving father to Gareth as well as to his own two girls. We lost him in '52, and I miss him still.

Nerys and I are both quite unalike, and yet quite the same. This will only make sense to people who have grown up with brothers and sisters, so don't feel you need to understand! My relationship with Nerys was tricky for a long time, but of late we've grown closer. She has a family of her own, so 'Aunty Gladys' has a nephew and a niece to make much of whenever I get back to Pontypridd.

Now, are you sitting comfortably?

Rhodri's first leave from the Navy came during the run-up to Christmas 1944. I was mad to see him, by that time. We'd written as often as we could, of course, but there were long gaps while he was at sea.

He'd gone off to train and then serve with a song in his heart. He was the same age as me - nineteen - and all swept up by the idea of this grand adventure. By the time he came home in December that year he'd had some - but not all - of the romance knocked out of him. Fortunately, by that time the Arctic Convoys weren't under threat from German U-boats and destroyers as much as they'd been a year or two earlier. From a frightened girl's point of view, there were worse places for her young man to be posted.

Jeffrey, I'm about to make you blush, and I give you fair warning.

During the week Rhodri and I had together, before he had to return to Scotland and Loch Ewe for his next tour, he and I had a conversation. We were, of course, already engaged to be married, and since the war news was starting to look positive we'd spoken about marrying in May the next year, around the time of my 20th birthday.
The thing is, Jeffrey, I didn't want to wait for certain married privileges. I loved and wanted Rhodri, and he loved and wanted me. Either of us could have died the very next day, in any of the ways the war was constantly stealing lives. So it seemed wrong to me that we should fail to take the opportunity to celebrate our love in the most basic way there is.

It took me three days of solid argument before Rhodri agreed. I snuck out of my bunk-room on the night we planned to meet, and met Rhodri by the northeast edge of the estate. There was snow on the ground, but we avoided the pathways because of the guards who kept the estate secure. (People sometimes tried to sneak in and steal the produce.)

I took Rhodri to the barn we called 'The Big Potting Shed', right in the middle of the nurseries. Inside the barn, at one end, was a storeroom, used during the day for a break and a cup of tea. We made a makeshift bed with sheets I'd hidden in there earlier. And secure in our little nest, Rhodri and I made love for a few stolen hours.

We liked it so much we did it again the next night, and again the night after.

Then Rhodri had to go back to his ship, and I had to carry on my work, and all there was left was to hope, hope, hope he'd be home again soon.

I'll close for now, because I'm getting to the tricky bit and I want to give some thought to how I write it for you. I hope this story isn't embarrassing you, Jeffrey. I know it's intimate, and I remember that your inhibitions can be powerful things. If at any point you need me to stop, just say so. I don't want to tell you these things if you don't want to hear them.

Affectionately,
Gladys

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

9th November 1962

Dear Gladys,

Don't even think about cutting short your story - I am hanging on every word! And fear not for my inhibitions. While I suffer with them still - for they are a part of who I am, and I cannot change that - I find them easier to control when the medium is the written word. (You cannot have failed to notice, over the course of this year, how much easier I find it to express myself this way.)

Please don't concern yourself over my well-being during the week of the missile crisis. I was not quite so alone and friendless as the picture I have inadvertently painted. A good friend of mine - a fellow academic - moved from Madison to Philadelphia a few weeks ago, and we exchanged several lengthy telephone calls into the evenings while the crisis was ongoing, thereby managing to bolster each other's courage.

I'd forgotten about that quirk of our divorce law. Three years seems such an arbitrary timescale to place on the petitioning of divorce. Is a spouse who is treated badly during that first three years simply supposed to live with such treatment? In any case, forgive the way I strayed into this subject. I didn't mean to force difficult recent memories to surface.

Thank you for providing some background on your family. It occurred to me, as I read your letter,
that I had never asked such questions of you while we were at Crimpton. This seems, now, an
oversight on my part. You often expressed interest for my domestic and family life, my
professional background, even my early aspirations, and yet I never made similar enquiries. How
standoffish I must have seemed to you! How...do you know, I seem to recall you putting it very
aptly yourself. How "prickly." Gladys - I am less prickly now, I hope!

Enough of my musings. Again I hesitate to interrupt further the flow of your story, so I shall offer
no secrets of my own in this letter. You should know, however, that I have been writing my own
war-years story, which culminates in a tragedy I have deliberately refused to think about for most
of the intervening years. When your tale is complete, I shall share mine with you.

You mentioned when first you wrote that you were staying on at the resort until later this month.
Since the end of November will be fast approaching by the time I next write to you, please do be
sure to include any change of address with your reply.

Yours in anticipation,
Jeffrey

~~~

Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort
Exmouth

November 15th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Yes, you seem a lot less prickly than you used to be. Positively silky, on occasion. Like that
lovely dressing gown you had at Crimpton.

Before I return to my story, I'll do the practical things. I leave Devon a week Friday, the 23rd. I'll
be moving back to Pontypridd, to the place I always used to live between Maplins seasons - my
Aunt Bethan's flat, over her little haberdasher's shop. I'll pop all the details down at the bottom of
the letter.

It'll be funny, going back there. I remember telling my family in letters I sent from Melbourne that
having my own bungalow out there felt like I'd finally grown up! I'd never lived in my own place
before. It was always either Mam's house, Aunty Bethan's flat, or the accommodation my job
provided. And yet here I am, seeing out November in a caravan that gets more creaky and rattly
with every day that goes by - and do you know what, Jeffrey? I am grateful beyond words that I
won't have to see that Melbourne bungalow ever again!

When I moved out to Australia with Clive I was so caught up in the whirlwind romance of it all, I
didn't think anything through. But even before my marriage fell apart I never felt settled or happy
there. I should have realised that being so far away from my family would be difficult.

Brendan, the manager here at the Clifftops, has asked me to come back early next season, and I've
said a tentative yes, so I should be back here by the end of February. Early bookings are already
coming in, so by February there'll be lots to do. Fortunately we're in the process of building a new
retail block on the site, which will have apartments for staff upstairs. Perhaps at some point next
year I can expect less creaking and rattling!

Oh - and don't go worrying about bringing up my divorce. The only reason I haven't given you a
detailed account is because there isn't much to tell. Clive persuaded me to give things another try.
Then he changed his mind. He flew back to Australia as soon as the Decree Nisi came through. He's selling the bungalow there. All my things are being packed up and shipped back to me. (Just as well! I've been managing with the same few outfits for the last six months!)

Well, I'd better get on and finish my story, hadn't I?

Rhodri died. That won't come as a surprise, I suppose. I found out the details of how it happened a few weeks after the end of the war, when a shipmate of his came to see me. He'd kept some of Rhodri's personal items to give back to me - letters and so on - knowing that the main bundle would find its way home to Rhodri's father.

There were no wartime heroics, Jeff. It was a stupid accident. In January the ship was rounding the northern tip of Norway, heading for the Barents Sea. The weather was bad and a storm was due. This wasn't unusual for the location and the time of year. Rhodri was sent to check the ship's supplies in its various cargo holds, to ensure everything was 'fast'. Even a big destroyer like the H.M.S. Milne could roll and lurch in stormy seas.

The storm blew in quicker than anyone expected. Rhodri was behind with his job. He'd discovered that a stack of big metal containers in the forward hold had not been secured properly because the strappings were frayed. He'd almost finished repairing the fastenings when the ship began to sway and tip with the waves. Rhodri was thrown from his perch on the top of the container stack, down to the floor of the hold. The topmost container slid off the stack and fell on top of him, crushing his legs and pelvis.

Apparently he survived for almost twelve hours in the medical bay, as the staff tried to stabilise him. But it wasn't to be. He passed away on January 22nd 1945, three days before he'd have turned 20 years old.

There. That's one of the hard bits done. You'll forgive me if I go and make myself a good strong cup of tea, now, won't you Jeffrey?

Well then, onwards and upwards. Or onwards, for the moment, at least.

I got the letter about Rhodri's death on February 15th. The girls at the estate all tried to be supportive. Tea and sympathy were available in spades. I was in shock for most of the day. It would have been dreadful news at the best of times, but the fact of the matter was that by February I knew I was pregnant. The three nights Rhodri and I had shared before Christmas had left more of a legacy than some beautiful memories.

So, suddenly, this tiny thing growing inside of me was all that was left of my beloved in the whole world. I was nineteen, unmarried and pregnant. Frightened and ashamed, yes, and devastated by my loss, but there was a part of me that was also grateful that my love for Rhodri, and his for me, had created something real.

On the 15th I went to bed as usual. I woke up in the night. I was in agony. I went to the bathroom and saw blood. I knew what was happening. I hated myself. That one scrap of Rhodri left, and I couldn't take care of it. I was letting down the man I loved.

I got a cardigan on over my nightie, and some supplies to cope with the mess, and I crept out to the same storeroom where my trysts with Rhodri had happened. It was the only place I could think of where I wouldn't be disturbed.
Another Land Girl, Carol Griffiths, saw me go. She followed me and ended up helping as best she could. She got blankets and kept me warm. She made tea on the camping stove.

I lost my baby. It was so early in my term, to this day I have no idea if I'd have had a little boy or a little girl. There was just pain and blood. On that night I wanted to die as well.

But Carol got me through the worst, and then I cleaned up and went back to the bunk-room. I got up thirty minutes later when everyone else rose to start their day. When the girls saw me looking so pale and ill they just assumed it was the aftermath of getting that awful letter.

I collapsed halfway through the morning. I passed out and fell into the trays of seedlings I was potting on. I was found on the floor with a cut on my head where I'd bashed it on the side of the table. Nervous exhaustion was diagnosed, but because the cut on my head was quite bad I was dispatched to the doctor's surgery in Pentrebane. Carol made sure she was the one who went with me.

I told the doctor everything. It seemed foolish not to. He stitched up my head (there's still a scar, just above my left temple - it's one of the reasons I wear my hair brushed forward like I do) and then carried out the proper examinations. He was concerned that the place where my miscarriage happened wasn't the best. It was a dirty room, full of sacks and soil and dust. His concerns proved right: I got an infection. It was treated with antibiotics and I recovered within a couple of weeks.

The doctor told me that there was a chance - a small one, but still there - that the trauma I'd suffered might make it hard for me to have a baby in the future. This is one of the secrets that private detective got hold of. Fact is, I don't know whether the damage was permanent or not. I haven't been in a position since then to put it to the test.

Well, there it is. My deepest, darkest secret. Maybe you're flattered by my trust, maybe you're embarrassed by my frankness, maybe you're disgusted by my morals or revolted by the details. I don't know. I can't predict. I'm not sure I've ever felt more vulnerable than I do now.

I just had to tell you, Jeffrey. I'm not sure I can explain why.

I'll sign off now and walk this down to the postbox, before I lose my courage and tear it up and write a different letter altogether.

Yours,
Gladys

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What's the Big Idea?

Telegram

To: Gladys Dempster
Devon Clifftops Holiday Resort, Nr. Exmouth, Devon, UK

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Tuesday 20th November 1962

NO EMBARRASSMENT, NO DISTASTE. ONLY ADMIRATION AND MY HEARTFELT SYMPATHY. EXPECT A LETTER SOON.

JEFFREY

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

20th November 1962

Dear Gladys,

I hope you receive with due haste the telegram I have dispatched. The fears you voiced, after your harrowing tale, left me anxious to set your mind at ease.

I must tell you that I was deeply moved as I read your last. While I had readied myself for news of the loss of your fiance, I had not anticipated the additional tragedy you described. The thought of you feeling such loss and pain and self-loathing (as if any of it were your fault!) left me winded.

And then to think that these private experiences were violated by some snivelling little detective working for a well-connected but morally bankrupt family? I am not a man given to violence, Gladys, but that particular notion left me with the strongest urge to punch something.

I wish I could offer you more than these meagre words. You have my condolences for your loss, my respect for your strength, my gratitude for your trust, and my pledge of friendship and support for as long as it is welcome, up to and including the rest of my days.

I owe you, I know, a recount of my own experiences in the war. I will not send my history through to you yet, since placing it side by side with yours seems somehow competitive. Perhaps in the future we can review together the wartime events that shaped me, but for now I am content to let your story stand alone, untarnished by any inadvertent comparison with another.

I hope that the telling of this story has not left you steeped in unhappy memories. I do, however, feel the urge to lift the mood of our conversation, if you are willing to accommodate this.

I owe you another secret. Here's one I have kept for more than three years.

My memories of a certain night in June 1959 at Crimpton-on-Sea remain far from complete. But in the days that followed that night, snatches of a conversation you and I shared began to return to me.
You'll no doubt recall that I claimed complete ignorance of the night's events. This was dishonest. At the time, however, I felt I had no other choice. I saw no 'safe' way to acknowledge the things I'd said. Admitting to them - and the 'in vino veritas' aspect to the conversation of that night - could only have led to significant consequences.

Do you think it is time we spoke about this, Gladys?

Yours,
Jeffrey

~~~

93 Taff Street
Pontypridd

November 26th 1962

Dear Jeffrey,

Thank you for the telegram and the letter both. I'm touched by your support and sympathy. Writing it down did, in a way, bring a lot of it back to me, but the pain hasn't lingered since. Knowing I've shared this burden is giving me a good feeling now. Perhaps you should bear this in mind as you consider sharing your own history?

But you're right - in the last few letters, what with nuclear missiles being pointed at people left, right and centre, and the account of my youthful ordeal, we've gone and got quite gloomy. Time to perk up.

You picked just the right subject.

A certain night in June 1959. Ah, the memories! (Mine are complete, of course.) How my heart sped as you made your solemn declarations. How my fingers trembled at the buttons of your shirt. Oh, Jeffrey, the nerves, the excitement, the giddy desire...

The pungent smell of stale alcohol. That ridiculous piece of bamboo you clutched. That fez. The way you managed to turn the word 'desirable' into 'derisible'.

Jeffrey, you're right. It is definitely time we talk about this.

For instance - it is long past time I assure you that neither your behaviour nor my own crossed any lines that night. I never quite worked out why you were so sure that something untoward happened between us (and I was always a bit offended that you were ready to believe I'd have taken advantage). But there it is. We talked, and it was a lovely talk. You said words to me that kept me going through the whole season. And then you tried to prepare for bed, and I assisted you.

I'm glad you remembered at least some of what you said. When I threw your own words back at you, later in the season, it wouldn't have been nearly as much fun if you hadn't recognised them. I thought, from the look in your eyes, that you probably did.

Well then, let's hear your thoughts. I can't wait to see where this one goes.

Affectionately yours,
Gladys

~~~
My dear Gladys,

I have opened quite the can of worms, have I not?

Derisible. Oh dear. Did I really do that? In my head, the words flowed so beautifully, too.

You are clearly not going to elucidate on details like "you tried to prepare for bed, and I assisted you" without some concession from myself. Suddenly this conversation of ours has gone from the sharing of burdens to a game of teasing, of tit-for-tat. Very well then, Gladys. I shall play along, and in return I beg for those details you have so far denied me.

I remember lying on my bed the wrong way around. I held on to that piece of the Hawaiian bar as if it were a lifebelt, though I honestly can't tell you why. You sat beside me, looking down, smiling like an angel.

I said to you, "The smile that launched a thousand ships."

You looked shocked, and told me to wash my mouth out.

I said, "SHIPS, Gladys."

I then felt the need to clarify how very lovely I thought your smile to be. You said something along the lines of not realising I'd ever noticed anything about your appearance. You did this with the most distinct pout, by the way.

At that point I remember becoming quite ardent in my alcohol-fuelled honesty. While I can't remember the exact words I spoke, I tried to impart to you the feelings I entertained. I told you I considered you beautiful, and desirable (let us ignore the unskilled manner of my speech), and that you reminded me of a stunning, dark-eyed, voluptuous French film star. This was very forward of me, but my inhibitions were singularly failing to put in an appearance. (The latter comment was the one you teased me with later in the season. And yes, I recognised it when it reappeared.)

I then explained that I was quite unable to act on the attraction I felt because I was still married. Even though the marriage was, at that point, more a technicality than an emotional reality, fidelity remained an important issue for me. This was the truth. Of course, the Jeffrey Fairbrother I was back then would not have admitted to the other factors influencing me - the fear and arrogance and self-doubt. Oh, Gladys - I admit them now: all of them.

You asked in your last letter why I was so convinced that my behaviour had broken the rules of propriety. This is why:

The following morning I discovered, folded in with my bedclothes, an item of feminine intimate apparel. In what looked to be your size.

Have I earned some answers from you now, Gladys?

Yours ever,
Jeffrey
Dearest Jeffrey,

Have you noticed that we seem to be trimming down the days between letters? I know that I have reached the point where I consider it a failure if I do not write my reply and catch the last post on the very day I receive a letter from you.

It is December the seventh, and I can no longer refrain from begging this information. Jeffrey - are you coming back to Britain for Christmas?

You remember more than I realised from 'that night'. You say you lacked your usual inhibitions thanks to the alcohol. What is your excuse this time, hmm?

That you discovered my bra in your chalet explains a lot. The item went missing from the laundry around that time, and I was quite cross about it. I blamed Peggy - as it turns out, I was probably right! My theory is that Peggy entered your chalet the morning after the night we're discussing, probably bringing her laundry collections with her. She'll have fussed about doing something, and put her bundle down while she did it. Then, when she went on with her rounds, I suspect she accidentally left you a present.

Jeffrey, I do assure you - if you and I had done anything other than talk that night, I'd know about it, and I'd be telling you the truth now, even if I'd felt the urge to lie about it then.

I suppose you want to know how far I undressed you, now, don't you? Yes, I suppose I could answer that question. I remember in great detail, of course. My only problem is that teasing you with this is probably the best fun I've had in about three years...

Tell you what. I'll finish the tale in my next letter. Or - if the good Lord is smiling on me - perhaps I can tell you in person, some time soon?

love,
Gladys

My dear Gladys,

The escalation in our letters, both in frequency and tone, has not escaped me. Nor, indeed, has the strange absence of my usual reticence.

I am afraid I must give you bad news, though. I will not be flying to England for Christmas.

Up until a day or so ago, my intention was to fly out around the 21st, to spend Christmas with my
mother. (I stayed in Wisconsin last year, and she certainly feels I 'owe' her a Christmas.) Then I wished to spend a week or so travelling around to visit friends, including, I had very much hoped, you.

Events, alas, have overtaken me here. I'm not sure I mentioned to you that last October I was promoted to Department Chair for the entire School of Anthropology. Unfortunately I do not yet have an Associate Chair for Archaeology to fill the position I vacated with my promotion. As such my responsibilities have increased significantly in the short-term, and I am required to be at the university between Christmas and New Year. Since Christmas falls mid-week, I cannot even work a brief visit around the bank holidays and a weekend.

I am so very sorry, Gladys, but I give you my word: I am looking to the Easter holidays next year with a very determined eye.

I enclose herewith two Christmas cards. One is for you, and you alone. The other I have written to the members of your immediate family, for I feel that if I am not yet a family friend then perhaps I can hope to be, one day soon.

I know that Christmas Days are notoriously busy, and I would hesitate to intrude upon your family's festivities. But if there is a quieter spell, perhaps on Christmas Eve or Boxing Day, when you would be prepared to take an international telephone call, either at your aunt's flat or your mother's house, please do specify which would be best (along, of course, with the relevant exchange and number). I would so relish the opportunity to hear your voice again, as I offer you greetings of the season.

As for the rest of the details from that night at Crimpton - keep them or share them: it is yours to choose. There was a time when the uncertainty about these gaps in my memory drove me to distraction. I find, however, that in recent weeks I have come to recognise in you, Gladys, a safe place for my secrets to reside. Even those secrets I don't remember!

with love,
Jeffrey

~~~

Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin
21st December 1962

"So have you told her?" asked Emilia, as they walked down the stairs together.

