ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Uttley was born in Lancashire just as the war was ending. Grammar school educated there, he read Physics at Oxford before embarking on a long career with the CEGB and National Grid Group. He was Finance Director at the time of the miners' strike, the Sizewell Inquiry and privatisation, receiving on OBE in 1991.Shortly afterwards, he suffered his fifteen minutes of fame when he publicly gave a dividend to charity in the middle of the fat cat furore. Following this, he took an external London degree in Divinity while acting as chairman of numerous smaller companies, both UK and US based. He is married to Janet, living just north of London. This is the third and last novel in his series which has seen *Where's Sailor Jack?* and *No Precedent* follow the lives of the Swarbrick and Shackleton families from the end of the Second World War until the present. John is now calling this trilogy *The Unholy Trinity*. Both sacred and profane, this novel puts a mirror to the social history of three generations in unforgettably honest and poignant terms.

THE DOVE IS DEAD

John Uttley

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CHAPTER ONE

'O love, that wilt not let me go'

In the Oxford summer of 2020, I was standing on the High Street where that bit of Oriel College reveals itself to the wider world. It's always felt to me that it was trespassing by reaching so far north. The crowd around me would have liked nothing better than ensuring it wouldn't do so for much longer. In the distance we could see the Rhodes statue, with Cecil looking apprehensive, as if he was already prepared to step off his perch even before someone found a ladder long enough to pull him down from it. Much as I wanted him to go, I was laughing at myself, wondering what on earth I thought I was doing there. This was not my natural habitat.

"Rhodes must fall," my college mate Charlie chanted, along with everyone else. I'd no choice but to join in. I'd linked up for more than a year with Charlie, an English student a couple of months older than me, whose room was just across the corridor from mine. We did political things together, as well as having become lovers. He was only the third person to have acquired that status. I didn't put myself about then or now. I'm not the promiscuous sibling in my family, nor the wild one, as you'll learn if you stick around.

"You can be woke and still be sensible," I'd say. "It's all about being alive to the wrongs of the past, which isn't everything in history." And then I'd add as a joke, "But that includes everything that's happened in the West since the industrial revolution started."

No, nobody ever laughed. I've never wanted to rebel against my upbringing in a big way though. It had been good. More than anything, I'd hate to be seen as a poor little rich girl, when I know that what I should feel is both privileged and grateful.

The woman next to us was waving a banner displaying the same words as Charlie's chant, briefly pausing to apologise when the damn thing clipped my ear. There were thousands of us there in this over-extended petri dish for the virus, a coalition of all those who felt it was time that Cecil was bade farewell from the city.

"Rhodes must fall," the chant continued, with me by now only miming the words. I heard the homophone and envisaged a sink hole suddenly appearing in the High Street, with a double-decker bus being swallowed up and eaten by a grotesque mechanical monster. Whatever the cause, my heart wasn't fully into that sort of protest, not with me being a Shackleton.

"Just look at this turn-out," the ear clipper said to us. "All well-behaved too, more's the pity. I was hoping for a good riot."

"This is Oxford. We're probably better at thinking about things than doing anything about it," I politely replied.

"Hell, that's no use. I'm Stephanie, by the way."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Amy."

Charlie killed that conversation off by choosing that moment to yell out, “Fucking Rhodes must fucking fall,” and he got the thumbs up from the putative rioter and cheers from those around us for his escalation of the struggle. That was perhaps not the wittiest thing he’d ever said, although on reflection I can’t remember anything much better. I could see a banner which read, “All roads lead to the river,” which was at least a bit wittier than Charlie had managed, but which could only be made possible by either weaving your way down through Christ Church meadow or by first walking up to Carfax and then turning left down St Aldates. Folly Bridge did sound to me like a suitable place though to ditch Rhodes and his views into a watery grave.

Rhodes wasn’t despatched that day. He still hasn’t been, despite all the resolutions of several worthy committees to do so legally. We were in Oxford, truly the home of lost causes, and not Bristol, where that fate had happened to Colston. The cops were well organised here too. A helicopter hovered overhead doing God knows what.

“Can they take photographs of protesters from there?” I asked Stephanie. She was sure they could, so gave a V sign in that general direction.

