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Where's Sailor Jack?

Written by John Uttley

Published by Matador

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WHERE'S SAILOR JACK?

JOHN UTTLEY



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First edition published in 2015
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ISBN 978 1785891 724

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall
Typeset by Troubador Publishing Ltd, Leicester, UK



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd



To my family

PROCESSIONAL

Family history only makes sense looking backwards. Yet hindsight creates illusions that defy contradiction. With a few peeks in the rear view mirror, this story must go onward and forward. But from when? The end of 1944, with the Christmas leave Petty Officer Jack Swarbrick, from St Chad's near Blackpool, and Sergeant Michael Shackleton, from Bolton, separately managed to wangle? These two guys never knew each other. The famous cup final between their two towns in Queen Elizabeth's coronation year, when Bob Swarbrick at the age of seven and a half first watched television and Richard Shackleton, two days younger, made the trip to Wembley? At that young age their illusions were of the future.

The two boys weren't to meet until forty years later, Lancastrian red roses cresting their caps, when their career paths crossed in the privatisation of Atomic Futures. Engineer Bob was Chief Executive of the company and Investment Banker Richard led the multi-billion flotation for Grindleton's. A decade further on again, the roses were beginning to wilt. Richard was struggling to keep his job after a row with his Chairman, Sir Charles Norman, coincidentally Bob's nemesis a few years previously. Their time of being in the thick of it was up. Their catch-up lunch in a dark cubicle of a dingy steak restaurant in Smithfield was subdued. That's

where to begin, well through their story of life, with their dreams in the past, the back fold of the dust jacket the more practical bookmark.

Following over-generous alcohol intake in his thirties, which fortunately had left no lasting damage, Richard was teetotal. His companion had to order by the glass. Bob was morosely finishing his second. The cricket season had just finished with Lancashire again finishing runners-up. For this, Richard blamed his Dad, who'd begun the affair that wrecked his marriage back in 1950. "That's when we cocked the last game up and only shared the damn thing with Surrey. The Almighty's had it in for us ever since."

"The sins of your father shouldn't be visited on me too," felt Bob. "My Mum and Dad were happily married. Mind you, I've not been entirely blameless since Jane divorced me."

Richard confessed to transgressions in the years between, before he met his wife Helen. "It's the three of us in series that's stopped us winning it."

"Plus the fact that Manchester's monsoon season is August," Bob grouched, proud of the Fylde coast's better rainfall record than most of the county.

"And the rest of the year," added Richard, in tune with West Pennines persistent precipitation. "Any new woman in your life?"

The drab surroundings led Bob to be more downbeat than his cheerfulness usually allowed. "Not recently," he said lugubriously. "You've had it the better way round, single when young, married when knackered."

"I don't know about that. At forty, the weekend before I met Helen, I was still on my own, putting up the Christmas tree with lights, baubles, tinsel, angels and a Father Christmas."

Bob was unimpressed: "Bloody hell, you'll be telling me there was a fairy on top next."

"It was a star. Try to feel the pathos."

"No dangling chocolates?" Bob asked. "You must have been hungry after all that emoting."

"No, I'd already eaten them."

Bob gave a wry grin. He asked Richard how he'd managed to get that far through his life without being snared. Richard admitted to being burnt by an early girlfriend, the first girl he'd made love to, who'd had him on a string for too damn long.

Bob hid well any empathy he might have felt. "I was incinerated by my first shag as well. I got her pregnant with our Ruth and married her." His eyes gazed soulfully into the distance. "Jane's still the same girl, and she sure wasn't the right one. She buggered off to live with a bloody weasel." He slowly skewered the air with his fork as he searched for the right words. "I don't think it was because either of us changed that much. The person we become in life is already in us in the womb."

"In which case, I'm going to be hanged. I was nearly strangled by the umbilical cord," Richard revealed.

"You'll be kept in suspense to the end then. Our first days were filled with utility furniture and rationing so we'll have a gloomy death," prophesied Bob, who enjoyed playing the Jeremiah. Both were deep-voiced, with Bob's rasping lead harmonising well with Richard's gravelly reflections. They'd moved about too much to retain their youthful best friends and, on an occasional basis, they'd become the brothers they'd never had to each other. Together they ran through their memories of queuing for rationed bananas in the forties, and fifties' family Christmases when the fates allowed. They reached

Larkin's 1963, the de facto standard dating for the end of the old order. Bob was the rocker of the two and didn't like Elvis being from the old world. He played older brother. Richard sang the first two lines of 'Girl of my Best Friend' while he contemplated this, causing Bob to scowl. The two days age gap between them had made a difference. Bob would have sung 'Heartbreak Hotel', agreeing with John Lennon that Elvis died when he joined the army. Richard rejected Bob's earlier dating, mainly because *Freewheelin'* had been released not that long after the Beatles first LP, and Dylan became their main man right the way through

Bob had to agree with this. "Us darling young ones really got going then. Sex wasn't discovered that early though, whatever Larkin thought."

"Too right. Apart from reading *Lady Chatterley*, my hand stroking the bit of flesh at the top of Susan Harwood's stockings was about as far as I got."