"Told her what?" Jeffrey asked.

She tut-tutted and then rolled her eyes as well, as if he needed multiple signals to understand her exasperation. Jeffrey smiled and continued to distract himself with an entirely different question. He was attempting to work out when his latest letter might have arrived at Pontypridd, and as such, whether he could really expect to receive a reply before Christmas.

"Do you think letters take longer at Christmas?" he asked.

"Of course they do. There's a ton more mail."
"Oh. Damn."

"Were you thinking about your Welsh dragon all the way through my lecture?" Emilia demanded.

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course not. That would be unprofessional."

"Right. Just about three quarters of it, then."

He smirked, and pushed the doors at the bottom of the stairwell open for them both. The building was all but deserted now. The benefits of waiting half an hour after the last lecture scheduled for the last day of the semester: students were leaving campus with the single-minded dedication of rats on sinking ships.

"So did you start signing off with 'love' yet?" Emilia asked.

"Em, please!"

"Fair question. Women notice these things. It's a big step."

He sighed, mainly to cover his embarrassment. "Just on my last letter."

"Three cheers for you! Beats the hell out of 'best regards' and 'fond wishes' and 'don't take this the wrong way because I'm not being funny or anything but there is a certain amount of perfectly respectable affection in the way I'm signing off here...""

Jeffrey barked a laugh. "Oh, you must let me write that one down."

"You love her, though, right?"

He glanced at Emilia, trying to gauge how much honesty she was really inviting. "I-I suppose I must do. Considering."

"Right. All this, and you haven't even seen her in more than three years."

"After the last three months, I don't need to."

"What if she got ugly? What if she got fat?"

"Gladys cannot fail to be beautiful. She's far more likely to take one look at my hairline and wonder what on earth she ever saw in me."

Emilia peered at him as they paused by the main doors. "What's wrong with your hairline?"

"It keeps moving," he said gloomily. "Backwards."

"Jeffrey Fairbrother, are you being vain?"

"Insecure."

"Need an ego-boost?"

"Yes please. Just keep it clean."

They moved out and on to the path, then turned to the left and walked up to the small parking area at the front of the building.

Emilia took his arm, leaned in towards him and murmured, "You have extremely shapely ears."
He laughed again. "Oh, Emilia, I have missed you terribly this last semester."

"You'll have to do it again next year."

"I will try to visit. Promise."

"Hold you to that, English. Now - you're sure you don't need me to come pick you up for Christmas Day?"

"I will drive myself. No need for both of us to go easy on the, er, Christmas cheer."

"Mom says you're welcome to stay over, you know."

"And I am grateful indeed. But I need to be back here." They paused, not far from Emilia's car, and turned to face each other. "Y-you do understand?"

"You don't want to speak to her from my parents' house."

"It just doesn't seem right."

She smiled her familiar smile, warm but tinged with regret. "I told you once before, Jeff. You're a good guy. Gimme a hug."

They embraced, and then Emilia got into her car and backed out of the space. He waved her off as she swung into Observatory Drive, then he turned back to the Social Science building. The wintry chill of Wisconsin reminded him that he hadn't put his overcoat on. He hurried back inside and returned to his office on the third floor. It was a larger room, now, since his promotion, and its corner position at the rear of the building offered him two windows in adjacent walls, one with a view over the lake and one with a view over the treetops of Muir Woods. Mrs. Parsons's area was a small room just outside his main door, where she now guarded him from the marauding hordes of Anthropology.

As soon as he'd closed the door behind himself, he was calculating once again.

So. He'd posted his letter on the 13th. That had been a Thursday. It would therefore have reached one of the air-mail hubs on the Friday, and would likely have been in London by Saturday. Say it left London by Monday, then, which meant that the absolute earliest - in the most ideal of worlds - that Gladys might have received his letter was Tuesday just gone.

Add another day on this side of the Atlantic for Christmas delays. Add another day over there for the same.

She still should have received that letter by the Thursday. Which was yesterday.

Of course, if she'd responded by letter herself, even if she'd done so on Tuesday, he wasn't likely to see that letter until Monday next week. Christmas Eve. To get anything to him sooner she'd have to telegram, or telephone.

Jeff stood at his window, gazing out on the choppy grey expanse of Lake Mendota. Winter clouds hung heavy in the sky overhead, the lightest of greys, diffusing sunlight and threatening snow.

The telephone rang, making him jump. He turned and glanced at the wall clock above the door before he answered. It was ten minutes before noon: almost six pm in the UK.

Which meant it was the perfect time for Gladys to telephone.
Ridiculously, he straightened his shoulders and smoothed his hair before he reached for the receiver.

Mrs. Parsons's voice said, "Call for you, Professor."

"Thank you," he said.

The line clicked. He tried to slow the hammer of his heart rate. "This is Jeffrey Fairbrother," he announced, in what he hoped was a warm, rich, masculine tone of voice.

"Yeah, hi, Professor," a male voice said. "This is Mark Kadlec. Hi."

Jeff needed a moment for the disappointment to dissipate. "Mr. Kadlec," he said. "How can I help?"

"It's about the interview," Kadlec said. "I'm due to see you next Thursday. The 27th."

"That's right."

"Well, I can still do that - that's no problem, sir. But the thing is, the dig in Guayabo has been closed early. There's some political stuff going on between the Costa Ricans and the consul."

Jeffrey frowned. "You're telling me that you'll be available sooner than next Easter?"

"Oh, I don't know. I mean, I don't want to be presumptuous - you didn't offer me the job yet!" The man laughed nervously. "No, Professor, what I mean is that I'm back in Connecticut already. So if you wanted to do the interview sooner than Thursday, I can make that."

Ah. Now he understood. Mr. Kadlec was attempting to reorganise his Christmas vacation, such that he didn't need to fly out to Wisconsin right in the middle of it.

"When are you due back at the site?" Jeffrey asked.

"At the moment, January 7. But we've all been told to wait for confirmation before we make arrangements."

Jeffrey shrugged. It made no real difference to him whether he interviewed Kadlec for the position of Archaeology Chair next Thursday or sooner. It wasn't as if he was going anywhere, was it?

"Very well, Mr. Kadlec," he said. "At your convenience, then. I'm available tomorrow afternoon if you're willing to give up your Saturday, or I can see you on Monday, on Christmas Eve."

"Tomorrow might be better with the travel," Kadlec suggested. "If that's okay with you?"

"Perfectly. See what you can manage, flight-wise, and give me a call back."

"Sure. I appreciate that, Professor. Thank you."

"Not at all. Speak to you soon."

Jeffrey replaced the telephone receiver. He stood straight, then turned back to the view from his window.

That was one of next Thursday's appointments rescheduled. Probably rescheduled, anyway. Now. If only he wasn't expecting another interviewee on Monday morning, one on Thursday morning,
and a further two next Friday, he might have been able to make some last-minute rejigs to his own lack-of-travel plans.

He sat down at his desk and tried to do some work.

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"Professor?"

Jeff looked up to see Mrs. Parsons standing in his doorway with her coat on. She'd probably knocked; she usually did. He must have missed it.

"Yes?" he said.

"There's a telegram for you, over at Bascom." She frowned at him. "Aren't you going for lunch?"

He glanced at the clock: it was after one. He'd been going through the résumés on his desk for an hour now. Five lecturers and a half dozen research fellows, all keen to move up one in the academic rankings.

"Not really hungry, thank you," he said, his mind immediately focused on the telegram news. He stood up.

"I can go get you a sandwich," Mrs. Parsons suggested.

"You're very kind, but I'm fine. I'll, er, sort something out later."

"You're sure?" She looked concerned. "Say now, because otherwise I'm heading home."

Of course. Last day of the semester, and Mrs. Parsons had been due to finish at midday. He wasn't going to see her again until after the new year. Jeffrey remembered his manners and walked around his desk. When he reached the doorway he held out his hand. Mrs. Parsons shook it warmly.

"Sorry," he said. "Bit distracted."

"I can come in next week when you have those appointments-"

"Not a bit of it," he said. "You deserve your holiday. I hope you and your family have a wonderful Christmas." He leaned in and planted a chaste kiss on her cheek.

She blushed as she pulled away. "Well, and the same to you, Professor. And don't forget, there's always plenty of room around our table if your plans change. We're only over in Middleton. You've got our number, haven't you?"

Jeff bore her fussing for a minute or two longer, before she was convinced he wasn't about to starve to death, either today or next week, and she made her exit.

He counted to sixty, just to give her time to clear the stairwell. Then he made a dash for the stairs himself.

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Telegram

To: Jeffrey Fairbrother
The building was beginning to feel ridiculously empty: as if he were the only man still in it, although Jeffrey knew Neil would be busy further down the corridor with his own staffing issues, and at least three of the research and post-doc fellows were going to be in situ through the Christmas break.

The telephone rang once more. The wall clock told him it was a little after eight in the UK. He tried not to get excited this time as he picked up the receiver.

The voice of the university's switchboard operator, whose name he had always meant to discover but hadn't managed to, told him in her slightly nasal tone that he had a call.

The line clicked. It was Mark Kadlec again, telling him he'd managed to sort out his travel arrangements for tomorrow and was looking to get to the university for around three o'clock. The relevant details were discussed. Jeffrey said goodbye and put the telephone down.

He returned his attention to the résumés.

"Professor?"

Jeff looked up. Standing in the open doorway of his office - it had seemed silly to close the door now Mrs. Parsons was no longer there to interrogate his visitors - was Dr. Scott Moore, the young ethnoarchaeologist Jeff had first met in 1960 when Moore had completed his doctorate. He was a research fellow now, and destined for great things. He was also on the short list for one of the two tenure assistant professorships that were becoming available.

"Hello Scott," Jeff greeted him. "Off for the day?"

"Yeah, I'm heading out. Back next week."

"Yes. We're meeting on Monday morning, aren't we?"

"Ten am," Moore confirmed. "Even got my tie picked out."

Jeffrey nodded. Then, without quite planning to, he said, "Listen. There's, er, there's no problem if you can't manage it, but - how-how are you fixed tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Moore said, looking at Jeffrey as though he had started speaking in tongues.
"Yes. I've got this chap from Yale coming tomorrow afternoon. Possible Associate Chair."

"Oh, Kadlec! Yeah, I read his paper, the one from last summer. He's been doing good work at Guayabo. You need some background on the dig?"

"That would actually be very helpful," Jeffrey agreed. "But I-I-I was thinking that, well, since I'm coming in anyway to see Mr. Kadlec tomorrow afternoon, how would it be if we moved up our own chat? Your family's in Seattle, isn't it? We could clear the decks for Monday. If you wanted to get away sooner than Christmas Eve, I mean."

"Well," Moore considered, "it would make my Mom happy. And it would make my brother less happy. Both of these are good things." He grinned. "Okay, Professor, you got a deal. I'll put you a crib-sheet together on Guayabo, and then, when you interview me tomorrow, you can be especially nice."

Jeffrey hid a smirk. Scott Moore was one of those amiable charmers it was impossible to dislike: especially given the formidable intellect his congenial mannerisms cloaked.

"After an early lunch?" Jeff suggested. "One thirty acceptable?"

"Sounds good. I'd better go press my tie, huh?"

"See you tomorrow."

Moore waved and moved off.

Jeffrey opened his diary and crossed out the appointments that were now rescheduled for Saturday. One remaining interview was arranged for next Thursday, but he might be able to shift that to later in the day, or even postpone until Friday.

His Christmas Eve was now free. Could he fly out tomorrow evening?

He got a blank piece of paper and began to make some calculations.

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The Dean called through to Jeffrey's office at about four pm.

"Jeffrey," he said. "Glad to catch you. I've had Professor Forester on the telephone this afternoon."

Jeffrey's heart skipped. "Oh yes?" he asked, trying to sound calm. Hoping that Forester hadn't called to say, Thanks but no thanks.'

"Looks like the timing's going to be tricky for him. Wanted to know if we could move the dates up at all."

"Earlier than the beginning of summer term? How are we supposed to do that?"

"Wave a magic wand? I don't know. But he did say that any time between New Year and Easter break would be better."

Jeffrey sighed. "Well, Neil Weitzman and I are working hard to organise everything."

"Any news there?"

"I'm seeing one possible Archaeology Chair tomorrow. Quite a-a-a promising candidate. Neil has
his preferred successor narrowed down to two of the Assistant Professors already tenured here. And we've good candidates to choose from, to fill any gaps a promotion would leave."

"Good to hear. Are you still planning on staying in Madison through Christmas?"

Jeffrey looked down at the scribblings he'd made over the last hour or so. It was impossible: he couldn't expect to catch the overnight flight from Chicago to Heathrow tomorrow evening, so it would be Sunday at the earliest when he flew out. Given the time zones, that meant he wouldn't be arriving until early on Christmas Eve. Within this timeframe he simply could not work out how to arrange the logistics of travelling to South Wales, finding accommodation during winter in the Rhondda Valley, and getting back to Heathrow in time to catch the return flight that would get him home for an afternoon appointment on Thursday. Not when he also had to include a) at least a flying visit to see his mother and b) eating and sleeping.

"Yes," he said, "I'll be here."

"We should get together, then. There's a proposal I have for you about your house." The Dean hesitated, then he said, "Did you say you're interviewing tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow afternoon."

"How's your morning looking?"

"Nothing planned, as yet."

"Great. Let's get together tomorrow morning, and then my wife doesn't give me hell for going in to work during Christmas week."

"That sounds fine."

"Do you have any lunch plans, Jeff?"

"Not as such."

"Excellent. I'll see you at eleven, your office, then we can grab a bite."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then, Dean."

"I, er, guess there's no point in asking you if you're likely to change your mind, is there?"

Jeffrey smiled and thought about a few paragraphs in a letter, written in Gladys's flowing hand.

"No," he said. "Even if the thing with Professor Forester falls through, I'd be looking elsewhere. I'm sorry, Dean. I'm aware it's all been dreadful timing. If I'd known in the summer what I know now, I'd have worked with Professor Manninger to ensure a much smoother transition on his retirement."

"Well, it's a crying shame, Jeff. But there it is. See you tomorrow."

"Yes. See you then."

Jeffrey put the telephone down and considered all this news. So, Professor Forester wanted him sooner than he'd probably be available. And the Dean had a proposal about the house on Chadbourne Avenue.

It was beginning to look like he'd reached the point where his tentative enquiries were becoming
hard and fast decisions. The problem was, the success of these decisions was going to depend on a woman who didn't have the faintest clue what he was currently up to.

"Call for you, Professor," said the switchboard woman. "International."

Jeff's heart sped. It was after ten o'clock in the evening GMT, but that only narrowed down the possibilities. It couldn't be a work-related call. So who would call him from home?

The line clunked. He pinched his lips against the shiver of adrenaline and then said, "Jeffrey Fairbrother."

"Jeffrey? Edward Furness."

His heart slowed down again. "Hello, Edward," he said. "How are you?"

"Just fine; just fine. Timed it all right, did I? Charles said you were six hours behind."

"Yes, this is fine."

"Well, just wanted you to know. The Budeigh Salterton property's a no-go. Far too much work needed, although the views are lovely. I've got three possibilities for you. One on the eastern edge of Exmouth - nice extended cottage, but pricey, and the garden's huge, if that's likely to be a problem. There's a modern bungalow, very nicely done if you like that kind of thing, in Lympstone. And my personal favourite - a house in Exton, ten minutes' walk from the station. Nice village, halfway between Exeter and Exmouth, if you need the geography. Four beds, lovely garden, nicely spaced out from nearby properties, and the views over the estuary are splendid."

Jeffrey nodded as he tried to process the information. "Rule out the modern bungalow," he said.

"Don't blame you. Not sure I'd trust any house that hasn't been standing for a good fifty years already. The other two?"

"How soon are they likely to go? I-I'm still not likely to get over until nearer Easter."

"The Exmouth one might get snapped up. Good location, you see. But the Exton one isn't on the market yet. Owner wants to do some tidying up first, since he had it valued. Estate agent reckons he'll be looking at listing it in spring, when the weather turns. I'll keep an eye on it for you, then, shall I?"

"Please do. If necessary I'll get Charles down there to give it the once-over. He's well-acquainted with my likes and dislikes."

"Right you are." There was a pause, then Furness said, "I, er, I'm right in supposing that the infinitely charming Mrs. Dempster has yet to hear of your Devonshire project?"

"You suppose correctly."

"Is there a reason why this remains a secret?"

"Several." Jeffrey felt his face flush with embarrassment and was thankful he was currently alone in his office. "Gladys and I have yet to discuss anything regarding the future. I think asking her to go and look at a house I-I-I might want to buy would constitute 'jumping the gun'."

"Oh, quite so. Quite so." A pause. "Still, for whatever it's worth, old chap - last thing your lady
needs is another man in her life who likes to keep secrets from her."

Jeff sighed. "I might not even be able to pull it off. They haven't offered me the job yet. I-I don't want to get her hopes up."

"Of course."

"Or my hopes," he added. Because he wasn't entirely sure that Gladys would respond positively. Flirtation in letters was rather a long way from committing to a future together. Still. At least if he was in Devon he'd be able to ask her out to dinner. Maybe dancing? "You'll keep me posted, then? On anything else that comes on the market in the next month or two?"

"Will do."

"I appreciate it, Edward."

"Not at all. Happy to help. And if I wasn't, Angela would make me do it anyway."

Jeffrey smiled. "Give my love to everyone when you see them next week."

"Consider it done. Merry Christmas, Jeffrey. I'll be in touch in the new year."

Jeffrey put the phone down and looked again at the scribbled notes he'd made as he'd researched air flights and fares.

Soon. He'd get back over there soon. And whatever happened with Gladys, well, that would happen at whatever pace Gladys preferred. But Edward was right; it was time Jeff told her about his big idea. It was too late to call her today, so he'd try tomorrow morning before his meetings got going.

The notion of hearing her voice again made him smile. And the thought of exchanging Chadbourne Avenue for a Devonshire house with green all around and views across the estuary of the River Exe filled him with a sense of contentment.

Wisconsin had been good for him, but - all things considered - it was time to go home.

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The international operator required him to spell PONTYPRIDD three times, each time sounding less convinced that a town might be written with that particular combination of letters. Jeffrey supposed it was as well that Gladys didn't live in that town on Anglesey with the ridiculously long name.

Finally the clunking, clicking line delivered a ringing tone. He straightened up at his desk and took a deep breath.

"Sewing Chest," was the greeting he was given. It wasn't Gladys's voice, even though it was undeniably Welsh and female.

"Oh, er, yes, er, hello," was his less than fluent start. "I-I was hoping to speak to Gladys."

"Speak up! Can't hear you!"

"Gladys! May I please speak to Gladys?"

"Oh, you want to speak to Gladys? Oh. She isn't here."

He sighed. "I-I see. Um - is there a good time to call back?"

"What's that, then? Pull back from what?"

"No - call. Um, telephone. When should I telephone again?"

"No need to shout, dear, I'm not deaf. Our Glad gets back from work about half past five. Oh, no - tell a lie. It's Saturday, isn't it? She'll be at Nerys's for her tea. Oh, and she's working late tonight, anyway. Monday's last day, isn't it, before Christmas, and then there's the sales. Lots to do."

"Yes, of course," Jeffrey agreed, bewildered. He didn't know where Gladys was working. He hadn't even realised she was working. "So what time should I telephone?"

"Oh, you'd better leave it till tomorrow, dear. She has her tea at her sister's on Saturdays, and she'll go straight there after work, I expect. She doesn't eat enough, you know. Especially lately. Mooning after that Yank."

"Um."

"You're a friend of hers, are you?"

"Er, yes. Yes I am."

"You can talk some sense into her then, maybe. What she needs is a nice reliable Welshman. I mean, she says she's over that smarmy toff she's divorcing, but I saw her face when that letter came, a few days ago. And now this bloody Yank! Oh, pardon my French, won't you? I mean, though, honestly. What's wrong with the valleys?"
Jeffrey blinked and wondered what on earth to say to all that.

"Anyway," Aunt Bethan - for he assumed he was speaking to Gladys's aunt - went on, "I can't stay chatting to you all day. I got customers. I'll tell Gladys you telephoned. What was the name?"

"Oh, er, Jeffrey. Fairbrother."

"Right you are, Jesse. Bye!"

The line went dead. Jeffrey replaced the receiver. Well, that solved one problem, at least. If the earliest he could speak to Gladys was Sunday morning, GMT, then he didn't have to worry about fitting in another international call between his meetings today.

'And for the record,' he told Aunt Bethan in his mind, 'I am not a bloody Yank!'

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Jeffrey saw Mark Kadlec off and then returned to the Social Science building. He went straight to Neil Weitzman's office, and was a little taken aback when he saw Scott Moore all settled in there, chatting.

"Oh," Moore said as he saw Jeffrey. "Need me to scoot?"

Neil arched a brow at him, inviting Jeffrey to choose. Jeff shrugged and shook his head; he wasn't really here to discuss Scott. "Not really." He found a place to sit down on one of the sofas in Neil's office: like most of the teaching professors of the department, his office doubled as a room for group tutorials.

"Scott's been telling me you gave him quite the grilling," Neil said, easing back in his chair and propping his feet up on the corner of his desk. "And on all his weaker areas. You're a mean old professor, Jeff."

Jeffrey stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle. "I already know Dr. Moore is an expert on ethnoarchaeology. I also know there's little that happens in central or south America that escapes his notice - a-archaeologically speaking, at least. So there was scant point in covering those areas. He'd have only shown me up."

"So you quizzed him on soil stratigraphy," Neil said.

"It's an important subject."

"It's deadly dull," Neil said.

Scott Moore, seated on the sofa opposite Jeff, gave a groan. He leaned forward and folded his arms to hide his head.

"Dull?" Jeffrey repeated, feigning indignation. "What could possibly be dull about the many fascinating and varied aspects of non-vertical superposition?"

Moore groaned again. Neil snorted a laugh and asked, "Seriously, Jeff, how did the whippersnapper do?"

Jeffrey pretended not to notice the way Moore's head lifted just enough for him to peek out from his hiding place. "He's young. And irritatingly clever. We shouldn't hold that against him. He'll be Associate Chair within ten years," Jeff predicted. "Possibly five."
"Yeah? Which one?"

"Either. But I think he'll find cultural anthropology more fun than my old job." Jeff leaned closer and said, "I'm not sure he's all that keen on soil and rock."

Moore sat up, looking pleased, as well he might. "I thought I'd blown it with your drain question."

Neil's eyes widened. "You asked him about drains?"

"Drains are an important part of any civilisation. Try living without them." Jeff loosened his tie. "Now, don't you want to hear about Mr. Kadlec, our possible new Associate Chair?"

"Did you ask him about drains?"

"Of course I did. Archaeology isn't always the glamour of the trowel and the caliper."

Neil huffed. "I thought we wanted to find a new Archaeology Chair."

"I think we have," Jeffrey confided. "Kadlec is an excellent candidate. No weak areas, personable, enthusiastic. He'll be ten times the lecturer I ever was. And he seems to like the campus."

Scott Moore said, "He's a Yale man, isn't he?" Moore sounded like he didn't quite understand the notion of someone attached to a premier Ivy League school hopping down to a State university.

Neil said, "He's a Yale research scientist. He's been a Yale research scientist for eight years, and there's still about a dozen research staff ahead of him in the line for tenure track. This would be a great move for him."

"Well, I can't offer him the job yet," Jeffrey said. "I'm due to see this man Beech on Thursday morning. From Georgetown."

"Oh!" Moore said. "Sorry. Forgot. You're supposed to be interviewing Jon Kelly on Friday, right?"

"That's right."

"He's my roomie. He got a call, late last night. His dad's in the hospital. Angina or something. He headed out to Detroit this morning. Doesn't know if he'll be back before the new year, now."

Jeffrey closed his eyes as one further appointment that had kept him from Gladys crumbled away.

"That's rough," Neil was saying. "You got his number?"

"Yeah, we'll be talking," said Moore.

"Okay - tell him there's no need to panic. We'll reschedule - right, Jeff?"

"O-o-of course."


"Have a great Christmas, Scott," Neil said.

"Yes, happy Christmas," Jeff added.
"Same to you guys. See you in '63, okay?"

Scott Moore left the office. Jeff sank back in the sofa and sighed.

"What's up?" Neil asked. "Thought everything was going pretty well."

"It is, I suppose," Jeff said. "I-I-I wasn't expecting the first interviewee for the Associate Chair to
be such a strong candidate. And by the way - do everything in your power to keep Scott here."

"Noted. What did the Dean say earlier?"

"He wants to buy my house," Jeff said, still with a vague sense of disbelief that such a convenient
solution to that issue had presented itself. "Well, the Bursar does. On behalf of the university. Apparantly it's such an obvious location it seems silly not to. With all the plans for expansion, the
Dean says they're looking for around a dozen family houses to acquire."

"Well, that's great. Is he offering a decent price?"

"Market value, according to him, plus an additional amount for the furniture."

"So why are you looking so glum, then?"

Jeffrey rubbed his eyes. "I shouldn't be here."

"Oh? Where should you be?"

He glanced at his watch. It was just gone five. In the Welsh valleys it would be eleven o'clock in
the evening. Perhaps there'd be snow on the ground, crispness in the clear, cold air...

*The evening would have been a slow one, filled with shyness and discovery and those delicious
flutters in his stomach. He and Gladys would have lingered over their meal, then - knowing they
didn't want to say good night - they'd have found some quiet little pub to continue their
corversation. Closing time would see them walking back to Gladys's flat. She'd have her arm
tucked in his, and that side of his body would be warm from her closeness. The stars would be
bright and the night peaceful. He'd see her to the door, having spent the last ten minutes
wondering whether he dared to kiss her-"

"Jeff?"

"Hmm?"

"I lost you for a second."

"Oh. Sorry."

Neil opened his mouth to repeat his question, but his attention turned to the doorway. Scott Moore
came back in.

"Miss me, guys?" he asked cheerfully. "Just caught Steadman unloading the mail downstairs.
Grabbed your stuff from your cubbies." He set a couple of envelopes down on Neil's desk, then
handed another envelope to Jeff. "Now you remember when you're thinking about promotions that
I was super-kind and brought you your mail. Always willing, that's me."

Neil laughed. "We'll remember you, next time there's an opening in the mail room!"

Moore pouted theatrically at him, then disappeared again after offering a friendly wave.
Jeffrey opened his envelope and read a brief letter. "Oh for goodness sake!" he snapped, and tossed the letter aside in disgust.

"What is it?"

He sighed. "My Thursday appointment has been cancelled. Beech has withdrawn his application."

"Is that much of a problem? You liked Kadlec."

Jeffrey stood up. "Someone, somewhere, is laughing at me. I mean, it's just-just comic farce!"

"Jeff?"

"And I still can't go to her! Even if I left first thing tomorrow, I-I-I still wouldn't be able to get back in time for Friday."

"Okay. Who are you seeing on Friday?"

"Latimer. We're both seeing him, remember?"

"So we'll see him the week after. He lives here. He isn't going anywhere."

Jeffrey blinked. "I thought we agreed we wanted to appoint the two Associate Chairs before the end of the holidays."

"We agree. Gives us a whole two weeks starting tomorrow. And I think Bill Latimer's a shoe-in for Cultural. You like Kadlec for Archaeology. Beech isn't coming. You've already seen Scott, and Jon Kelly's got family issues."

"Oh. Um-"

"Jeff - where do you need to be?"

"South Wales," he said quietly. "Oh, god, I need to be in South Wales."

~~~

Chadbourne Avenue, Madison
23rd December 1962

"Yes, hello again," Jeffrey said down the telephone line. "It's Jeffrey Fairbrother. We spoke yesterday."

"I don't know any Jeffreys," Aunt Bethan said. "When did we speak?"

"Yesterday. I was trying to get hold of Gladys."

"Gladys? Gladys isn't here. She's at St. Wilfred's. It's Sunday. Little Rhyddyd's singing in the carol concert this afternoon, isn't it?" Aunt Bethan said this as if she considered anyone who was unaware of the information to be a halfwit.

"Oh," Jeff said. "Er, yes. Of course."
"Is there a message?"

"No, no message." Jeffrey felt very downcast. "I-I'll try her again later."

"She'll be in by six, I expect. Oh! Oh, is that Jesse, is it?"

"Yes. Jesse speaking." He sighed. "Thank you for your help, anyway."

"No problem, dear. I'll tell Glad you called."

Six o'clock in the evening over there would be midday here. At that point he'd be between flights at Chicago O'Hare.

Ah well. He'd have to find a public telephone.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Quarter past nine. His taxi was due in five minutes.

~~~

Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Illinois
23rd December 1962

It was a jolly good thing that he'd kept a large number of coins. Jeffrey deposited the surprising amount requested by the international operator, wondering whether the international calls he made from his office were likely to cost the university the same amount each time. He hoped not.

The call connected. He held his breath.

'Please let it be her, please let it be her...'


Oh god.

"Hello again," he said.

"Oh, hello Jesse! How are you?"

He closed his eyes. "I'm fine, thank you. Is Gladys there?"

"She's just upstairs in the flat. Give me a moment, will you?"

The phone line exploded, as if Aunt Bethan had taken a hammer to the receiver, and a moment later he heard her yelling Gladys's name. He remembered from Gladys's telegram that the telephone in the building was downstairs near the shop rather than upstairs in the flat.

He waited.

There was the sound of Gladys's name being bellowed again, then the thud-thud-thud of someone going up some stairs. It seemed that the telephone was situated in the downstairs hallway.

He waited some more.
Again came the thud-thud-thud, and there was another crackle-explosion as the receiver was
manhandled.

Aunt Bethan said, "She says she doesn't know any Jesses, and it's probably a wrong number. I told
her you've called before-"

"Jeffrey!" he said desperately. "Please, Bethan, my name is Jeffrey."

"I don't think we've been introduced, have we, young man?" Aunt Bethan said. "So I think we'll
stick to Mrs. Pritchard, if it's all the same with you."

He sighed. "I apologise, Mrs. Pritchard. I only knew you as Aunt Bethan, you see. From Gladys's
letters."

"Well, that's quite all right. But there's a place for formalities, isn't there? Just a matter of respect."

"I quite agree," he said. "Mrs. Pritchard, I'm calling from O'Hare airport, and I'm not sure how
much longer my money is going to buy me, so please, please, could you ask Gladys if she will
speak to me? My name is Jeffrey. Jeff. J-E-"

There was a crunch and a tone, and the international operator asked him to deposit a further three
dollars in change. Jeffrey dug in his pockets and looked in despair at one dollar, three dimes, a
nickel and four pennies, one of which was rather bent.

"Thank you, goodbye," he said dully to the operator and replaced the receiver.

He'd have to leave it until he got to Heathrow. At least the call to Pontypridd shouldn't cost quite
so much from London. Although, thinking about it, his flight from Chicago was scheduled as
overnight, and he'd be landing very early, UK time. So perhaps he should wait until he'd worked
out what he was going to do after his flight touched down.

He hadn't even called his mother.

He hadn't even changed any money...