You couldn't be a baby boomer, according to either of these founder members (despite statisticians making the start birth date for the category three months after they were born), unless you listened nostalgically to Buddy Holly to remember when you were learning the game.

"One way or another, we learnt it, kid," Bob was brave enough to say. Richard wasn't that cocky, not having been able to roller-skate. Bob had fewer doubts about his competence. "I never could jive. What the hell! I can do simultaneous equations."

"Did that pull the girls?" Richard enquired, eyebrows ironically raised in the middle, one of his winsome tricks. "Not in an all-boys school," Bob had to reply. Richard recalled his teenage years, when the smell of floor polish at the Church

youth club, blended with a hint of disinfectant from the lavatories, competed for supremacy with the aroma of the generously-scented soap the girls had used, if sparingly, at bath time. Bob had similar memories and suggested that they both could have done with something more earthy, losing their virginity earlier.

"It's who we are," Richard propounded. "We've invented our own hinterland, a bit like Graham Greene did. Ours has never become fashionable with society girls though. It's Anglican innocence rather than Catholic guilt."

They looked up as an immaculately feather-cut blonde head giggled at what she heard as she was passing with her partner, a guy who had public school banker swagger sewn into the seams of his suit. As he chivvied her along, she planted her feet firmly down alongside the table and asked, "Still too mean for the Waterside Inn, Bob?"

The head belonged to Rebecca Moore, the very svelte, delightfully cool, former PR Director of Atomic Futures. The swaggerer was her husband rather than a business acquaintance. Despite its unpretentious name, the Inn in question is the great Roux confection on the Thames at Bray. Bob explained to Richard that Rebecca's dig was caused by a claim for a meal for two she'd put in on her expenses. Richard had eaten there too, and he said the black pudding had been nearly as good as the ones of his youth at the Art Deco UCP restaurant in Bradshawgate.

Rebecca's shining eyes tilted at his inverse snobbery. "You'd have had no idea what Art Deco was when you lived in whatever one-horse northern town that's in. You're worse than Bob. He summoned me up to his office to ask if the local Little Chef had been shut. I enjoyed telling him the Chairman had insisted that's where we were going."

Smoothie-chops husband frogmarched her to their cubicle. Bob's eyes too often looked that way over the rest of the meal. Richard had also detected that Rebecca's eyes had glowed too much while she'd been looking at Bob. He couldn't resist finding out more about the rumour that the two of them had been walking out together during the flotation. "Well, maybe," was Bob's response. Richard asked why it didn't work out seeing that they'd looked like great chums.

"She finished it," admitted Bob. "We were chatting about all this postmodern, structural stuff you intellectuals are into and she gave me a book to read. I quite liked it."

Richard was sceptical. "No, you didn't. You wanted to impress your way into her knickers."

"Don't judge me by your standards with Susan Harwood," Bob retorted. "Having offered up my innocence I got repaid with scorn, as our main man found out. I said something too concrete by way of interpretation. The look on her face came from the same pattern in her brain as when she wanted to be sick."

"Helen specialises in that look. It's generational, not personal," Richard confided unconvincingly.

Bob wasn't persuaded either. "I tried to recover by suggesting that we do have a bit of free will in the scheme of things, the way characters in a novel pull on the author. She argued that there was no author of a book at all and finished with me that evening. She married that master-of-the-universe banker she's with, who designs derivatives of derivatives, and has an even more tenuous grasp of reality than she does."

Richard guessed that the offending book was *Mythologies,* which he said should also be the description for derivatives on

bank balance sheets. "It was a bit paradoxical if her thinking she had no agency was her reason for dumping you." He looked across towards Rebecca before carrying on with his musings. "Not that I'm sure we've any either, as you know. We can enjoy the roller coaster but have no choice where it goes. What we can do is think whatever we want to afterwards. I guess that's better than nowt."

At their age, making sense of life was mugging up for finals. Only their children and finding comfort in the love of a good woman (or failing that, in Bob's case, a bad one) mattered more. Their kids weren't in the restaurant and Rebecca was taken. Richard was about to add that you were only free when you'd nothing left to lose. He changed tack when he saw Bob again gazing in Rebecca's direction. Richard's latter-day problem was having nothing left to win. He believed that ideas didn't follow any laws but actions were dictated by them. "It's clearly a law that every ten seconds you look Rebecca's way," was the proof of his theory.

Bob guiltily shuffled around in his chair so that he couldn't see her. "You're probably right. The non-existent God plays dice and we're clutching at straws."

Richard said that conscience was the straw he grabbed at, the bit of him that didn't come either from carnal desire or the wish to conform. "If there's anything left after taking those out," he continued, "it's always too slow to change anything, and just adds to your regrets further down the line."

"Perhaps as well," said Bob. "Wasn't it free will that turned Satan to rebellion?"