That would seem like a sensible next job, then. If he was going to scramble about with public
telephones in Britain, he was going to need a good supply of shillings. Especially, he thought
darkly, if Aunt Bethan was the person on the other end of the line.

~~~

Oceanic Terminal, Heathrow Airport, West London
24th December 1962

Jeffrey blinked in the early morning cold outside the airport. The sun wasn't up yet. The ground
was frosty underfoot. He had managed to doze, off and on, for the last two hours of the flight
across the Atlantic, but it hadn't been the kind of sleep that leaves you feeling refreshed.

His body told him it should be about midnight. His brain said that it looked like midnight, what
with the darkness and everything.

His wristwatch said it was five past seven in the morning. The plane had touched down fifteen
minutes early, thanks to favourable tailwinds. After the last few days, Jeffrey could only assume that someone, somewhere, really, really wanted him to see Gladys again. Unfortunately that someone had not had a quiet word with Aunty Bethan.

He looked down the road outside the arrivals hall and spotted the taxi rank. Even with the passengers spilling out with him from the long-haul flight from America, the queue wasn't large. He lifted his suitcase and headed off to join it.

When he was third in the queue, the man at the front turned around and said, "Anyone else going to Paddington?"

Jeffrey was going to Marylebone. That was the line which would take him up to High Wycombe, and then Hazlemere, and his fussy, silly, constantly-disappointed social-climber of a mother. He loved his mother, of course; not that she'd ever stand for him stating this fact in any kind of non-euphemistic way.

But he wasn't here to see his mother.

"I'm going to Paddington!" he called over.

"Nice one, guv!" the man said. The taxi driver looked unimpressed, but waited for the two of them to load up the cab and get in. "They don't like people sharing," the man confided. "I'd rather be glaring at for thirty minutes and split the fare, though, eh?"

Jeffrey smiled and nodded. In truth, his ears were having a bit of trouble assimilating the absence of American accents in those people who addressed him. It was two years since he'd last been in Britain. He was attuned to a different cadence of speech.

"Where you off to, then, squire?" his fellow passenger asked.

"Hmm?"

"Paddington ain't usually a destination. Where you off to?"

"Oh. Er, Cardiff."

"Welsh Wales, eh? Family there, have you?"

He smiled to himself. "Not yet."

"Eh? What? Oh! Oh, say no more, old son. Say no more. Well, I wish you all the best. Tis the season, et cetera. Me, I'm off to Swindon. My old girl's been all the family I need for the last twenty years. Still get a warm glow when I'm on my way home."

It was a quarter before eight when they arrived at Paddington station. The sun was starting to break through in the east, but the morning remained dark. This being central London, however, the station was already busy.

Jeff went to the ticket office and bought an open return ticket to Pontypridd via Cardiff. The first express of the day was due to depart at eight thirty. He went to find a cup of coffee, and wondered to himself whether it was too early to call Gladys. Or too late, perhaps? Mrs. Pritchard had said Gladys was working. She might have left the flat for her job already. Knowing Gladys, it seemed more likely than not.

He sighed to himself as he sat down in the buffet and pondered the vagaries of fate. Three years
ago he'd been seeking a new job with something akin to desperation: anything that avoided both Cambridge academia and Ugly Face Competitions would have suited. The opportunity in Wisconsin had been perfect, and he'd gladly turned his back on Crimpton, and Maplins, and even on Gladys Pugh.

Then, three months ago, having realised that Gladys Pugh was not someone he could so readily dismiss from his life, his heart had been broken by a telephone call. He'd been convinced he would never see Gladys again. It had hurt almost beyond his ability to describe: just as he had hurt her with that ill-advised letter back in 1960.

And here he was now. Sitting in Paddington station, waiting for a train to Cardiff.

Gladys didn't know he was coming. She probably wouldn't, even by the time he got there, since he had no contact number for her besides that of her Aunt. All he had was the address of a small haberdashers owned by a woman who thought he was an overly familiar man named Jesse. He didn't even have an hotel booked. Fine time he'd picked to become spontaneous! He never did things without careful planning. Never.

Still. He'd have given half his soul to know that before the end of the day he'd be looking at Gladys Pugh's face once again. Jeff drank his coffee with a half-smile, and didn't even notice how terrible it tasted.

~~~~~~
Jeffrey drew a deep, nerve-steadying breath as he looked at the façade of the shop. 'The Sewing Chest' was picked out in cheerful yellow letters on the hoarding outside. In the shop window there was a display of wool, the balls stacked in a neat pyramid, all in various colours and thicknesses. An old-fashioned embroidery frame with a half-finished design stood beside it. Scattered around the shelf were pincushions and some stuffed animals.

This was it, then. He was here. The realisation was almost dizzying. Halfway to Cardiff, on the steam train that had not yet been upgraded to one of the new diesels, he'd wondered whether it wouldn't be quicker to get out and walk.

It had just gone three o'clock in the afternoon. He hadn't slept properly in over twenty-four hours. He had tried to eat some lunch at a hotel opposite the station in Cardiff while he waited for the Pontypridd connection, but he'd been too tense to enjoy it and had sent most of it back.

He had no idea how Gladys was going to react to his arrival. Worse than that, he had no idea how he was going to react either. Their new closeness was founded on the relative safety of the written word. He'd been able to take his time to form the sentences he wrote to her. He'd been able to second-guess things, start again, improve his wording. And he'd been able to read her words in privacy, without any need for self-consciousness.

All those safety nets would be lost now. And Jeffrey Fairbrother was not a man given to articulate and flowing conversation. He stuttered. He blushed. He got nervous and masked this with pomposity.

Oh god, he was a disaster waiting to happen.

He pushed the door and went inside. The shop was small, with a single central table in its main area containing sewing supplies, and taller units around the walls dispensing wool, cotton, embroidery silks, buttons of all shapes, sizes and hues, and other things he couldn't begin to guess the names for. Another customer was browsing a display of thimbles. At the far end, facing the door, a stout woman with a jovial face stood behind a counter with a Victorian cast-iron till on it. She wore her silvering hair scraped back in a bun that was pinned with lethal-looking crossed needles, almost Oriental in style, and she was waiting to catch his eye.

"Afternoon, sir," she called over. "Anything I can help with, just you let me know."

Aunty Bethan, he realised, recognising that voice. With a mental reminder not to address her in any informal way, Jeffrey made his way over there.

"Good afternoon," he said. "My name is Fairbrother. Jeffrey Fairbrother."

Mrs. Pritchard frowned at him. "Am I supposed to be expecting you? I don't know any Fairbrothers."

"We've spoken on the telephone several times in the last few days," he told her, keeping his impatience to himself only with some effort.
She kept frowning, then the frown cleared. Her eyes widened in recognition. "Jesse?"

"Jeffrey," he said firmly.

"Jeffrey! Oh, it was such a bad line, like you were calling from halfway round the world! You should have saved your money if you were coming by here anyway."

"Yes, well, that was why I was calling," he said, as evenly as he could. "I was trying to let Gladys know that I was on my way."

"Oh, right. I see. Well, she's been in a pickle, the last week or so. First of all that letter from Australia, and then finding out her Yankee professor didn't want to visit. Just like the other one, of course. Clive-ruddy-Dempster. South Wales wasn't good enough for him either. Last Christmas, it was. My sister - that's Glad's Mam, Nesta - she was so upset. She'd got the best china out, and the glasses from her wedding to Alun, God rest his soul, and she'd fussed about for days trying to make sure that little house of hers was fit to receive guests. She'd missed her Glad so much, see, and she wanted everything to be perfect."

Mrs. Pritchard paused for breath. Jeffrey seized the chance to jump in with a comment of his own.

"Is Gladys here, Mrs. Pritchard?"

"Hmm? Well of course she isn't, dear, she's at work. Last shopping day before Christmas."

"Is it possible for you to give me an address?"

Mrs. Pritchard hesitated, then - for some reason - glanced over his shoulder at the woman who'd been looking at the thimbles. Jeffrey looked too. She was watching them with her hands on her hips.

"Oh," he said, "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your business." He moved aside to allow the customer to make her purchase.

The woman stepped closer, hands still on hips, but she didn't seem interested in the till or Mrs. Pritchard. She looked at him, lifted her chin, and she said, "You're Jeffrey Fairbrother."

"Um - yes," he said.

The woman looked him up and down and was not, apparently, impressed. "Gladys thought you weren't coming," she said, as if his arrival had been designed specifically to cause Gladys distress.

"I thought I wasn't coming. Up until Saturday evening." He pulled his shoulders back. "Forgive me - I-I-I don't know who you are."

"Nerys Roberts. Glad's sister."

"Oh." Now he looked, he could see the resemblance in the shape of the nose and jaw, and in the lift of the chin, but apart from that the two women were not alike. Nerys had shoulder-length, wavy hair, pinned sensibly behind her ears, mousy in colour. Her eyes were lighter too, and she was about four inches taller than her older sister. "Well, I-I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs. Roberts." He offered a hand. Nerys looked at it suspiciously for a long moment before her manners got the better of her and she shook it.

"Are you here to let her down?" Nerys demanded.
"I sincerely hope not."

"Why are you here, then?"

Jeffrey paused for a moment, trying to formulate an answer. He was so very tired, and so very nervous, and he had always struggled to deal with situations that had not been carefully planned out from the start.

"Nerys," Mrs. Pritchard said, "there's no need for the third degree, is there?"

"No, no, i-i-it's all right," he said. He straightened up and looked Nerys in the eye. She was doing only what any loyal sibling would do: she was protecting her sister from further injury. "I'm here because it's Christmas," he said. And it felt like a tiny epiphany when he added, "We're supposed to be with the people we love."

Mrs. Pritchard gasped and clutched at her bosom.

Nerys glared at him. "The other one said he loved her too."

Jeffrey opened his mouth to reply, but Mrs. Pritchard wailed, "What about the Yank! What about her professor!"

Nerys rolled her eyes. "He isn't a Yank, Aunty Bethan, he just works over there. This is him."

"Oh."

"Well?" she asked him. "Why should you be any better for her than Clive-ruddy-Dempster?"

It seemed Dempster had earned himself quite the nickname in the valleys. Jeffrey shrugged. "I don't know. I-I might not be. I'm rather out of practice." He sighed. "I don't blame you for wanting to protect her. You don't know me - why should you trust to my good intentions?"

"Why indeed?"

Jeffrey hesitated. Then, confused, he made a vaguely circular motion between them with his hand and said, "Are we, er, are, are we asking each other rhetorical questions now? Because it doesn't seem the best way to, er, m-move this conversation forward."

Nerys paused. Then she couldn't help but crack a smile. "All right, fine. I'll show you where Glad works. You want to leave your suitcase here, do you?"

"Oh. Um - I-I suppose that would make sense. If that's all right with you, Mrs. Pritchard?"

Mrs. Pritchard was beaming at him now. "You go on with Nerys, Professor. Your luggage will be safe by here. Later on we'll all have a cup of tea, get to know each other."

He handed off his case to Nerys, who went behind the counter and through a door, and returned a moment later empty-handed. Meanwhile Jeffrey offered a hand to Mrs. Pritchard. "I'm sorry about the confusion on the telephone," he said. "I-I was indeed calling from halfway around the world. But it's good to meet you in person."

"Word of advice," Nerys said as she led him out of the shop. "Don't be so charming. That's what he was like."

"Clive-ruddy-Dempster?"
She shot him a sharp look, then she sniffed haughtily and turned to lead him one way along Taff Street.

~~~

"You and Gladys worked together at Maplins," Nerys stated.

They were walking down the narrow shopping street of Pontypridd, with its bustling pedestrians doing their last-minute shopping, and the constant tooting of horns as cars and wagons tried to use the single-lane road. Everything seemed chaotic and frantic and required too much care and attention. There was a headache pressing between Jeffrey's eyes.

"Oh. Um, yes."

"You're the one, walked out on the team without a backwards glance."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Couldn't even say a proper goodbye."

He suppressed a sigh. "Guilty as charged."

"Hmph. Well, you get full marks for honesty, anyway. The other one liked to make up smooth excuses."

Jeffrey clenched his teeth. "Mrs. Roberts, I will happily spend the rest of my born days proving to you that I am not the same kind of man as 'the other one', but for now I would very much appreciate just the smallest benefit of the doubt!"

There was a pause. He wondered if he should apologise for losing his temper. Tiredness had rendered him grumpy.

"Well, thank the good Lord for that," Nerys said. "I was beginning to think you didn't have any backbone at all."

They walked further. This narrow road seemed to go on forever.

"You set Gladys up with that nice solicitor," she said.

"Yes."

"Thank you for that."

"It was the only way I could think of to help. This last year I've felt very, er, very isolated. Over in America. Knowing Gladys was facing such difficulties."

"Gladys always lands on her feet," Nerys said with a shrug.

There spoke the resentful little sister, Jeffrey suspected. But he made nothing of it, because his thoughts were more focused on the reunion ahead than this conversation.

The narrow road opened out into a crossroads, and on the near side of the junction stood a tall Victorian building, five storeys high, with a series of large fronted windows containing various displays, and a sign over the main doors which read 'Hywel's' in large letters and 'Est. 1864' in smaller ones. Nerys stopped at the doors and pushed them open.
Inside, music was being piped from speakers throughout the store: jingling interpretations of classic carols. In the large space in front of the doors stood a Christmas tree decorated with red ribbons and silver stars. It was surrounded by a low picket fence, attached to which was a colourful banner which informed customers: 'Father Christmas Grotto - Lower Ground Floor.' The banner provided a handy arrow towards the nearest stairs down.

Beyond, the shop floor opened out into a perfumery and cosmetics area. Nerys marched around the tree, weaving past the throngs of shoppers.

"She'll be upstairs, probably," Nerys called over her shoulder. "She finished organising all the Christmassy things weeks ago. She'll be on with the last preparations for the sales, now." Nerys guided them over to a set of lifts at the rear of the shop. "Always used to be her routine after the holiday season. October at the Sewing Chest, to do the tax forms and give Aunty Bethan a break. Then November, December, January at Hywel's."

"I see."

"She doesn't know how to not be busy, see."

"I remember."

Nerys looked at him curiously as they waited for the lift. "I'm not being rude, Mr. Fairbrother, but you've gone white as a sheet."

He swallowed. "I-I-I haven't seen Gladys in more than, er, er, three years."

"Well, it's probably about time, then, isn't it? For the record, if you ever hurt her, I'm coming after you with a sledgehammer."

Jeff looked at Nerys more in surprise than alarm. Nerys gave a small smirk. He was beginning to suspect that she was finding him trickier to dislike than she'd intended.

The lift pinged and the doors slid open. A dark-haired woman holding a clipboard stepped towards the door, then stopped. Her eyes met his, growing wide and round in shock.

Suddenly all Jeffrey could hear was the thump of his heart.

The world receded, distant, dimmed, and Jeffrey was trapped in a bubble of light that emanated from Gladys Pugh. Gladys dropped her clipboard, though it seemed not to make a single sound as it hit the floor of the lift. Jeffrey's breath hitched as he tried to take on enough oxygen. It felt like he'd been running.

Her lips said, "Jeffrey." She looked frightened, astonished, uncertain.

He said, "Gladys. Oh, Gladys."

The lift doors tried to slide shut. Someone stopped them with an arm, and they juddered back open. Jeffrey wasn't going to miss his chance again. He stepped inside the lift and held out a hand to Gladys. She glanced at it, then lifted her chin. Her shoulders moved with a sob, and this time the sound penetrated the ringing in Jeff's ears.

"Jeffrey," she said again. "It's really you."

"Such as I am," he agreed. He moved closer. If he wasn't touching her within three seconds flat he thought his heart might stop.
"Oh!" she cried, all passion and joy, suddenly no trace of fear at all. She lifted her arms, those dark eyes filled with welcome. Jeffrey moved to take her into his embrace.

The lift doors slid shut. The lift jolted as it moved. This motion knocked him briefly off-balance, and the embrace he offered tightened as they found their feet.

Oh god. The scent of vanilla. She still used the same lotion on her skin.

Gladys trembled against his shoulder, half laughing, half crying. He clasped her body to his and moved his mouth to her ear, and murmured:

"Surprise."

~~~

Five minutes later, and without quite knowing what had happened in the interim, Jeffrey found himself sitting in a small, windowless office with Gladys. The room was one of many along a narrow corridor accessible from a 'Staff Only' door on the fourth floor, behind the department store's tea-room. It was barely big enough for the desk and the filing cabinets that filled it. Two chairs had stood along the wall ready for visitors. He and Gladys now occupied them, and sat half-turned to face each other. Their hands were intertwined.

"Oh," Jeffrey said as a thought occurred, "um, your-your sister...?"

Gladys beamed at him. "It's half past three. She'll be off to collect the kids from holiday club at the church hall."

"Oh."

"You didn't see her wave?"

He shook his head as he looked at Gladys's face. So familiar, and yet somehow, exotically, different. "I, er, can't say I did."

She smiled; the kind of smile that could make a man's toes curl. "I'm having trouble looking at other things myself, right now." A sigh. "Jeffrey, why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I tried. Several times. Your aunt became convinced I was some impudent wretch named Jesse."

"Oh." Gladys frowned. "Oh!"

"Doesn't matter. I'm here now. God knows how I managed it."

She tilted her head to one side. "You do look weary. When did you last sleep?"

"Properly? Um - April?"

Gladys rolled her eyes. "I'm serious!"

"I'm all right, Gladys. It was a-a-a long journey, but it was worth it."

She smiled, a touch shy, and looked down at their clasping hands. "Last week, when I got your letter, I went to Hodgsons just down the road. Travel agents. Found out how much it costs to fly out to Wisconsin."

"Too much," he said ruefully. "But I-I very much appreciate the thought."
"It wasn't the cost that stopped me," she said. Then, in a whisper: "I was afraid."

He didn't ask for clarification. He just nodded his understanding. "Well, we are both prone to anxiety," he said.

"Yes."

"But going from the last few letters we've exchanged - Gladys, I don't think either of us can stop this, now. I-I certainly don't want to."

"Neither do I."

"We can go as slowly as you like, though." He breathed in through his nose, exhaled, then he briefly squeezed Gladys's hands. "You've no reason to trust me. Not in-in-in these, er, matters." He straightened up a bit. "I was a fool."

She shook her head. "I was moving too fast, and you weren't ready. It was bad timing, much as anything else."

"I was a coward."

"Are we really going to do this, Jeffrey? Use this time together to tell each other what idiots we've been?"

Jeff felt his face heat up as his brain processed the words that immediately sprang to mind. 'Why? How would you like to use the time?' He cleared his throat. "Perhaps not," he said instead. "I just, er, I-I didn't want you thinking I'd forgotten how badly I let you down."

"I don't think that," she said. "And I think it's time to look forwards, not back."

"Not too far forwards," he said. "I-I have a return plane ticket for new year's eve."

"It's all right," she said. "You've already given me more of a Christmas present than I ever thought I'd have." Teasingly, she added, "I'll take what I'm given and be grateful."

He couldn't help himself: he pulled a hand away from their tangle and lifted Gladys's hand to his lips, where he pressed a kiss to her knuckles and then brushed over that place with his thumb. Her breath caught as he did this. "Gladys," he said quietly, "I have to go back. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about what could perhaps happen. Further down the, er, th-the line."

"Let's do that," she agreed. "Maybe after you've had some rest, though, eh?"

"An excellent idea."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've, er, nothing planned."

Her eyebrows arched. "No?"

"No, it was all rather, well, last-minute."

"My," she said, her voice low and throaty and somehow able to flush his body with a sensual heat. "Things have changed."

"Some things have," he agreed. "Some things haven't." He knew he was blushing again, but this
time he wasn't going to stop himself. He leaned closer and held her gaze and murmured, "You're still 'derisible', Gladys."

She chuckled at that, and shook her head. "That's it. I'm finishing for the day. Give me two minutes to find Mr. Hughes to let him know. Then we'll get back to the shop, get you a cup of tea and a place to put your feet up, and we'll work out what to do next."

The two of them stood up. "I-I, er, don't mean to be a bother," he apologised.

"Jeffrey Fairbrother," she said. "Don't be ridiculous. Now. I'm due at Tonypandy this evening. Mainly because Mam won't go near the turkey while it's uncooked, and someone has to dress it for the oven. You're coming with me."

"All right."

She looked at their joined hands, then let go with a small frown of reluctance. "There's a spare room. You can sleep as long as you need."

"Where will you sleep?"

Her eyes widened briefly. "I'll manage," she said, feigning indignation.

"You always do," he agreed.

God, that smile. How had he ever turned his back on that smile?

Gladys opened the door of the office and they went off in search of Mr. Hughes.

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"Jeffrey."

_He turned his face in the direction of the voice, but the light from the mirror ball in the Hawaiian Ballroom kept flashing in his eyes and making him blink._

"Jeffrey, wake up."

_He tried to say that he was already awake, but no sound came out. Next to him, leaning against the bar, Fidel Castro offered him a satsuma. He declined. Castro scowled and threw the satsuma over to where Yvonne and Barry were holding their triumphant finishing pose in a perfectly silent ballroom. The satsuma exploded and covered them with bits of peel._

"Come on, Jeff."

_There was a nudge at his shoulder, and he turned the other way to see Gladys beside him, smiling, sipping her sherry and looking delectable in that claret frock: the one that so complemented the darkness of her eyes and hair and the paleness of her skin._

"Gladys," he murmured.

"Yes, Gladys is here. Time to wake up."

_Castro reached around him and put another satsuma down on the bar between Gladys and himself._

He came to with a sharp inhalation through his nostrils. His body tensed and flailed with a sense of uncertainty. "Watch out!" he tried to shout, but it came out more of a rasp.
"Hey - it's all right," Gladys said. "Lie back and get your breath.

"Oh," he said, as his eyes found hers and the world fell back into place. He was slumped in the corner of a sofa, and someone must have draped a blanket over his shoulders because he couldn't remember putting it there himself. He was nice and warm. "Gladys."

"Sorry to wake you up," she said. Then she frowned. "Watch out for what?"

"The, er, satsuma," he said, without thinking. Then he grimaced at his own words. "Sorry. I-I-I was dreaming." He took a deep breath and then tried to sit up properly. Gladys took the blanket off his shoulders and turned away as she folded it up. Jeff had the sense that she was giving him a moment of privacy. "How long was I asleep?"

"About an hour," she said. "I'd have left you a bit longer, but Dafydd'll be here in ten minutes. I thought you might want to wash your face and clear your head before we get going."

He nodded, rubbing at his eyes and wondering whether an hour of sleep had done any good or just made him even fuzzier. "Who's Dafydd?"

"My brother-in-law."

"Ah. Right." He sat foward. "Gladys, I'm so sorry - I don't remember dropping off."

"It's perfectly fine," she assured him, laying the folded blanket over the arm of a distant chair. "You kept going longer than I thought you would. That'll be Aunty Bethan's fault. She likes to talk."

Yes. He remembered quizzes about the weather in Madison, and his house in Madison, and his job in Madison, and whether he'd gone to be a professor in Madison because of some terrible event that had barred him forever from the universities of Great Britain.

"Where is your aunt?" he asked.

"Wrapping Christmas presents in her room."

Which was a good point. He'd told Gladys before they'd left the department store that he'd arrived in the Rhondda without any of his usual planning, and currently had in his suitcase only one Christmas gift, destined for Gladys herself. When Gladys had explained that the Christmas Day celebrations would feature all of her immediate family, Jeffrey had realised he had some shopping to do. She'd told him he didn't need to worry about that. He'd insisted.

"I need to do some of that," he said. "Wrapping presents."

"It's all right," she said. "I've got all the doings to take to Mam's. We can sort it out this evening."

"Right."

"It's daft, really," she went on, as Jeffrey pulled himself together. "Nerys and Dafydd have a lovely big house. An end-of-terrace, you know. Four bedrooms, and a nice big parlour. Year after year they offer to host Christmas day. And Mam won't have it. She won't have Christmas dinner anywhere other than Primrose Street, 'cause she says it has to happen where she can best picture Dad being there too."

Jeffrey thought that this was less daft and more heartbreakingly romantic. But he didn't say so, because he suspected that his sentimentality had reached epic levels on this particular Christmas
Eve, and he didn't really trust his own judgement.

Gladys shot him a cautious look. "I should probably warn you, though. Mam's house - it isn't a big place. It's just a standard old mining town terrace."

"Is it going to be a problem?" he asked. "Me being there? I mean, if there's already a crowd-"

"No it's not. It's going to be wonderful. There's plenty of food. The turkey's eighteen pounds, because Mam was offended when Bevan-the-Beef offered her a twelve pound bird. Eighteen was the only other one he had." Gladys stopped herself talking and then gave a smile. "I'm just saying. It's going to be busy tomorrow."

"I'll help in any way I can," he said simply. "I'm looking forward to meeting more of your family."

A memory popped into his head: Ted Bovis describing Mrs. Pugh in the most disconcerting terms. Heavyset and hirsute of face...

Well, so what? If she was as wide as she was tall and sported a veritable handlebar moustache, she remained the woman who had brought Gladys into the world. That made her, as far as Jeffrey was concerned, worthy of respect.

"It'll be quiet tonight, at least," Gladys said. "Just the three of us. We'll pick up some fish and chips on the way for supper, if that's all right?"

"Splendid," Jeff said. In the last two minutes or so he'd realised he was ravenous.

"But tomorrow, well, Nerys and Dafydd do their own Christmas morning with the kids, to get them over the first bit of excitement. They usually get over about midday, and they'll bring Aunt Bethan too. Gareth'll be there mid-morning because he brings the parsnips and carrots from his allotment in Porth."

"Is there anything I can offer for the festivities?" he asked. "A bottle of wine, or-or-or anything?"

Gladys looked at him askance. "If you bring wine, no one except us will be drinking it. Mam'll be on Babychams. Bethan and Nerys will be on pale ale. Dafydd on brown ale. Gareth doesn't like beer - he's a port-and-lemon man. Dafydd will tease him rotten about that."

Jeffrey processed all this information. It seemed that he was, indeed, entering something of a different world.

"So there's no need for you to bring a bottle. Nowhere's open, anyway, now," Gladys went on. "No late shopping tonight. Don't worry, though - I'm all organised for the food and drink."

Of course she was. How could she be otherwise? "You are, quite possibly, the most organised human being it has ever been my pleasure to meet," he said, and stood up.

"Well. Everyone's good at something," she said, but she looked pleased.

He stretched his back. His wristwatch read five minutes to six. He realised, with a flush of discomfort, that he needed to use the bathroom. He blanched and looked at Gladys uncertainly.

She smiled at him. "Back out into the hall, turn right, door at the end."

"You see?" he said. "Organised. Bordering on telepathic."

"Perhaps you're easier to read than you used to be," she threw back.
He hesitated at the doorway and looked at her. "I-I do hope so. That'll make my various inhibitions easier to navigate."

Her eyes glinted with mischief as she said, "Don't worry. If it all gets a bit much, we can sit in separate rooms and pass notes to each other under the doors."

He thought about that. He smiled at the image. Then he stopped smiling, because it occurred to him that Gladys was making a very good point...

He gave up trying to think straight and went to freshen up.

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The chapter's title comes from the song "Can't Help Falling in Love" which was written by Hugo Peretti, Luigi Creatore and George David Weiss.

Primrose Street, Tonypandy
24th December 1962

The house on Primrose Street had been given the same post-war modernisation as rows of terraces the country over. An extension on the rear of the building now housed a small kitchen. An inside lavatory and bathroom had been installed where room permitted: in the case of Mrs. Pugh's house this was upstairs, lopping off a few square feet of the spare bedroom. Most welcome of all, a water tank with immersion heater had replaced the back boiler integrated into the open fireplace.

At a little after half past nine on Christmas Eve, Jeffrey lay in a small bathtub, with his knees bent and raised and looking rather knobbly and pale. He had adopted this position in order to sluice away the lather after washing with a bar of Pears glycerine soap. He was cramped, and very aware of the fact that the door to the bathroom had no lock or bolt, but at that point his priorities were focused on the goal of looking, feeling and smelling clean again.

He'd worn the same clothes for more than thirty-six hours. He'd spent almost twelve of those hours in aeroplanes thick with cigarette smoke, and six of them either inside or in the general vicinity of a steam train. He'd been stressed into several episodes of perspiration during that day and a half. Up until half an hour ago he'd been convinced he was no longer pleasant to be close to. When Mrs. Pugh had offered him hot water to bathe, he'd have happily tried to shoehorn himself into the Belfast sink in the corner of the kitchen, if it had been necessary.

Along with the pleasure of washing himself clean came the additional pleasure of some time to himself. Being with Gladys again was marvellous - which was also, come to think of it, a huge relief, because a part of him had wondered whether a face-to-face meeting might have proved disastrous - but he relished the time to catch his breath. Catch up.

He sat up again, his shoulders reluctantly leaving the heat of the bathwater so that his legs could stretch out. His knees appreciated the renewed warmth.

So, he had now met Gladys's mother, who - according to Ted Bovis - should have been a terror to behold. She was, as it turned out, a perfectly presentable woman in her sixties, with no nightmare-inducing qualities at all. She walked with a stick due to the osteoarthritis she suffered in her joints, occasioned by many years with an undiagnosed thyroid disorder. Apart from this ailment, and a large pair of thick-framed spectacles to correct her myopia, she was quite capable.

Mrs. Pugh had an unpolished intelligence, an excellent memory for detail and a bawdy wit. She obviously adored Gladys, and Gladys adored her. After a long chat over their fish and chips about the chapel at nearby Penrhys village - a site of archaeological importance for Jeffrey and religious devotion for Mrs. Pugh - he decided that he was going to adore her too. It was a rotten shame that
he could not foresee a similar connection being forged between Gladys and his own mother.

Jeffrey used a nailbrush to ensure his hands were spotless, then sadly considered the need to remove his body from the cooling bathwater. He couldn't justify lingering any longer. Mrs. Pugh would require access to the room when she retired. It would be rude to blockade the bathroom.

He clambered out and drained the water. The soap suds floating on it were grey. He looked around for something to rinse out the bath, and found an old measuring jug on the shelf. While the bath emptied he towelled off.

The tiredness he'd felt earlier was coming back. He'd pushed through that first wave of fatigue after dinner, deciding it was better to keep going such that his waking patterns matched the daylight. Keeping occupied had helped. He'd wrapped his gifts while Gladys and her mother listened to some programme on the wireless in Welsh, both of them chortling at various intervals. Then he'd helped Gladys in the kitchen, undertaking what had turned out to be a significant amount of work to ensure that the turkey was ready to roast when Gladys turned on the oven in the morning. (About six o'clock in the morning, she'd claimed. He'd had no idea Christmas dinners were so labour-and-time intensive. Jeffrey loved to eat, but he'd never had any occasion to teach himself to cook.)

He wrapped the towel about his waist and put his dressing gown on over it. He tied the belt securely and turned to the almost-empty bath. A few rinses with clean, cold water left it looking ready for its next customer. He wondered about brushing his teeth, then remembered that Gladys had mentioned something about a nightcap. He brushed them anyway, but with barely any toothpaste so the tastes wouldn't clash.

Then he left the bathroom and turned the corner into the spare bedroom. His jacket and trousers were on a hanger he'd clipped to the curtain rail, and the draught from the window frame would hopefully go some way to airing them both. Jeff dressed quickly in clean undergarments and shirt, and his spare pair of trousers. He put a cardigan on over the shirt, not because the room downstairs was cold (in fact it was warmer than was comfortable, given the crackling coal fire in the grate) but because wandering around in one's shirt-sleeves in someone else's house seemed impolite.

He combed his hair. Checked his reflection in the mirror on the dressing table. Wondered whether Gladys had noticed his receding hairline. Then he returned downstairs.

He coughed as he approached the doorway into the parlour, simply to announce his presence. Mrs. Pugh and Gladys looked over at him and smiled. They seemed to be adding new decorations to the Christmas tree that stood in the corner furthest from the fire. When Jeff drew closer he realised that they were small homemade crackers.

"It's all right, dear," Mrs. Pugh said blithely. "We've finished talking about you."

"Mam!" Gladys complained. (She had been saying 'Mam!' in that tone of voice quite frequently that evening. Mrs. Pugh liked to tease.)

"I, er, hope the verdict isn't too dire," he said.

"Well, it's early days, isn't it?" Mrs. Pugh said. "You've been on best behaviour tonight, so first impressions are good. But they could be misleading."

"Trust me," Gladys said, "he's always on best behaviour." She sounded gloomy about it, but when Jeffrey caught her eye he saw a glimmer of mischief.
"Is that so?" Mrs. Pugh asked. "Probably safe to leave you two lovely young things alone down here, then, isn't it?" She stepped back. "Glad - you sure you don't want to come in with me tonight?"

"Easier to make sure I get the oven on if I sleep on the settee."

Jeffrey arched his brows in dismay. "Oh! Gladys, no, I-I-I'll happily avail myself of the, er, sofa. You should take the spare room."

Gladys looked at her mother. "See what I mean? This one doesn't even have an 'Honourable' and yet he can't help but be a gentleman. *All* the time." She turned to Jeff. "How tall are you, Jeffrey?"

"Five foot nine," he said, then shifted uncomfortably and added, "and a half."

"Mm-hmm. And how tall am I?"

"Five...three?"

"About six inches shorter than you, yes?"

"Don't forget the half," Mrs. Pugh muttered.

"And the settee?" Gladys went on, pointedly ignoring her mother and gesturing to the sofa that faced the fireplace. "How long do you think that is?"

"Um..."

"Here's a clue. I can lie on that and if I stretch my toes I can touch the far end."

"Gladys-"

"Jeffrey, you're jet-lagged. And tomorrow morning this house is going to get very, very busy. You need some proper rest. You can be ungentlemanly. Just for one night."

Mrs. Pugh snorted.

Gladys frowned. "That's not what I meant, Mam."

"Fine," he said, raising his hands and stepping back. "I concede, hopefully before my absurd manners provoke an argument."

Oh, don't worry about that, *bach,* Mrs. Pugh said, making Gladys - for some reason - snort, herself. "The arguments always happen at the same time. You're safe till tomorrow, about half an hour after Her Majesty's speech is done. That's when Dafydd has his third bottle o' brown ale, and Gareth stops ignoring Dafydd's insults."

"Um..."

"But we've got all that to look forward to," Mrs. Pugh said. "Now I'm for bed, and half an hour with Miss Georgette Heyer. Jeffrey - if I may call you Jeffrey?"

"Please do."

"Thank you for your help this evening. I'll wish you good night."
"Good night, Mrs. Pugh."

"Oh, call me Nesta. Unless we're going straight to 'Mam'?"

"Mam!" That was Gladys, of course.

Mrs. Pugh gave Jeff a cheeky grin and then handed off her last Christmas cracker to Gladys. She pressed a kiss to her daughter's cheek. "Sweet dreams, cariad."

Gladys gave Jeffrey a smouldering look. "Very, very likely."

Jeff said, "Oh lord," and picked up some homemade crackers to place in the tree.

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The fire burned low. The tree met Gladys's perfectionist standards. The gifts were wrapped and deposited beneath the branches. Jeffrey and Gladys sipped Drambuie, neat, from sherry glasses.

"I haven't tasted this stuff for years," Jeff remarked, after rolling the liqueur around his mouth and savouring the spicy notes over the honey sweetness.

"I hadn't ever tasted it before August," Gladys said.

"Oh?"

"Brendan caught me in a rare moment of indecision," she said. "At the bar."

"Brendan is the, er, resort manager?"

"That's right. Nice man. I think you'd like him. Anyway, he asked me what the problem was, and I said I didn't fancy any of my usual tipples. I wanted something a bit sweet, but not too sweet. And I wanted something warming too. But not harsh."

"Drambuie's a good choice," Jeffrey said, nodding, wondering whether he would really, truly like the kind of man who chatted Gladys up at the bar. "The chap who shared rooms with me at Cambridge kept a bottle of it. Mainly to mix with the very cheap and nasty Scotch he bought."

"A Rusty Nail," Gladys said.

"Yes, that's right."

"I like it better neat. Or with ice. But Mam's still getting used to the icebox in the new fridge. She keeps forgetting to fill up the tray."

"That's all right. I-I'm not generally a fan of 'on the rocks'."

Gladys made a surprised noise.

"What?" he asked.

"I thought you liked rocks. And soil. And playing in the dirt."

He huffed a laugh at that. "I suppose I do. Always have."

"Always?"