Both of them were cradle Anglicans, who still honoured their faith as middle-of-the-road Churchmen. Richard

needed a curator to draw, tend and nurture his spiritual world, his reality. For Bob, God had to have created the cosmos from nothing with an act of willpower or nothing could ever be changed by creator or created. Like St Paul, they'd both been untimely born. Things before Elvis had been staid, and after *Sergeant Pepper* they'd been stale, apart from their main man and just a few others. The rot set in according to Bob with John Lennon spending days on end in bed with Yoko. A few years later, his then wife Jane had made him listen to a Yes album. His growled view of Prog Rock that he'd rather listen to bloody Mantovani anticipated what punk rockers were also to think. Richard had tried to join in the seventies by growing a Jason King moustache, which he'd never quite managed to get the same length either side. He'd worn the polyester suits too, but they'd made his underpants stick to his bollocks. When the women's movement and disco music came along, white, non-jiving, northern males were what they replaced first. The grammar schools coming and going had cut the two of them adrift permanently from the previous and following generations, by first educating them and then having them think it meant something.

The waiter came and took orders for two tarte Tatins and coffees. Neither cared that much for tatty tart, and wouldn't pretend they preferred rock-hard fruit in puff pastry to sweet, mashed-up Bramleys in a shortcrust. When the bill arrived, Richard put down his company credit card. Bob threw it back to him, saying it was his turn to pay. Richard insisted: "Take it. You've earned enough money for Grindleton's in your time."

"It doesn't sound from what you've said that you'll be there much longer. Once the press have got hold of a Board Room

row, someone has to go. As Charlie's the other guy involved, that's you."

Richard had recently refused a bonus, saying it was too generous, and the incident had reached the FT Diary Column. So when the waiter eventually came, Bob didn't mind that Grindleton's paid. Outside the restaurant, a dense black cloud was approaching from the north-west.

"That sky looks ominous," warned Richard as he checked that his umbrella was in his briefcase. Bob raised his collar. "Aye, it'll rain, snow or go dark before morning. Good seeing you again, pal. Maybe one day the Lord will forgive and Lancashire can win it."

"Next year in Jerusalem," Richard hoped, expecting the wait to be another two millennia. "You're looking a bit flushed. Are you OK health-wise, cocker?"

"It's just the red wine. I'm fit as a fiddle. I need a change of scenery and I'm looking at houses back up in St Chad's. I'll be right as rain once I've moved back."

Richard left Grindleton's within a month of the lunch. He and Helen were comfortably off with substantial savings tied up in investments. He couldn't be bothered to sort all that out, and there were mouths to feed, human, canine and feline, so he'd lined up a role with Divinity Partners before resigning. He refused a generous termination pay-off on principle.

In the next spring, 2007, Bob moved his main home to a solid Edwardian semi-detached house about a quarter of a mile from St Chad's square, keeping his London flat for business needs. He and his sister had grown up in the square, along with their dog Rover, above the ironmonger's store his parents had owned. It had become an off licence. Even so,

his return gave him the air he needed, the soft rustle of trees, the cool smell of the dark evening, and the warm afternoon dampness of Fylde fields gently blowing in from the River Wyre. He couldn't pin down who he was but he did know where he was from.

CHAPTER ONE

On a Sunday soon after his move north-west, Bob was flying high on Virgin, to LAX, as everyone but he knew Los Angeles airport was called. His last long-haul flight had been on Atomic Futures' business in the bulkhead with British Airways. At over six foot and heavily built, he could make good use of the leg room. In an unflattering lavatory mirror, he saw receding, greying hair and many wrinkles above a jaw line a boxer could break a fist on. He'd never quite understood how his rugged looks had charmed the several-to-many women along the way. The seating arrangement in Virgin's best seats made the cabin look like a beauty salon, but he'd played safe and eschewed the offer of an on-board facial. The Journey Information on the monitor told him there was about an hour of the flight to go, confirmed by something looking like the Grand Canyon out of the window, though it looked bleak enough to have been the surface of another planet.

He was trying not to sleep on the way out, nor to go to bed until at least ten o'clock Pacific Standard Time. He'd flicked between the films on the in-flight entertainment system, and found nothing he'd wanted. He'd then settled down to listen to some music, first Elvis, then Ray Charles and finally Abba, who'd bounced along merrily at first until a cold sweat told him that he was the loser standing small alongside seventies woman. He switched Agnetha off to pick up the book he'd

brought, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, which he immediately put down again. His eyes were tired.

He reclined the chair to be alone with his musings on his return to Lancashire. Blackpool was making a good fist of doing itself up, despite New Labour lousing up the Las Vegas style casino scheme, not that he'd ever really wanted it. In the evenings, the place was alive with young ladies joyfully, sometimes even decorously, celebrating their hen nights with like-minded friends. The folk who lived in St Chad's hadn't changed that much. The young people at church had the same freshness that he'd once had, full of their multimedia world and excited about their opportunities, though the ladder had been pulled up since his day, leaving cows from the Fylde fields with more chance of going through the eye of a needle than any ordinary kid entering the kingdom of riches he'd inherited. Lancashire wasn't at the centre of things the way it had been back then, with Blackpool the Mecca for comedians, Liverpool the capital of music, the mighty Granada television like a second BBC, and the *Manchester Guardian* thinking about what the world would do tomorrow. He saw *The Guardian* moving to London as an even bigger betrayal than John Lennon's sleep-in.