Jeff smiled distantly. "I was, oh, about ten years old? Home for the summer hols. At a loose end,
nothing to do with myself. I decided to make a battleground for my toy soldiers in a corner of the

garden." His memory took him back to the scene, and his hand followed the shape of the
landscape he'd tried to build. "Hills, fortifications, tree cover. I borrowed a trowel from the

toolshed and began to sculpt my area of play. And-

He stopped. Gladys turned to him. "And what?"

"And I-I've just realised this is not a childhood moment I should be sharing with you on an evening

like this one."

She looked at him a moment, and then she asked, "What did you dig up?"

He sighed. "The skeleton of a pet cat."

"Your cat?"

"Oh, no." He frowned at the very idea. "No, no, Mother would never have cats in the house." He

smiled to himself. "She views cats and dogs as a binary choice. You may embrace one or the

other, but never both." He shook the stray thought away. "No, it had been a-a good twenty years

in the ground, that poor old moggy." He cleared his throat. "Sorry. Not the most romantic of

anecdotes."

Gladys only shrugged. Perhaps she'd been expecting nothing else. "But you weren't upset? Ten

years old, looking at a dead cat?"

"The skeleton was very well preserved. Almost intact. Chemistry of the soil, you see. Wet, clay,

almost pH neutral, like fenland. Once I realised what I'd found, I was fascinated. I got quite

careful about the way I uncovered it."

"Of course you did," she said dryly.

"I'd been to the Natural History Museum. I'd seen skeletons before."

"Did you think you'd discovered a new dinosaur or something?"

"Oh, no, I-I knew it was a cat."

"How?"

"Little collar tag, lying next to the neck. I could read the engraving: 'Tiger - Three Beeches.' That

was my main clue." He smiled at Gladys's tut-tut, since he could see it was affectionately meant.

"Anyway, I spent all afternoon edging the soil away from this specimen."

"Cat. Named Tiger."

"Er, yes. And when my father came home from work that evening he came to find me. Saw me

covered in dirt, trying to scrape soil from between a dead cat's ribs with one end of a lollypop

stick."

"So he gave you a clip round the ear and told you to take better care of your clothing?"

"No, he told me I was going to be an archaeologist. And as it turns out, he was quite right."

Gladys nodded. "Well." She glanced at him. "That was a lovely story."

Their gazes held for a moment before the absurd humour broke through the tension and they both
began to giggle. When the giggling tailed off they went back to sipping their Drambuie.

"I suppose it's a good point to make, though," Jeff said. "Perhaps it's better that I'm honest. Er, up front, so to speak. There's a good chance I'm going to be very bad at this."

"At what?"

"At, er, at....um."

"At finding words?"

"Well, yes. That."

Gladys leaned closer, and her upper arm touched his. He managed not to flinch away, though he was dismayed to realise that there was a reflex in him that wanted to.


"Let's, er, not get ahead of ourselves."

"I knew you'd say that," she grumbled. "Anyway, lovemaking doesn't only mean that. It means the-the preamble. As well."

"Oh. Well. I learned three years ago to never question your dictionary definitions."

It took her a moment before she laughed again. "I'd forgotten about that!"

"I hadn't. I was mortified for months."

"Good. So you should have been." Their arms were warm and snug against each other now, and Jeffrey found himself relaxing. Gladys gave a small sigh that sounded reasonably contented.

"Why d'you say you'll be bad at it?"

"For a start I-I-I'm very out of practice."

He sensed her nodding. "There's been no one?"

"Since Daphne? No."

"Three and a half years?"

"She left me in October '58. That makes it four years and two months." He looked away, hiding his face. "Not that I've been counting." Not until very recently, anyway.

"Four years since you last..."

"Since I last did any, er, wooing. Pre- or, er, post-preamble."

"Why?" Gladys asked.

"Why what?"

"Why has there been no one else?" She turned to look at him, but he kept his gaze on the flames of the fire opposite. "You're a catch, Jeff. You're nice-looking, thoughtful, clever, kind. I won't believe you if you say no one showed any interest. So why?"
Jeff sighed. "Because every time someone showed any interest, all I could do was..." He gave a small shrug which managed to move both of their shoulders. "Well. No one knows better than you what I do."

"Curl up like a hedgehog. Show your prickles. Hope they give up and leave you alone."

"Yes."

"And yet here you are. Watching the fire burn down with me after flying halfway around the world just to be with me at Christmas."

"It was the letters," he told her, suddenly quite overcome with emotion. He swallowed it down. "Talking to you in those letters - Gladys, I'm not sure I've ever felt closer to anyone."

"Me too."

A moment of quiet was broken by a coal sputtering in the grate. Gladys got up and went to the fire, leaving Jeff's right arm feeling cold and bereft. As she rearranged the coals, she crouched down and he could admire the shape of her hips and posterior in her tailored skirt. He had to look away.

"Jeff?"

"Hmm?" When he looked back she was standing up.

"Mind if I turn the lights down?" she asked.

Ah. So they came to this: the moment the day had perhaps been building towards. As lightly as he could, he asked, "Am I about to be seduced?"

Gladys glanced at the ceiling. "With Mam upstairs reading Regency romance, and my hands shaking?" She held up her hands and demonstrated that there was indeed a tremble. "Don't think so. But I'd like to talk a bit longer, if you're not too tired, and it'd be nice to do it without the main light on."

Jeffrey realised that softening the light in the room would allow him to feel less self-conscious too, so he nodded. "However you're comfortable," he said.

"Why don't you pour us another drink?"

He poured. He noticed his hands were trembling as well.

Gladys went to one corner of the room, where a table lamp sat at the end of a sideboard next to one of the two armchairs positioned either side of the fire. She switched the lamp on, then lifted it down to set it on the carpet. Then she switched the overhead light off. The room was cast with a gentle orange-tinged glow, flickering a little from the light of the flames in the fireplace.

She returned to the sofa and settled beside him. An image sprang into his mind: a premonition, perhaps, of Gladys turning towards him, reaching for his face, gently coaxing him into a position where she could-

"There's, er, something I-I-I need to tell you," he said, quelling the moment of panic.

"Oh, fy nuw," she quietly despaired. "Here it comes."

"Here what comes?"
"The thing that makes it all crash down."

Her trembling grew pronounced. For some reason, realising that Gladys was perhaps even more nervous than he was made Jeffrey calmer. He half-turned towards her and tried to look reassuring.

"Gladys, it's all right," he said. "At least, I hope it's all right. I'm leaving America. That's what I need to tell you. I'm coming home."

It took several seconds for the words to sink in. Gladys lifted her hand to her nose and held it there a moment, then she breathed deeply and turned to look at him. Her brief moment of despair passed, overtaken by a look of incomprehension.

"Home."

"Britain."

"But you just got a promotion."

It wasn't the comment he'd expected. Every time he'd run through this conversation in his head she'd said different things, but that had never been one of them.

Jeffrey nodded cautiously. "The timing hasn't been ideal, no. But as soon as I thought about doing it, I-I knew it felt right."

"Where are you going to work, then?"

"At the moment I'm waiting to hear. There's a-a-a university that has shown an interest in offering me a position. These things are...it's all early days. At present I'm not due to leave Wisconsin until Easter."

"Which university?"

He gave a small smile, and hoped this news was going to be well-received. "Exeter."

Gladys's eyes widened. "You're coming back for me?"

"I'm coming back because it feels right. But I'd be lying if I said that you weren't a-a-an important factor."

"What if you don't get the job?" she asked, looking a lot more anxious than he'd hoped for. "What if it's a worse job? What if you hate it? You'll end up resenting me. Hating me-"

"Gladys, that is not going to happen-"

"It's my fault, isn't it?"

"This isn't about f-"

"It's what I wrote to you. About how I hated it in Australia, so far away from my family."

"I admit," he said, "that when I read those words it changed my mind about some things."

"What things?"

"Well, I, er, I-I had this rather complacent notion that if our, er, our-our-"
"Oh for god's sake, it's called a relationship, Jeffrey."

He tamped down a surge of irritation that had been prompted by Gladys's own. "If our relationship continued to develop as it seemed to be developing, then I thought I-I should invite you to come to Madison. To, er, to see if you liked it." He sighed. "Sometimes I'm not terribly good at remembering that other people view things in a different way to me. I needed you to write those words in that letter. I needed to learn that it isn't fair - just expecting someone to fit their life around yours."

"So you decided to fit yours around mine?" But the tone was no longer accusatory or irritated, it was bewildered.

"Not necessarily. Not in any way that...presumes upon your welcome." He sighed at himself as he sensed his brain trying to flick the switch and change to formal-mode. Damn it, he really was awful at this kind of thing. "I'd have come back within a couple more years anyway. Wisconsin has been very good for me - you can see, I hope, how much good it's done."

"I can see," she agreed.

"But I think it's time to come home. A-and Exeter is not only in a beautiful part of the country, but it has the following things going for it." He counted off on his fingers, in the way Emilia always tended to do. "It is nicely distant from Cambridge, and from Hazlemere. It is a newish university, unhampered by centuries of its own politics and traditions. Its anthropology department is already gathering a reputation for excellence. And..." He looked at Gladys and tried a smile. "If I find myself living and working in that area, I can invite you to have dinner with me. I can ask you to dance, from time to time. We can walk together through the Devonshire countryside. We can picnic. We can do all the things people do..."

When they're in love. He wanted to say the words, but couldn't.

Gladys tilted her head as she looked at him. "You do know you don't have to court me, don't you? I'm already yours, Jeffrey."

"It isn't about what I have to do," he said. "It's what I want to do." He reached for her hand and wrapped both of his around it. "Gladys - I have never before been with a woman who makes me feel like this. It is, er...it's nerve-racking. And uncomfortable." He breathed out slowly, and closed his eyes. "And so intensely delicious I can hardly think straight."

When he opened his eyes she was smiling at him. "Well, it's nice to know it's not just me," she said. "But it does make me wonder what on earth you were feeling when you courted your ex-wife."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'll tell you all about it some time. It was different. But this - this is magical. Miraculous." He squeezed her hand. "I want the chance to enjoy it. If, er, if that fits in with what you'd like, too?"

She squeezed back, then she pulled her hand from his. She stood up, walked away, making Jeffrey wonder whether he'd done it all wrong. He thought he'd found his romantic voice, but he had such a limited frame of reference for such things.

Gladys went to the wireless on the sideboard. She turned it on low and fiddled with the tuning dial. After a susurration of static the station she had selected came through. She adjusted the volume with a cautious look up to the ceiling. Music quietly filled the parlour: something by Helen Shapiro, he thought.
Gladys returned to the sofa and held out her hand. "Must be Ladies' Choice in the Primrose Ballroom tonight," she said shyly.

He could hardly surrender to the reflex that urged distance after the conversation of the last ten minutes, could he? Jeffrey took her hand and stood up, and the two of them found a small space between the sofa and the fireplace. It actually felt quite comfortable, taking Gladys in his arms like this. She didn't press too close, or gaze passionately up at him, as she had sometimes done back in those days at Crimpton.

He rubbed his thumb over the knuckle of her hand without really thinking about it. His arm around her waist felt almost possessive. He'd need to be careful of thoughts like that.

He could still smell the faintest tease of vanilla from her skin. If it had been combined with the hint of chlorine from an early-morning swim then he could have closed his eyes and been right back there...

Jeff caught himself studying her face. Gladys had noticed it too, and there was a wary question in her eyes. It was odd to realise that she still seemed to be waiting for the walls to come crashing down.

"Your hair's longer now," he observed.

"Only at the back."

He nodded. He wanted to find the tiny scar he knew was close to her left temple, but it felt like too much of an intrusion. There'd be time in the future to find it, and kiss it, and try to use that one point of her body to focus all the compassion and condolence he felt for her whenever he thought of the events at St. Fagans Castle.

He set the idea aside for now. "No more false eyelashes," he noted.

"They got to be such a pain," she said. "Do you miss them?"

"Why on earth would I? I can see your eyes even better now." God, but she had beautiful eyes. They were like polished ebony. Black marble. A deeper, more sensuous mirror than silver and glass could ever be. He could fall into those eyes, and keep falling, infinitely, and never know anything except the sweetest contentment.

His arm tightened around Gladys's back. They swayed without really moving their feet. Helen Shapiro was replaced by Danny Williams singing 'Moon River'.

"Go on, then," he said. "Tell me my hairline is in danger of disappearing over the brow of the hill."

Gladys glanced up at his forehead. "Is it?" She shrugged. "Hadn't noticed." She just smiled at the look of disbelief in his eyes, and slowly lowered her head until her cheek rested against his shoulder. She moved with caution, like he was a wild animal that might yet startle and bolt.

She probably wasn't far wrong...

He'd show her. And perhaps he'd show himself, too. He stroked the curve of her spine and turned his head so he could rest his jawline against her hair.

Gladys sighed, and swayed. He closed his eyes and tried to imprint on his mind the sensations he knew in that moment. He'd need these memories to keep him sane when he had to go back to
Wisconsin. His feelings hadn't exactly taken him by surprise - he'd known when he boarded the plane at Dane County that he was a man running to the woman he loved - but the sheer potency of it all was giving him pause.

Perhaps it was down to the way they'd found each other again while they'd been so far apart. They'd fallen in love with no chance to look, to touch, to sigh together. Perhaps the looking, the touching, the sighing was what was needed to keep the feelings in check. A relief valve, to stop the pressure from building to dangerous levels.

Right now every touch seemed needful. His chest ached with it.

It was only when Gladys pulled back that he realised he'd begun to murmur kisses against her hair. His eyes half-opened, even as his lips moved. He waited for the wave of icy shock to return him to his senses...

"Jeffrey," she murmured with that beautiful, lilting, sensual voice of hers. Why did his name never sound so provocative from any other lips?

And how was this voice keeping the icy shock at bay?

Her hand left his and slid slowly up to his shoulder. He completed their embrace as he wrapped his free arm around her. Their bodies pressed close; their eyes met. His lids remained heavy, perhaps with tiredness, more probably with the thick, velvet passion of the moment. A flutter in his abdomen made his stomach muscles tense and then relax. If their mouths were drawing closer, it was agonisingly slowly.

'Moon River' built to its climax. They weren't swaying any more. In the distance a male voice from the wireless reeled off song titles, then mentioned Radio Luxembourg, then said "Elvis." Another song began: so appropriate that their almost-kiss became an almost-chuckle, just for an instant.

Wise men say only fools rush in...

Gladys's lower lip grazed against his. They both caught their breath with the sensation. Jeff angled his head and chased that tiny contact with one of his own. Slow; so slow. Not even a proper kiss. Not yet. Soon.

One of Gladys's hands found its way to his collar, and her fingernails gently stroked the nape of his neck. He shivered with the touch. Her mouth pressed a light, chaste kiss to his lower lip and then backed off with a warm whisper of her breath. His heavy-lidded eyes were closing, the better for his sense of touch to take over. He'd had little in the way of alcohol this evening, but he felt as if he were intoxicated.

Their lips met again, and this time the contact lingered: still light, still tentative, but too irresistible to break. Jeffrey lost track of his physical self. He knew, intellectually, that he stood in the parlour of a terraced house. His feet were on the floor, his legs were straight and supported his weight, his arms held Gladys Pugh snugly against him. But to process the signals from his nervous system was impossible. He might as well have been falling through the aether, or floating in an endless ocean.

Gladys gave a pleading murmur. Jeff's spinning displacement was gone in an instant. He heard himself answer her need with his own, and the contact at their lips increased. He moved carefully, followed her lead. He hadn't been joking earlier when he'd confessed to being out of practice, and in any case, he'd never known a kiss like this before. Forty-one years with no practice made him a
novice indeed.

The kiss broke; probably from a need for oxygen. They pulled back, breathing hard.

"Jeffrey," Gladys said, her voice wavering between passion and restraint, "am I dreaming? Tell me I'm not dreaming. Tell me-"

"I love you," he breathed, drunk with the sense of release the words gave him. "I love you. I love you." He only stopped when her mouth found his once again.

On the night before Christmas in a Welsh mining town, Jeffrey Fairbrother kissed Gladys Pugh in front of a low-burning fire. On the wireless, Elvis Presley advised them that some things were meant to be, and when his rich, lingering baritone was replaced by Chubby Checker urging them to twist again, neither Jeffrey nor Gladys heard or cared.

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Dearest Jeffrey,

You've been gone only two and a half hours, and I miss you.

The last few days feel like a dream. Did they really happen? Did I really stand in that lift at Hywel's as the doors slid open, to see your face looking back at me? Did we dance in front of the fire on Christmas Eve, and kiss, and kiss, and kiss? Was that you, Jeffrey Fairbrother, who helped Rhyddyd build a model of a Lancaster bomber, and then didn't even flinch when little Rhian climbed on your knee and presented you with a storybook? Did we walk together on Boxing Day, hand in hand, all the way up through Clydach Vale, when the snow fell and the path turned icy, and neither of us had the right shoes on?

Was it really us, Jeff? Because it feels like I've been making the sort of memories in the last four days that most people struggle to make over a lifetime.

(Aunty Bethan just brought me a cup of tea and a Bourbon biscuit. She never, ever makes me tea unless we have company. I must be wearing my saddest face at the moment!)

I'm looking forward, though. All the uncertainty is gone. For such a long time I wasn't sure if you thought of me as just a friend - fondly of course, but no more than that. Now I have visions in my head of all that is still to come: dancing and picnics and romantic dinners. That'll keep me going for a while, at least. And those things - they're just the preamble, my love. When we get to the main event I think we can promise each other fireworks. Lord knows, there's been a few times, these last four days, when it's been hard to hold back.

Oh. That reminds me.

There was something we didn't get around to talking about, what with that silly letter from Clive's mistress about their son, and your wartime story, and all the other things we discussed. It's about that night in 1959.

As I recall, you never went swimming in the pool at Crimpston (other than fully clothed!) but I can tell you, hand on heart, that if I am ever lucky enough to see you dressed in a fetching pair of bathing trunks, I will be seeing no more and no less than I have already. And there's that question finally answered!

You've got lovely calves to your legs, by the way. And a smudgy little freckle above your navel. Funny that - I don't think you've got freckles anywhere else. (Well, can you blame a girl for looking?)

I'd better close now, before I get myself too hot and bothered.

Write soon, Jeff. I'm already counting the hours until the next time we're together.

All my love,

Gladys
Dearheart,

Your letter came this morning, and it was an honest to goodness relief. The last week has been such a tumult of activity I’ve barely had the time to gather my thoughts, but every moment of privacy that I could contrive saw me - what else! - revisiting the days we spent together in the Rhondda. And like you, Gladys, I watched the memories play back in my head, and I wondered whether it could have been real.

So thank you for your letter. At least I know now that if it was all the most beautiful delusion, then it was one we shared!

Before I begin to wax lyrical, I shall deal with the news I have. I have informed Mother that I am involved with a delectable woman from South Wales. I had not realised how much concern my four years of abstinence had caused her. Mother was so grateful to discover that I have not dedicated myself to a life of celibacy that she did not even shriek and wail upon learning that the object of my devotion has no entry in Burke’s.

I am quite sure that Mother's snobbery will mean your first impression of her is a vexatious one. How I wish I could expect things to be different. I know how delighted I was to meet your own Mother, and to realise, within the time it took to eat some excellent fish and chips straight from the newspaper, that she is wise, witty and wonderful.

Well, what will be will be. For now, Mother is happy that I am no longer living quite so monk-like. At least that reaction was more positive than I was expecting!

Before I flew back here I met with Professor Forester on the Saturday, in London. We had lunch, and a very good meeting it was too. He's a good man, an excellent academic, and we seemed to get on well. I can only wait and hope now. If the timing works out, I could be moving to Exeter come Easter. If not, I shall simply have to look elsewhere. There is no need for concern, however, Gladys. Whether I leave Madison at Easter or sooner, I will be leaving. My finances are well in order, so I can afford to take a sabbatical if no other options present.

To this end, I have already begun to pack! I have purchased packaging and wrapping materials, and those personal possessions which I must ship back to Britain are being organised. (I really do seem to accumulate books at an alarming rate.)

You mentioned before Christmas that you would be returning early to Devon, so do let me know your moving dates. In the meantime, I hope the sales have been going well at Hywel's. Please give my very best wishes for a happy and prosperous new year to all your family.

Take exceptionally good care of yourself, dearheart, and write to me again soon. I tell myself that April is not so far away, but when I look at the calendar I wonder how I will be able to stand the waiting.

With my best love,
Jeffrey

P.S. That is not a freckle. It is a small birthmark, and when viewed from the correct angle it has been known to resemble Madagascar. I take comfort from knowing, however, that there remains some "undiscovered country" between us. I would hate to have become predictable so soon...

J. X

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Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin

7th January 1963

Dear Professor Forester,

Thank you for your letter, and for taking the time to meet with me at such short notice over Christmas. I too felt that the conversation we had over lunch was as useful as it was enjoyable.

I am delighted that you feel I would be a good fit for your department, and hereby provisionally accept the position of Chair in Archaeology. As we discussed, my present contract with the University of Wisconsin runs until the 5th April, though I am expecting that date to be brought forward. This will happen within the next two weeks, once our own staffing issues have been addressed. At that point I shall send a telegram to confirm my earliest availability.

It was kind of you to let me know you are interviewing other candidates in case the offer you have made to me falls through. I understand completely, of course, and appreciate your candour.

It is my sincere hope that we can find agreement with the timeframe. At that point I will very much look forward to taking up my responsibilities at the University of Exeter.

Yours sincerely,

Jeffrey Fairbrother

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Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin

7th January 1963

Dear Mr. Kadlec,

Further to our second meeting last Friday, I am delighted to offer you the position of Associate Chair (Archaeology) within the Department of Anthropology. If you are willing to accept the post, please advise your availability at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Jeffrey Fairbrother
Department Chair

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Three Beeches
Dear Jeffrey,

Now sit down and don't panic.

I'm in hospital. It is nothing serious. I had a silly fall out on the path by the long hedges. Brisket got under my feet as usual, but the ground was frosty and down I went. Baxter heard me shout and was there in a trice, and I must admit that this National Health Service that the socialists insisted on founding did take good care of me. It turns out I have broken my ankle, and quite badly. I had a small operation yesterday morning which realigned the bones, and it went perfectly well. Now I am in plaster cast and hoping to be discharged very soon. Hospitals are tedious places.

Now go and make yourself a cup of tea before you hyperventilate, dear.

All right then? Good. I shall be back home by the time you receive this, so by all means telephone if you feel you must. Baxter will no doubt rally round like the trooper he is, and Edna Witteridge has already offered to come and stay for a week or two until I'm more mobile on the crutches. I have plenty of help here.

Now then - to business. I know you won't thank me for this, but I've told Dean Buxton that you're returning to England in the spring. He tried to play his cards close to his chest at first, because he's still rather cross about the way you stayed at that silly camp all through 1959 and then went racing off across the Atlantic. But in the end, after some rather aloof comments about how he "can't be expected to move heaven and earth depending on young Jeffrey's whims and moods" he admitted that he's finally retiring in the summer, and if your name were to be put forward as a possible replacement for Department Chair then it would, so far as the Dean is concerned, go straight to the top of the list. He also hinted that you'd be Dean of the college within two years, as Dean Buxton's successor in that regard is barely any younger than he is.

Dean Fairbrother, Jeffrey! You can't tell me that doesn't have rather a good ring to it! So don't turn your nose up just yet. Be thankful you haven't been blackballed. Keep the idea on the back burner if you like, but while you do so, try to remember that view across the Old Quad from your former rooms, and the Burgundy they'd serve at High Table on feast days, and all the other good things you've so conveniently forgotten.

Also remember that Cambridge, being a seat of learning, has never paid quite so much attention to the class system as it perhaps ought to. So there's no reason to suppose this young woman you're seeing can't fit in there too, if this thing between you both is serious. I seem to recall some of your former colleagues with quite ordinary wives. Educated, I suppose, in some respects, but rather unfinished in others. That's what you get with scholarships, isn't it?

I've just been told I must take my pain pills. I don't like them. They make me woozy. I suppose one has to sleep, though, so I shall close this letter for now. It really was lovely to see you at Christmas, dear, even if you were following your heart rather than your filial duty. You've always had far too great a capacity for sentiment. Just like your father. Still, I suppose you wouldn't be you, otherwise, would you?

Take care of yourself, and don't go fussing. I am perfectly all right!

Mother
Telegram

To: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

From: Gladys Pugh
Taff Street Post Office, Pontypridd, S. Wales

Friday 11th January 1963

DELIVERED TODAY: ONE DECREE ABSOLUTE. MR. FURNESS PHONED TO SAY SETTLEMENT SUM ALREADY RECEIVED. DO YOU WANT ME FOR MY MONEY?

LETTER TO FOLLOW.

LOVE,
GLADYS

---

Telegram

To: Gladys Pugh
93 Taff Street, Pontypridd, S. Wales

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Friday 11th January 1963

SHALL I RISK CONGRATULATIONS?

I WANT YOU FOR A THOUSAND REASONS, NONE OF THEM FINANCIAL. MAY YOUR LETTER FLY SWIFT.

LOVE,
JEFFREY

---

January 11th 1963

93 Taff Street
Pontypridd

My darling Jeffrey,

I am no longer married. It is a strange feeling. Did you feel strange when it happened to you? It seems to me, after the events of last year, that this final bit of paper shouldn't mean so much. The decision was already made. The details were agreed. The forms were signed. I'd already said to myself, "Yes, this marriage is over."

And yet I have this strange feeling. I think it's less about feeling something in particular, and more about believing I should feel something. Perhaps what I'm truly feeling is guilt, that the end of my
marriage means little more than the chance to get on with my life, and make better decisions this time around.

I am Gladys Pugh once again. I am a divorcee. Hmm - yes, now I've written it out, I think I am content with these facts.

So, my love. Having just re-read your letter, my thoughts immediately turn to this birthmark, and my imagination runs wild as I consider the various 'angles' it could be viewed from. But I must not get ahead of myself.

The sales are going well, thank you. The family send their best wishes for the new year back to you, and Mam even asked me to send you her love, so you've obviously made a good impression there!

As far as your Mother goes, don't fret. If she views me as being not nearly good enough for her angelic boy, then I'll try not to take offence. She is who she is, and the one thing that will always unite us is our fierce love and pride in Jeffrey Fairbrother. Perhaps she will come to recognise this common ground we share, and her attitude will improve. If not, well, we'll cross that bridge when it comes. I've learned not to stew over problems that may never arise.

I am excited to learn that you are already preparing for your return to these shores. If I can help with anything at this end, let me know.

I'm returning to Devon on Saturday February 16th. With only a few admin staff around the resort between seasons, Brendan tells me he's getting behind on bookings and paperwork, and he knows he'll have to rejig the employment contracts now that the resort has been open two full seasons and is gathering good reviews. Publicity Manager is to be one of the posts that becomes permanent, so it looks like Hywel's may have to do without me next December.

Your telegram was just delivered - thank you for the congratulations. A thousand reasons, is it? Roll on the day, Jeffrey, when you can lean in and whisper those reasons into my ear.

Thinking of you, Jeffrey, and sending my love your way,

Gladys
X

~~~

Telegram

To: Prof. James Forester
University of Exeter, UK

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Tuesday 15th January 1963

FURTHER TO PHONE CALL, PLEASED TO CONFIRM DATE I AM AVAILABLE: MONDAY 25TH FEBRUARY. LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU ON 22ND AS AGREED TO DO THE PAPERWORK.

J.F.
Telegram

To: Gladys Pugh
93 Taff Street, Pontypridd, S. Wales

From: Jeffrey Fairbrother
University of Wisconsin, USA

Tuesday 15th January 1963

WOULD YOU DO ME THE HONOUR OF HAVING DINNER WITH ME ON 22ND FEBRUARY?

LOVE,
JEFFREY

---

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

17th January 1963

Dearheart,

This really is quite ridiculous. The amount of time I must wait before seeing you again grows ever shorter, and yet every day that brings our reunion closer makes the remaining delay more difficult to stand! I suspect that I will be an absolute wreck the week I am due to fly back.

I'm so glad you telephoned on Tuesday - of course I'm glad, since listening to your voice is the source of my greatest joy - but Gladys, Gladys, how you try my restraint! I showered in barely warm water after that conversation, and then tried to lose myself in a favourite novel, and still your voice chased me into my dreams.

Before I find myself abandoning all thoughts of decorum and begin to tell you, in intimate detail, of those dreams, I had better move on to more earthly news.

I have received a letter from my Mother. She has had a fall and injured herself badly enough to require surgery. She is home now, and her broken ankle is in a cast. When I telephoned her yesterday she was in cheerful spirits, and the only time her mood took a turn for the worse was when I informed her that her attempt to engineer a return to Cambridge for me will not succeed. I have no intention of returning there to see out my academic career surrounded by infighting, politics and posturing. At this point in my life I can look back on Cambridge with affection once again. I do not want to spoil that.

I've sent Mother some flowers, anyway, and I'll be seeing her on the 19th, the day my flight lands. Hopefully by that time she'll be well on the mend.

As for the strangeness of holding that Decree Absolute - yes, I remember the feeling well. My divorce from Daphne was a more drawn-out process than your own experience, so there was an element of relief in there for me. Once I'd accepted that the marriage was irretrievable (which was difficult for me) I just wanted it over with. It was an odd feeling, though, to hold a piece of paper
that looked so ordinary but embodied such meaning. Seven years of my life were dismissed with that document. I was relieved, and glad it was all over, but I was rather depressed about it too.

The feeling passed quickly, however, and I sensed from our conversation last Tuesday that the same is true for you. This is all to the good, for I think it is time for Gladys and Jeffrey, divorcees both, to cast aside the trappings of the past and devote time and energy to their future.

I shall close for now, my dearheart, and I'll retire to bed with your name on my lips and your face in my thoughts. I cannot fight these dreams, nor do I want to. At least when I sleep we are together once again.

With all my love,
Jeffrey
X

~~~

93 Taff Street
Pontypridd

January 24th 1963

My dearest Jeffrey,

When next we are together we shall have to compare dreams. It seems that my thoughts are so filled with you, morning, noon and night, that there's no room in my brain for anything else. These dreams are heavenly while they last, but it's a lonely, hollow feeling when I wake up and remember how very far away you are.

The news here in the Rhondda is that Gareth and Doris have set a date. Everyone's pleased. Doris has been so very good for my brother. Even Dafydd has admitted that Gareth is a changed man. (Personally I'm not sure he's changed that much: I think it's the rest of us who've stopped assuming the worst about him all the time.)

I know you had a long conversation with Gareth on Christmas Day. He said he ended up telling you all about some of the difficulties he had as a child and a young man. He also said you suggested he might take the time to explain his point of view to me, if the opportunity presented. Well anyway, Gareth did just that last Saturday, when he came round to the flat with his news.

I feel like I let him down, Jeff. All those years, and it never occurred to me that Gareth might have felt like he didn't really belong after Mam married Dad. I know Dad always treated Gareth as his own, and Gareth says he was always grateful, but it didn't change the fact that he knew he was the different one. He's always been so sensitive about his height, too, and the glasses, and the way he lost his hair so young. It all bundled together, didn't it? Made him scared of being mocked and rejected.

Anyway, we ended up having such a long talk, right into the evening. We both cried a bit. I'd already apologised, years ago, for some of the mistakes I'd made, but it seems there was more for both of us to say. I think it was a good talk. I think we both appreciate and understand each other a bit better now.

So - Gareth and Doris tie the knot on April 13th. We've been invited together, Jeffrey - if it isn't too soon for us to be considered a couple?

Tomorrow's my last day at Hywel's. I've got three weeks off then, before I head back to Devon. I
was thinking of doing some travelling to visit friends. Sylvia asked me to spend a few days with her in Littlehampton (she isn't due back at Devon until late-April, of course) and Spike and April offered their spare bedroom for a few days too. Most of all, though, I want to take Barry up on his offer of a place to stay if ever I'm in London. I want to go and see 'My Fair Lady' at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and Barry says he's happy to go with me. (Don't worry, Jeff, I know it wouldn't be your choice of entertainment!)

So I might do a bit of touring around over the next couple of weeks. I've been feeling restless this last few days. For some reason I seem to be filled with tensions and frustrations! Anyway, if it takes a few days longer than usual for me to reply to your next letter, that'll be why. Hopefully if I keep myself occupied then the time might pass more quickly!

January 24th now. Less than a month to wait. Honestly, Jeff, why did those four days at Christmas go by so fast, when these days drag, and drag, and drag! It just isn't fair!

All my love,
Missing you,
Gladys
X

~~~

1232 Chadbourne Avenue
University Heights
Madison

1st February 1963

Dearheart,

Please pass on my hearty congratulations to Gareth and Doris when next you see them. They both deserve every happiness. I'm glad to learn that you and Gareth were able to have a good talk together, though I doubt I can take nearly so much credit for making it happen as you seem to think.

I am delighted to be invited to their wedding, and feel honoured indeed that the invitation is extended to us both. Too soon to be considered a couple? Oh, Gladys, we've been moving towards this for almost four years. There may have been mishaps on the way, obstacles to overcome, but it seems to me that we are finally getting there.

It is February. It is now the month in which I fly home. In three weeks I will see you again.

Travelling around to see friends seems like a splendid idea. Please give my good wishes to all those friends known to me as well - that is, if you even receive this before you set off on your travels!

I've been fortunate, I suppose, that work has been so busy in recent weeks; the days pass reasonably swiftly here - that is to say, the bit that happens between eight am and six pm, anyway. Today, for instance, was the first day that the new Archaeology Chair has been able to take up his position. In the next two weeks we're planning a proper handover. So far all seems to be going well. Most importantly, the new man seems to have found an immediate rapport with my friend and colleague Neil Weitzman, who is to succeed me as Department Chair. I am confident that I leave the department in fine hands.
Unfortunately, once the day is done, I must go home. Oh, that empty house! It's the evenings that drag, for me. I can't seem to lose myself in a good book the way I used to. I'll read half a page and then I veer off into thoughts of your face, your eyes-

The vanilla scent on your skin.

The way you lift your chin when you feel determined.

The curve of your spine under my fingers when I hold you in my arms.

The way you breathe faster when we draw together...the way these thoughts make me breathe faster too...

Gladys, the way I long to touch you again is agony. Four years of indifference in matters of the heart, and look at me!

I shall send this along, hoping you receive it soon and are not too alarmed at the romantic distraction which seems to have me in its grip!

Travel safely, and my best love to you.

Your own,
Jeffrey
X

~~~

93 Taff Street
Pontypridd

February 10th 1963

My dearest Jeffrey,

Well, here I am again, back in Aunty Bethan's flat after eleven days of trundling about the south of England. I see a letter of yours waiting for me on my return, and I skip off to my room, ready to read it and then write a reply to tell you all about my travels.