The summer of 1963 with *Freewheelin'* on his turntable and the Mersey sound on every radio was forever to remain his Archimedean point. Martin Luther King was dreaming his dream accompanied vibrato by Joan Baez and civil rights were coming. Bras weren't being burnt though. Much later Jane challenged him with why not. He'd answered that women's liberation hadn't come out of nowhere. She'd generously agreed that it was only fair for apes like him to have had their day in the sun before the real business got done.

He'd had a vacation job in Stanley Park and that had given him an affinity with the old codgers from the Great War who came for the brass band concerts. Though they were sitting in God's waiting room, they were cheerful, talking for hours about space travel and the like but not of course about their health problems or the trenches. He thought of his never-liberated Grannie who died at the start of the pivotal year. She'd make him green jelly with bananas whenever he went round as a kid and had knitted most of the jumpers he was still wearing through university after her death. His sister had in her kitchen the old milking stool from Grannie's farm-girl days, with more than a thousand years of history stored in its battered wood. Like the religion his ancestors had shared, its purpose had been endorsed by the long passage of time. To lose either would be to lose his soul. He didn't want to live so long that his memory of Grannie dimmed.

He was off to LA to discuss the possibility of him chairing a solar technology company, The Northern Solstice Inc., looking to be floated on AIM, the small companies' part of the London Stock Exchange. He'd created a portfolio of non-executive chairmanships since his nuclear demise; nice work if you can get it, he'd say. He'd had surprising success given that he was temperamentally stuck somewhere between public and private sector. On one venture, he'd helped rescue a telecoms company after the dotcom bubble burst, which he'd then sold to a trade buyer, a conglomerate chaired by Sir Charles, for a huge profit, a month before the market fell again. He'd found that the private sector was about living on your wits rather than on solid ground.

He hadn't much knowledge of solar economics or if it was such a good environmental thing. He hoped that this

opportunity could provide some atonement for his past environmental sins. As a nuclear man, he'd never been a denier of the greenhouse effect. He knew how expensive nuclear had been but could see no better option despite his lingering doubts on waste disposal, weapons proliferation and operational balls-up issues. He was as antagonistic towards wind power as most power engineers and ornithologists were.

The invitation to LA had come from a woman he'd got to know at Black and Robertshaw, an accounting firm working out of Bristol whose corporate finance arm had handled the telecoms sale. They were advising on the Northern Solstice flotation, acting as Nomad – shorthand for nominated adviser. Wendy Ballinger was already in LA and he was to meet her the next day with the acting Chairman and the CEO.

In the arrivals hall, the driver arranged by Virgin was holding up his name. All upper class passengers could have a limo for up to an hour's journey. Anaheim was in the band. He was stopping at the Stonehaven there, near to the Northern Solstice factory in Yorba Linda as well as close to Disney. Wendy was upmarket and uptown, staying at the Westin. His mobile beeped a message as he reached his room. Wendy wanted a word. He was desperate for the lavatory, but couldn't prevent himself from ringing her first. As he waited for her to answer, her face appeared in front of him on the screen in his brain (not on his phone, that was an early, basic model), almost elegant, with a distinguished nose. Her blonde hair looked natural enough but did owe something to a bottle. He found her both friendly and competent, a pleasure to do business with. She was a while answering and his internal camera panned slowly downwards. In her early forties, married without children to an older man, her bosom was worthy of the name; her long

legs went all the way to her not insubstantial bum. And she was intelligent. He should have thought of that first.

She had bad news, disclosed in pure, gentle, Gloucestershire tones that could have belonged to a sixth former. She'd been at a pre-meeting with the acting Chairman, a guy called Peter Forster, along with the CEO, Emil Fares. Forster was a hard-nosed South African who owned Forster Capital, the largest shareholder. He'd told Wendy that they didn't want her to handle the listing as Black and Robertshaw had no market strength.

Bob wanted to ask if that meant he'd wasted his time coming out, and if somebody would be reimbursing his expenses, but realised he'd better sympathise first. She didn't need that, believing that her firm, although not a strong broking house, had done a pretty good job. "No first division broker would handle such a small transaction," she asserted. "And there's so little time before the date they want to float that they'd like to take a look at you. They'll also want to know if you've any other ideas as to who else could act as Nomad."

"I'd have no idea. I wouldn't want the job now anyway," he said, honestly enough as Wendy was a big part of the attraction.

"That's up to you, but I'd be grateful for my reputation if you could hear them out. Perhaps Divinity might do it. They're pitching hard into renewables."

Bob became more interested. "Fancy that. An old friend of mine from my nuclear days, Richard Shackleton, told me over a round of golf that he'd just joined Divinity Partners. He said it was about time the Godhead had some new blood. Do you know him?"

Wendy did know Richard, who she called a terrific bloke.

"Hey, thee, me and him could make a great team if they'd have us," Bob reckoned. "Can't we get him to do the broking and you to be the Nomad?" Wendy doubted Forster would agree to that idea but was happy for Bob to try it on.

Bob was already looking forward to Richard joining them and started to tell Wendy about his daft ideas. "Like me, he doesn't think metaphysics should be a dry study of what can and can't be said, but a licence to think insanely. According to him, we can't actually change anything physical and all events rigidly follow the laws of nature. But we are free to make whatever we want of what happens. I remember a flotation meeting with loads of advisers. We took time out to discuss Schrödinger's cat, as you do. Richard…"

"As you and Richard do, you mean. Tell me about that some other time," she interrupted. "George Coulson, the CFO, will be in the hotel lobby at nine o'clock to collect you. We're meeting in Emil's office at nine thirty."

Having at last managed to have a pee, he unpacked his case, lining up one shirt and tie, his suit, a pair of socks and shoes for the morning. He put pyjamas on the pillow, soap bag and razor in the bathroom, *Saturday* and the alarm clock by his bed, before he had had a quick shower, drenching the bathroom floor. At a quarter past nine PST, twenty two hours since leaving his London flat, he went to bed.

He quickly went to sleep, only to wake with a start at about two o'clock, gasping for breath. The heavy quilt was over his head. He pulled the quilt halfway down the bed and managed to sleep again. An hour later he woke again. This time he turned the air conditioning off. Sleep wouldn't come. He tried to read for a while, propped up against the pillows. In the big mirror on the opposite wall, he caught sight of his gaunt face

drained of colour. With a shock, he realised he was looking at his Dad, Jack Swarbrick, laid out at the funeral parlour. That Swarbrick big conk was a matter of pride.

Of course it wasn't his Dad, but the embodiment of hard-wired genetics. Wendy's face, and much prettier conk, had frozen on his internal screen. He slept through till 6.30am with her in view.

CHAPTER TWO

Jane still shared with Andrew the house in Mossley Hill she'd moved to some twenty-five years before. She hadn't been blessed with further offspring, which wasn't altogether surprising to Bob, given that polecats and weasels can't breed together. Andrew had recently retired as head teacher of a community comprehensive school. Jane, eight years younger, was professor of sociolinguistics at Mount Vernon University, the study of the relationship between language and society. Jane specialised in research on gender differences in workplace speech. Bob's definition of her expertise was the humiliation of males without anaesthetic or the right of appeal. But to be fair, Jane had a carrycot beside her on a Saturday as she read *The Female Eunuch* while studying for her degree. Bob was out playing cricket.

As he was talking to Wendy on the phone in LA, Monday started in Liverpool with Jane late out of the bathroom after problems with the soap holder in the shower. This was meant to be held in place by suction pads, but they sucked insufficiently and an almost full shampoo bottle was deposited onto her toes. She wrote mocking comments in her diary about how Bob had once carefully drilled a screw hole for a similar holder, through sellotape to prevent any crack in the tile, before dropping his drill and chipping the enamel tray. But her final words on the subject were, "At least he tried."

While she ate her breakfast, Andrew stared out of the window at the birds rather than reading *The Guardian* he was holding. This was worthy of diary comment as his utopia had never needed a bird table, nut feeder or tits. When the kids were young, Bob had spent hours on elaborate schemes to stop squirrel raids. Unsuccessfully, according to Jane, as she sided with Andrew in this entry, complaining of how the dawn chorus kept her awake, and pondering if the damned things stopped singing once they'd found a mate. She finished with the unkind thought of Bob chirping into the evening right the way through to autumn.

She'd then heard a loud crash from the kitchen, a bang followed by a series of clatters, each seeming an echo of the last. As far as she could tell, it wasn't a poltergeist. The metal tea caddy had fallen off a top shelf because, struggling to reach, she'd left it too near the edge. The caddy had slid through the open cupboard door, knocked into the kitchen roll holder on the work surface below which had then banged into the china biscuit barrel. This had acquired enough momentum to crash to the floor, finding its state of lowest potential energy (as she could hear a 'Bob' in her head saying) after it had shattered into many pieces. She'd had to apologise to Andrew as the barrel had been a wedding present from his sister. He'd reacted with his customary eye-rolling routine. She'd found the dustpan herself, hearing 'Bob' yet again philosophising about the direction of time being that of increasing entropy. She disagreed with that. She could bring order from chaos. Or, as the real Bob had said in one of their many rows, stamp her pre-conceived notions on the world. She did like to think that language could change society as much as society changed language.

She quickly made a cheese and coleslaw sandwich and dashed to her car parked in the drive, a beaten-up MX5. Through the window, she saw Andrew get out of his chair to go to a similar room to the one that, thousands of miles away, Bob was also trying to reach. She didn't know until later that Andrew's problem wasn't with the *Guardian* editorial or birds singing. There was blood in his stools not caused by piles. He was muttering a resigned, "Heigh-ho."

Jane was giving a lecture to a feminist summer school, followed by a class with some of her post graduate students. In the previous day's diary, she'd castigated Andrew for loafing about the house in his slippers and suave dressing gown. She'd written that, for all the good he'd done, he might just as well have been Noel Coward presenting crazy reactionary views to his confused pupils rather than teaching his preposterous revisionist crap. They'd met as she'd been about to cross a picket line during the winter of discontent. Fatefully, she'd turned and stopped to talk. Under her influence, he'd wholeheartedly embraced child-centred approaches to teaching. In later years he'd adopted soothing, caring tones so that 'patronising' was her adjective of choice for him. She preferred the self-sufficient arrogance of the tall, wiry picket, except when he tried and failed to be like his heroes, intellectuals from the beat generation. Existence precedes essence, we're self-made, he'd argued in an early dispute between them, adding snidely that she hadn't made much progress to date.