And then I read of your 'romantic distraction' and how you're all caught up in visions of heaving bosoms and caressings and all the other delicious things I want and cannot have, not yet, not quite yet. So of course, now all I can think about is-

Well. I'm sure you don't need me to spell it out.

Oh, I miss you. Twelve days to wait, now. Twelve days, and I can take the train into Exeter, and there you will be on the platform as the steam clears. And though it's likely to embarrass you, nothing will stop me from flying into your arms, Jeffrey. Prepare yourself for the kind of embrace that might knock you from your feet!

A few deep breaths, a cup of tea, and I've managed to calm down. I'll get on to another subject before my thoughts steer me into trouble again!

I have passed on your good wishes to our old friends from Crimpton - I assumed you would want me to. I first travelled to Littlehampton. Sylvia was in good spirits. She has spent the closed season working in one of these new leisure centres that are popping up, teaching a few keep-fit
classes, including one that people do in a swimming pool. She's also been seeing a man called Raymond, who lives in the flat across from her sister's place, where I stayed. He works in one of those bookshops that sells very old and expensive copies of books that you can normally find nice and cheap in paperback form if you've got the sense to go to W.H.Smith. (I'm teasing, before you start spluttering at me, Jeffrey.)

Sylvia was over the moon to hear that you managed to get over at Christmas time, and that you're coming home for good. For some reason she asked me to say, "Mr. Punch gives you the biggest kiss, since it's the last chance he'll ever have." (No, darling - I don't want to know!)

I had a lovely few days in Littlehampton. Then on Monday I took the train the short hop along the south coast to Brighton, where April met me at the station. She and I had lunch, and she told me her big news - she and Spike are expecting. Then she made me promise not to let on that I know, because she said Spike was looking forward to telling me the news himself.

So we went back to their house, and when Spike got back from work I played dumb when he told me his news, and then we all celebrated with a glass of Bulmer's cider. The two of them make a handsome couple. They are quite devoted to each other. Sometimes, I might venture to say, almost too much - at least when there is an audience! Oh, I don't mean they forget themselves, but their little terms of endearment and the way they wrinkle their noses at each other can be a bit much after a while.

It was the Wednesday when I took the train up to London to see Barry and his 'flat-mate' Harold. (Actually he's a very nice man, and the two of them are quite natural with each other. The first time I met Harold was when I flew in from Australia, so this time I was no longer surprised by the unconventional set-up they have. They're obviously happy with each other, Jeff, so I challenge anyone not to say 'live and let live'.)

Barry rearranged his work so we could have a couple of days together, and he asked me what I'd like to see out of London's many attractions. Do you know what the first thing that came into my head was? I said I wanted to go to the Natural History Museum! So off we went, and admired dinosaur bones and trays of insects and all sorts. I liked the enormous tree trunk, and the bit about volcanoes.

On Saturday came the highlight of the trip: a matinee at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Oh, it was a wonderful afternoon. Such a beautiful theatre, and the show was fun. Everyone had a wonderful time, and you could tell that the cast were enjoying themselves too. 'My Fair Lady' has an interesting story. (I only knew bits of it because of the songs.) I wasn't too sure about the end, though. How can it be a happy ending if a woman has spent three hours on stage making herself into more than she was before, only to throw it away and settle for finding a sulky old snob his slippers? That makes no sense to me.

So that was my little trip. It's kept me busy for a week and a half, at least!

How's things with you, Jeffrey? By the time you get this, you should be only a few days off from your move. I won't expect a letter from you in return - at least, not one from America! - but I am hoping for a telephone call some time around the 19th/20th, to let me know you've landed safely. Don't forget you'll need to call me during office hours, because there's no telephone in my caravan.

I hope your preparations are going well, and your new professor is proving to be a good find. Now it's my turn to say - travel safely, my love.

And I will be seeing you soon!
All my love,
Gladys
X

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"It's just by here," Gladys called, and rather inexplicably pointed them in the direction of the crowded trees that lined the path.

Jeffrey drew to a stop beside her, hoisted his bag more comfortably on his shoulder, and peered through the trees. "Are you sure?"

She turned to look at him, eyes gleaming with fun. "Don't you trust me, Jeffrey?"

"With my very life," he told her solemnly.

"Well, then." She examined the ground by the path again, nodded, then picked her way around the nearest trees, heading in a direction that was at right-angles to the path.

He followed as carefully as he could, holding the bag away from the trees so that the fragile contents didn't get bashed around. His sense of direction was not always strong, but he had the sense that they were heading back towards the cliffs: the ones the path had left behind ten minutes ago, when it began to meander through these woods.

Gladys looked back at him as she made progress, slightly uphill, towards what seemed to be nothing more than trees, deadfall, and the carpet of bluebells thriving in between. "Managing?" she called.

"Just about."

"It's not far."

It took them almost ten minutes to cover no more than two hundred yards, but suddenly the ground stopped rising and the tree cover broke. Jeffrey found himself standing on the brow of an isolated grassy shelf. It sloped gently down before levelling off, and it ended, perhaps twenty yards away, in a rocky edge that was tufted with long, wiry grass: the kind that grows in sand dunes. Beyond this was the cliff, and beyond that, the sea.

The sunshine felt glorious after twenty minutes in the shade of the woods. The trees and terrain behind them protected them from the cooler wind that was blowing in from the northeast. Gladys had managed to find a spectacular spot: sheltered, sunny, picturesque and - perhaps most importantly - unequivocally private.

"Down here, I think," she said. Jeff stopped admiring the view of the landscape and instead turned to admire the view of his beloved. Gladys had moved down the slope to find the most level spot on the grass, and was removing the odd stray stone from her chosen patch. "Got the blanket?"

"Er, yes." He tore his eyes from those parts of her body that he really shouldn't find himself dwelling on quite as much as he did, and hastened towards her. Between them they spread the
picnic blanket out over the thick, springy grass, and used their bags to trap the edges.

They settled on the blanket side by side, propped up on elbows, legs stretched before them, and they watched the clouds, and the surf, and the few distant vessels that were barely visible towards the horizon of the English Channel.

"How on earth did you discover a place like this?" Jeffrey asked.

"I was invited here," she said. "Last season."

"On a picnic?"

"On a picnic."

"Oh." He nodded. "And do I actually need to be feeling this seething sense of jealousy?"

She huffed a laugh. "No, love, you don't." She rolled to her side and looked at him. "Sylvia found out about this place from a couple of the locals that work at the resort. They like to keep a few spots all to themselves, for when the area gets busy with tourists."

"Ah. Well, this is, er, certainly off the beaten track."

"There's a secret mark, down by the path. A stick in the ground with a notch in it." She grinned. "All very hush-hush."

"I see. So you and Sylvia came up here?"

"And a few others. It was during the first month or so I was here. May, or June. I was still trying to find my feet after everything that had happened. Sylvia, bless her, was doing her best to make me feel included and supported and all that. So one afternoon on changeover day we came up here and drank cider and perry, and sunbathed." Gladys hesitated. "Well, I didn't sunbathe. You know me. I don't tan well. So I sat here in a sundress and a wide-brimmed hat while the other girls soaked up the sun." She frowned in memory. "Not sure I was the best company that day."

Jeff rolled to face her, still propped on one elbow, and he touched her face. "I wish I'd been here for you."

She smiled. "You were. You made that clear last year in, oh, February, was it?" Gladys turned her head and kissed his fingertips, then she settled on her back with her hands tucked behind her head. Her eyes closed in contentment. "Anyway, since the season opens weekend after next, I thought I'd make the most of this place while we'll definitely have it to ourselves."

"It's a very lovely spot," Jeffrey agreed, though he couldn't seem to take his eyes from her face.

"I suppose you'll be busy again when the Easter holidays are over. We'll have to make do with weekends, then, if we're going to do picnicky things."

This was true. And after the frustrations he'd suffered earlier in the year, waiting for the chance to cross the Atlantic and see Gladys once again, he had found that there was worse to be suffered. For example: the torment of spending a single day without seeing her when they were separated by a mere twelve miles of country road.

In fact, they'd only returned yesterday from the Rhondda Valley, having celebrated Gladys's brother's marriage. For two days they had stayed with Nesta in Tonypandy, and Jeff had been separated from Gladys through the still of the night by only a scant few feet and a couple of walls.
And that? That had been all but unbearable.

It seemed that the closer she was, the greater his need became to have her closer still. He'd been back in the country for just seven weeks, and in that time their relationship had become something of a balancing act. There was the comfortable, teasing familiarity with each other that made his heart warm. Then there was the ever-present frisson of erotic tension that was barely assuaged by long, searing kisses and the limited touches they could offer before their mutual passion threatened to break its restraint.

Damn it, why was he waiting?

He was waiting for her, of course. He'd told himself a long time ago that the pace was for Gladys to dictate. He was the one who had let her down. He no longer had a right to decide how fast or how slow they went.

Still, he'd feel foolish in the extreme if he learned that all this time she'd been waiting for a clearer signal from him...

"Gladys," he said.

"Hmm?"

"The house in Exton. The one we went to see last Thursday."

"Hmm?"

"You, er, you liked it?"

"Course I did. It's a beautiful house. Such a nice garden, and those views."

"You don't prefer more modern houses?"

"Oh no. No, I like a house to have had the chance to soak up some memories. You know?"

He smiled at yet another example of the common ground he'd once so fervently denied that they had. "Yes, I prefer that too."

"It's a big house though," she remarked. She remained relaxed, eyes closed, the gentle spring sunshine making every inch of her soft pale skin look like it was a source of light in its own right.

"I suppose it is," he said. "You think four bedrooms is too many?"

One eye opened and looked at him. "How many do you need?" she asked.

He hesitated. Gladys's lips curved in a tiny smile, then she closed her eye again.

He sat up, faced the sea, tried to think. Was this too fast? She could always say no. And if she didn't, if she said yes - god, please let her say yes - then that wasn't necessarily too fast. It wasn't as if they were setting a date, here and now.

But damn it, he wanted to set a date. He wanted to know when that time would come: the time when the end of his working day guaranteed him a return to Gladys's side. When saying good night didn't mean seeing her to the station, or seeing himself to the station, or getting in a bloody taxi and forcing himself to sit quietly as someone drove him further and further away from Gladys.

He hated that feeling. God, it was perverse. How could it ever be right, putting miles between the
two of them?

He sighed and turned to the holdall he'd been carrying, and he retrieved the bottle of his favourite picnic wine: a Provençal rosé from Château Simone. It was still quite cool, since he'd chilled it overnight and then wrapped it before packing it. He uncorked the wine using his penknife and then dug in the holdall for the two tumblers he'd also packed. (Stemmed glasses never carried well in a holdall.)

"Nice noise," Gladys said. Presumably referring to the cork.

The grassy ledge was turning into quite a suntrap. Jeffrey set the bottle and glasses aside. He shrugged off his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves; he'd already forgone wearing a tie today. He wanted to take off his shoes and socks and wriggle his toes in the fresh air. Maybe he'd work up to that.

He poured two glasses of wine. Gladys stirred as she heard the glug-glug, and she sat up, tucking her legs around herself. She accepted a glass after an interested look over his shirt and forearms, and a lingering one at his throat where the top two buttons of his shirt were undone.

She sipped. She said, "Very nice." Her eyes only then lifted to his own, and an eyebrow was seductively raised.

Jeffrey noticed peripherally that his heart was beating far too fast, and other parts of his body were getting significantly ahead of the rest of him. He made himself look away and breathe deeply. He swallowed some wine and forced himself to analyse its fruity complexity.

A few seconds to reclaim his restraint, and he sighed again. He kept his eyes facing forward as he said, "So I was, er, thinking of putting an offer in. On the house. In, er, Exton."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes." He nodded to himself. "I know it's only been two months, but I think..." He lost track of the words he was going to say. He blinked and wondered why this was so difficult.

"It's probably long enough to know, isn't it?" Gladys suggested. "If it's going to work out."

"Yes. Yes, it is. And I believe it will. I'm quite sure of it."

"Well, that's good, then."

"Yes." He glanced over at her. She still looked relaxed. How did she manage to look so composed when he could feel his face flushing? He needed to grip his glass firmly so as not to betray the tremor in his hands. "I mean, things are fine just as they are," he said, trying to give her the chance to say that she'd like to keep things that way for a while longer.

She didn't say that. She said, "But they could be better."

"Yes!" He turned to her, seizing the moment. "That's exactly it, Gladys. I-I-I don't want to make you feel hurried, of course, the choice is entirely...I'm just so sure! Every time we're together, I know I'm happier than when we're apart. Every time we talk, I find some new thing that binds us more closely. And-and-and I just don't see the sense of it. Waiting. I mean, if you feel we should wait, then wait we shall, of course, but sometimes when you look at me I get the sense that you want everything I want, and it seems just-just absurd. To hold back. Gladys, I ache with the way I want to make love with you - but it isn't just about that, I promise you. It's about everything. Everything. I-I want to sleep with your body next to mine. See your face when I wake up. I want
to talk with you over breakfast about our days ahead, and make plans for the evening, or the weekend, or the holidays." He exhaled hard. "I want to come home to a house with a lovely garden, where we can sit outside together and discuss everything that happened that day. And-and I want you to teach me Welsh. And I want to dance with you on the terrace when the light begins to fade, and I want to still be doing that when I'm seventy years old, and we look into each other's eyes and remember how it felt to share that first kiss in your mother's parlour-

He broke off, astonished at the words he'd just managed to release. He breathed hard.

Gladys said, "Oh. I thought you were talking about your job."

"Um." He frowned at her. "Sorry?"

"When you said you thought it would work out. I thought you meant you were happy with your job."

"You said things could be better-"

"I thought you meant the rooms you have on campus! I thought you were talking about how it wasn't enough of a home, so you wanted to buy the house."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Yes, well, anyway, the job's going well too," he said weakly.

For a moment he wanted the earth to swallow him up. He'd gone too far. Jeffrey Fairbrother, a man who had made a career from caution and reticence, had gone too far! Perhaps there was no need for the earth to swallow him up when there was a nice cliff edge not too far away-

Pressure at his hand. He looked down. Gladys gently took his half-filled glass from him and set it down next to the bottle, where she'd already put her own glass. Jeff swallowed and made himself look at her. Her face was a little pink, and her lips were parted as she breathed fast. Her eyes looked at him with that familiar sense of longing, and suddenly everything felt just a little less fraught.

"So you want me to teach you Welsh?" she said.

"Actually, yes, I do. It sounds so beautiful when you speak it."

She smiled at that, and leaned closer, took his hand. "When I speak Welsh," she confided, "I'm usually swearing. I don't like swearing in English. Makes me feel coarse and nasty. But in Welsh I can be vulgar as anything."

"It still sounds beautiful," he said.

She nodded. Then she said, "Fi'n caru ti."

"Um."

"I love you."

"Vee'n carry tee?"

"Fi'n caru ti." She said it slowly, carefully, and her eyes told him that these words were not just a lesson in language.

"Fi'n caru ti."
She nodded. "You're a natural," she said, in her husky, seductive voice.

"And you're everything I want," he replied. "Everything in the world. Will you marry me, Gladys?"

She smiled slowly, and his toes curled in response. "Oh, yes, I should think so," she said.

A moment later they were kissing, and falling to the blanket in each other's arms, and moving and touching and rolling...until the kiss broke apart, and Jeffrey found himself on his back with Gladys lying half on top of him, both of them panting for air.

"Jeffrey," she breathed. The sound went straight to his loins and his hips lifted without volition. She smiled and wriggled back. "So - you want to make love, do you?"

"I do," he murmured. "But I can wait."

Her eyes flashed. "What on earth makes you think I can?"

Gladys lowered her head to kiss him again, and a second later Jeffrey felt the sensual scratch of her fingernails at the open neck of his shirt as she undid another button. He wondered about stopping her before things got too far out of hand, but only for a moment, because the fingers of his left hand were already weaving through her sun-warmed hair, and his right hand had swept over her hip to press her body against his own.

Chapter End Notes

When writing this story, the issue that concerned me most was to avoid the character-assassination of Clive.

I knew that time and circumstance would earn me the ability to bypass Jeffrey's reticence. Canon itself had suggested a cessation of hostilities between Gladys and Sylvia by the end of the series. So I felt I could justify what I was doing with Jeffrey/Gladys, and Sylvia and Gladys.

But Clive...

The series has him undergo a profound change to his character in the final season. Presumably because it was understood that the series was finishing, and Gladys probably deserved a happy ending, Clive's established character traits (selfishness, absence of morals, manipulation and deceit, seduction-on-tap) were swept aside in what was almost a Road to Damascus moment. Clive recognised that Gladys was worthy of devotion. His behaviour from the previous four seasons was dismissed and he became a romantic hero.

Now I can believe that Clive's attitude to Gladys changed. When he says that his feelings for her are the closest he's ever come to knowing 'love' I believe him.

What I don't believe is that a character so specifically drawn, with its flaws and proclivities, would change forever in the light of this understanding. Clive's personality is not only vividly portrayed in the storylines of Hi-De-Hi! It is also
psychologically consistent with his upbringing, his class and his family. Clive, as we see him in all but the last couple of episodes, makes sense to me. Clive, as seen through Just-Married-Gladys's eyes, kind of doesn't.

So I wanted to tell a story about the Clive/Gladys romance falling apart which was consistent with all the information canon gave us, but which did not resort to character-assassination. I hope I struck the balance between the Clive who is hedonistic and incapable of fidelity, and the Clive who is genuinely in love and intelligent enough to acknowledge his own mistakes.

There it is, then. And to the three other people in the world who were probably interested enough to read a multi-chapter story based on Hi-De-Hi! -- thanks for dropping by!

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