Neither's working-class credentials were legitimate anyway as far as Bob was concerned. Andrew was from Southport, the smartest town in Lancashire until placed in the newly created Merseyside as part of Edward Heath's eccentric reforms. Andrew had been one of the few daft enough to welcome that

change. Jane was from similarly affluent Knutsford in Cheshire, which sensibly stayed out of the clutches of Manchester.

As she pulled up in the departmental car park, Pratap Dongre, one of her older post grads, greeted her. He was a handsome guy and a good student, if a bit over-literal, keen to please, with white flashing eyes and impeccable manners. If she'd said he'd got the wrong end of the stick, he'd ask where the stick was. He wanted advice on the direction of his research and they arranged to meet in her office at lunch. In her class, she was less on her high feminist horse than usual, hedging her assertions. She didn't know why. Even Bob wouldn't have her abandon her feminism, though asking his advice would be similar to asking Dawkins for his views on Anglican liturgy. He'd have some interesting ideas without being quite the one to chair the working party.

Pratap was waiting outside her office. Feeling hungry, she ate her sandwich as discreetly as possible while letting him talk, wishing she'd brought some cake too. 'Bob' was saying that he could eat a scabby donkey. She learnt that Pratap lived with a younger girl from Australia who was too possessive and hit him quite regularly. He wouldn't retaliate. She moved on to the problem with his research.

"It's the data collection, Professor," he told her. "We're too far from India to have insight into the language used by the different castes. I've tried with Hindus here but they become westernised quickly. It would be better if I could go home to Kolkata for a few months."

Jane agreed that he would benefit from real Indian fieldwork and promised to see if the department could find the necessary funds for him to go back in the holidays. She thought that he needed a break from his aggressive partner

anyway. Most post-grads called her Jane without asking and she suggested he do likewise.

"They do not give you the respect that you deserve," he replied in all seriousness. "I shall only call you Jane if you do me the honour of signing my copy of your magnificent text book." He carefully stressed each word as though reading from a sacred text. She realised that Pratap had taken more than a shine to her. He produced a well-thumbed tome from his briefcase. She wrote, 'To Pratap, with best wishes, Jane Burrows,' in her best handwriting. She used her maiden name at work, and for her publications. Suspecting he was lonely, she asked what other friends and interests he had in Liverpool. She was partly right, though he did play squash and he'd found a meditation centre.

"How interesting! I've always intended to give meditation a go, but never got round to it," she lied.

"You're one of the few lecturers here who isn't prejudiced against religious discourse. Are you a practising Christian?"

"Not now, I'm afraid, Pratap. The church is against too many things, feminism, homosexuality and the like, and I've found it easier to drop the whole idea of God."

Pratap accepted that Hinduism could also get too theistic and too noisy. Buddhism could take the Gods out of the narrative, replacing them with a deep silence, he said. He was looking at her too intently to suggest he'd found an inner peace. She asked why he put up with his girlfriend's violence.

He grinned sheepishly, shrugging his shoulders. "She's a lovely girl when she's nice."

So the girl was a good lay at least, guessed Jane. "But when she is bad she is horrid" was what she said. She decided to tease him no longer, at least for the time being. "I'd better be going,

Pratap. I've a mound of ironing to do at home and we've a reception with the Vice Chancellor this evening. I don't like to advise people on their personal affairs, but if you were a woman telling me this tale, I'd be advising you to leave."

Promising to email Pratap about the funds, she made for the car. The Head of Psychology, Geoffrey Parkinson, was leaving at the same time. "You look lovelier every day," he simpered "Does Andrew know how lucky he is?" Soon after marrying Andrew, she'd had a brief affair with Geoff. She agreed to postpone the delights of ironing for those of the pub. Once the drinks were on the table, Geoff carried on where he'd left off. "Did your first husband not appreciate you either?"

She hoped 'Bob' hadn't got into Geoff's head as well. "Mainly it was me not appreciating him, Bob Swarbrick. He became CEO of Atomic Futures. He wasn't a bone-headed engineer and was very open to ideas. But there are the two cultures, the scientists and the humanities. He was with the losers."

"I'm on both sides of that debate. Your side may have exposed the emptiness at the heart of theory, but you've, we've, replaced it with nothing," he humbly observed.

"We've had a good time. Andrew has his left-wing views but I can humour those."

Geoff didn't like Andrew too much. "That can't be easy. Whenever I meet him, he has this turgid need to fulfil some clanking metaphor of having iron in his self-created soul."

Jane smiled. "Yeah, he reviews his progress on that every day in the mirror as he shaves. But Bob refused to join the zeitgeist. When my sister Mary enlisted into the burgeoning ranks of social workers in the early seventies, he said to her face that they'd do more harm than good. 'Grammar school snots

patronising sec mod kids who can manage on their own,' were his actual words."

Bob's views on that didn't change much with the years. As Geoff went for more drinks, in her head she was viewing Bob's real face, his defeated face, outside the divorce court. The last time they'd met he'd told her how his old friends all seemed to have retired and moved to Kendal with their first wife and second dog, a Wainwright's World theme park with laconic text and lovely drawings. He could see through what he'd preferred to stay with, but stay with them he had. Geoff returned, slopping the drinks on the beer mats, finding her deep in thought. He asked if she was thinking of Andrew or Bob.

"Bob. I do more nowadays. He wasn't a bad guy and he was the father of my kids," she admitted, more to herself than to Geoff.

"You see yourself hip and him a hick. Probably that's how you see me too."

Jane was gratified that Geoff was still carrying a torch, but wanted to keep him at a distance, for the time being at least. "You've never played in the same league as my previous or present husband, sweetheart. I did love Bob, while resenting that I had to marry him because I was pregnant."

Geoffrey bravely continued with his enquiries. "How soon before you were unfaithful? I know from personal experience that it didn't take that long after you married Andrew."

"Get it, will you? You were never any big deal. Bob was the only man I'd ever made love to until I met Andrew," she snapped.

"I remember you being very familiar with a young man at a student party in Tue Brook," Geoff persisted.

Jane was disturbed as well as annoyed. “Were you there that night? Are you some weird kind of stalker? You were a lecturer by then, for God’s sake. I’d found a baby sitter for once. I smoked some pot, drank too much and then snogged John Westwood. In the nick of time, I made an excuse and left.”

“I know. I opened the front door for you. The party was at my house.”

Jane grinned ruefully. “I’d forgotten that, my plumpish little guardian angel. Maybe someday I’ll need you again. Do you still know John? He’s a sociobiologist in the US now. I meet him occasionally at conferences and it’s still unconsummated.”

“I’ve met him once or twice. Was Bob resentful of your academic success?”

Jane still didn’t know. “I can remember the shock on his face when I snook a first. But he switched to delight almost immediately.”

When she’d left Bob, he’d accused her in his rage of not existing, because she couldn’t be constant about anything. That sounded worse than jealousy. Not only did she not have an essence according to Andrew, but Bob didn’t even think she existed. She’d always thought that he confused existence with free will. She had no such problems. Humans had coined the word ‘exist’, and whatever they used it for was what ‘existence’ was. Bob had unsuccessfully argued that not to work for a dog.

She’d had enough of Geoff’s questions and told him he’d be a terrible practising psychiatrist. “You’re not always that likeable, you know, Jane, much as I adore you,” was his frustrated parting shot. Her diary was reflective of why Geoff had said that. However hard she tried, she divided people. People liked or loathed her.

Andrew was still with *The Guardian*, working on the crossword when she arrived home. He turned away as she tried to kiss him. She told him about this Indian student whose Aussie girlfriend was beating him up, and who wouldn't retaliate. She noticed that he was trembling as he discussed the issue in terms of their behaviour echoing the two countries' post-colonial legacies before returning to his crossword.

She assumed wrongly his tremble had come from self-righteous anger. She did half an hour's ironing before going upstairs to Skype Ruth, her first child with Bob, and to watch baby Ben gurgle, She asked Ruth if she'd seen her Dad recently. After Ruth's snide remark that if she really cared she'd phone him herself, she gleaned that he'd dropped in on his way down to London a couple of days before. He was off to Los Angeles for some business. She'd asked if he was wanted in the movies; a remake of *The Misfits* maybe?

Jane and Bob had swapped phone details at Ben's christening. Over the last few hours he'd been in her head like a maggot in an apple. She had an impulse to talk to him, whatever the cost of ringing a mobile in LA. Once she'd worked out that it would be about eight o'clock in the morning in California, she hit the call button. There was a gruff, "Hello," after the transatlantic pause. Bob usually spoke in an unhurried voice formed from the straightforward vowels of the Fylde, but the surprise call in his hotel room had him worried that something was up. Jane reassured him quickly with a lie. "No, I was ringing up to have family talk with you. Ruth tells me you're flying to Los Angeles next week. What's that all about?"

"I'm there now. Do you want me to ring you back?" he volunteered.

Jane wasn't a cheapskate. She refused his offer. She did discuss children and grandchildren first while she tried to understand why she'd rung him. Bob was fond of his grandchildren too. "Tom's been in the Under 11 cricket team, did you hear? And what about young Rachel? She's a talkative one. I wonder which grandmother she takes after."

"Watch it, buster. I've got an old friend who's a sociobiologist in LA. I wish I was there with you."

This last bit was true but Bob was the one on her mind. He didn't realise this and even if he had he would have thought it safer to focus on the other guy. He asked, "What on earth is sociobiology?"

"If you need to ask the question, you wouldn't understand the answer."

That was Jane through and through, followed by Bob at his best. "You mean you don't know either. Is he an international conference acquaintance, David Lodge style?"

She changed the subject quickly, moving to another potential trouble spot, the Indian student who was being beaten up by his girlfriend. "I somehow can't see anyone ever having done that to you," she sniggered.

"You might be right there. I guess it's the pacifist ideas, it would be wrong to retaliate. One Indian guy I knew said it was the vegetarian thing in Hindus; they don't eat much meat. That's why the Pakistanis have the better fast bowlers."

She remembered how her mother had found him coarse. "So you'd advise him to eat cold steak and kidney pies for breakfast like you used to do when I met you."

"Yeah. And then next time she does it, to pull her knickers down and smack her arse."

Jane surprisingly didn't choose to view this as an act of

male aggression. As if she'd missed out, she murmured, "You never did that to me."

"I should've done; anyway you never hit me."

"I should've done. You always left me to do the telling off with the children."

Bob couldn't resist the remark he knew he could soon be regretting, "You were so much better at it than me."

But Jane pulled her punches after setting up the attack. "Half the time you were missing at one or other power station, or playing cricket somewhere. At least that's what I used to think. But I can remember how much help you gave with my first book."

"Not that you took much notice. You always wrote the opposite of what I suggested," he recalled.

She gave him a compliment. "No, I didn't. We were a near miss, but a miss is as good as a mile. I'll concede you did have a certain je ne sais quoi."

"Je ne sais what?"

She even had the grace to laugh at being slightly bested. "Now this Indian guy meditates, he contemplates the nothingness at the heart of his existence. Is that perfection?"

"Before all this stuff about string theory, which I never can quite get, a guy at Atomic Futures would tell me about particles and antiparticles springing in and out of existence from nothing. There's always summat and nowt there."

"I could have told them all that but I'm clever enough to get string theory. I bet you don't know how long the piece of string is," said Jane, knowing why she'd rung. She'd been missing any decent verbal sport recently.

"About the Planck length, I guess," he tentatively ventured.

He'd left himself wide open. There were three rules to

word games with Jane which mirrored thermodynamics. You can't win. You can't break even. You can't leave the game. He'd walked straight into her haymaker. Jane was exultant that he'd admitted he was as thick as one short plank, if not two, condemned from his own mouth. He tried to recover by stating that he wasn't that daft as the string had no thickness at all but oscillated in ten spatial dimensions, reckoning her backside also wiggled in the other seven as well as the normal three. He paid full attention to *a posteriori* views of his women. Jane was flattered, but she'd counted him out before the cheeky remarks. She remembered how he'd used to think that a photon of quantum uncertainty could be sent from the spirit to the brain by human will. She told him that was old hat. The science guys at her university didn't believe all that uncertainty poppycock and thought that every possibility that could happen did do in parallel multiverses.

Bob hated these ideas but wanted though to show Jane how broad-minded he was.

"Maybe somewhere out there you and I are living together in married bliss," he mused. She excluded this on *a priori* grounds, not believing they'd made the grade in any universe. She then wanted to know if there was anything new in his life, clearly meaning a new woman. He answered that there wasn't, but not for the want of trying. She liked this answer and reverted to sweetness. "Come on, most women would have you like a shot. You're too picky,"

"Only the unsuitable ones. I embarrass myself when I remember some of them."

She genuinely wondered if that included her. He said she was top of every list, including that one. Their goodbyes were friendly.

While she was upstairs on the phone, Andrew was wishing that he could be easier in conversation with her, thinking how his superior attitude didn't wash. His stomach churned at the thought of the greatest humiliation in life. A couple of years after Jane and children had moved in, they'd banned Ruth from going to church and youth club on Sunday evening after she'd returned home late too often. Bob happened to be in Lancashire that next Sunday after visiting his parents and dropped in to go to church with her.

After the initial glacial politeness, Andrew had slipped his leash first, calling Bob a coward for clinging to his religion when he must know it was incoherent. Bob in reply had accused Andrew of treachery towards his roots, saying that religion was at least interesting, whereas socialism made everyone bloody miserable. Andrew hadn't been able to stop himself saying that Bob was the miserable one, unable to adjust to human realities like losing his wife. Bob, displaying a yobbish side to his character he only very occasionally found a need for, had grabbed Andrew by the collar and smashed him into the wall. Andrew had been rescued, if that was the right word, by Ruth shouting, "Don't hit him, Dad, he's not worth it." Jane had been struck motionless by Bob's aggression, their younger child Robert spellbound.

Andrew shivered at the memory of their insolent swagger as they'd walked off to church. He thought of the incident often, each successive time a further hammer blow nailing down the coffin lid on this marriage. A few months later, there'd been a triumphal, ugly victory roll. Robert had his BMX stolen after foolishly leaving it outside the park unlocked. He'd been told he couldn't have a new one until his birthday. The next weekend Bob had knocked at the door with the latest model.

Andrew hadn't been reading *The Guardian* all morning. He'd been to the doctor's surgery about his problem. That's why he'd been shivering. He said nothing about it to Jane and bravely managed the VC's reception. He looked like death on the journey home, and went straight to bed. Jane wrote up her diary first. Her diaries were meticulous all the way back to her sixth form days. As she joined him in bed, his eyes were open wide as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Jane, I might have some bad news. I've been to Dr Duncan today and he's referred me to the Royal. It may be nothing but he wants me to have some blood tests."

Jane found it difficult to sleep that evening. She couldn't understand why she felt so excited.