But, instead of rioting, we listened to the worthy speeches, before slowly dispersing, much to the irritation of Stephanie. She’d come on a train from Reading hoping for some more positive action. As we went past a cohort of police, she shouted out, “Fascist scum.” If they were, they were disciplined stormtroopers, because none of them batted an eyelid.

Grateful that she hadn’t knocked one of their helmets off, I asked Stephanie why she was walking with us in the opposite direction to the railway station.

“For the company,” she said. “And to try to understand what makes posh girls like you tick.”

“I’ve been wondering that since I met her,” said Charlie.

“Well, I’m certainly not going to tell you now, either of you,” I replied with what I thought was a wicked chuckle, although I was still too young for one of those.

I soon learnt that I wasn’t the woman of mystery there. Stephanie, who was, had no intention of remaining one for long either. She looked to be in her early thirties, confirmed by her quickly assuming the senior role. I’m not an assertive person anyway, whatever my sister says. Stephanie told us that she was a trans woman. That day, I thought she looked stunning and had been wanting to copy her hairstyle, not that I could as all hairdressers were out of bounds. She looked fit; she told us in a well-rehearsed potted autobiography, that she was living with a cis man who was both a stylist and a personal trainer. She claimed to be a freelance writer.

“What’ve you had published?” I asked.

“It’s well buried on the internet,” she said. “And not for your bourgeois eyes. You’d be shocked.”

I couldn’t have been happier to meet her, wanting to know far more about what I assumed she had gone through. She then turned coy and told me all that would have to wait for another occasion, as she’d walked too far in the wrong direction and had a train to catch. We quickly exchanged contact details. She said she’d fix up for us to meet again. Covid prevented that for nearly a year, but we did keep in

touch on Instagram and WhatsApp, discussing both the persecutions she suffered and the many horrors of the Johnson administration.

Before we did get to meet again, some six months after the demo, I was looking out of my window at St Catherine's College at the bleak December trees. I was overcome by the feeling that I was watching shots from a movie, one with a small budget and hand-held camera work, yet still seeming two-dimensional and lifeless. I couldn't tell if I was at the start, the middle, or the end of the film. It being December did give me a broad hint though. Whatever I did, said, thought and wrote, I knew that everything would all end the same. Still only aged nineteen, I recall being impressed with myself for the weight of that conceit. But then I had to rid myself of that fatalism pretty quickly. I also believed strongly that we were called to action to correct injustices, making interventions that could and should produce results, although outcomes are not my forte. Perhaps I do still believe we should act, but now I wouldn't expect things to work out. Experience too often suggests otherwise. This world was, is and always will be too screwed up to respond to my good intentions.

Outside my window were formal gardens, designed in the early sixties to be in keeping with the then newly constructed award-winning buildings. The building had to win awards of course, otherwise, the architect would have to have spent his life apologising. He should have done that even after he'd won the prizes. From this point on, I'll be referring to my college as Catz, though it does convey more than a note of the privilege I'd still prefer to hide, unexamined. I didn't like the highly praised garden design that much either, even in Summer, apart from the watery bits by the river. I much preferred the cottage-style confusion Dad had created at our home in Monkey Mead, chaos that had taken him more than thirty years to create, in a combination of his customary flare, manic energy and benign neglect.

The scene has just shifted inside the windows, into my room, and to me, Amy Shackleton, in close-up, a second-year student reading History. It's bang in the middle of the pandemic and I'm waiting for Dad to arrive.

It seems like yesterday but it's nearly seventeen years ago. I'm provisionally titling what I'm writing and you're reading as *The Dove is Dead*. It's deliberately written as the third and final book of an extended family saga. which I'm pretentiously describing to myself as *The Unholy Trilogy.* The previous two books were published relatively recently by different authors. *Where's Sailor Jack?* was written by Richie Smith-Swarbrick. The second, *No Precedent*, has two main authors, Richie's mother and father, Wendy Smith and Bob Swarbrick, but which also contains a brief final word by Helen Shackleton, who happens to be my mother.

The two principal characters in those two books, and in what I'll be writing too, are Bob Swarbrick and Richard Shackleton, both born in 1945 as the war finished. Their lives are chronicled through to their deaths, my father's occurring only a couple of years ago. When I read these first two books, I realised that they gave more emphasis to Bob overall, a man I knew for much of my life and someone I greatly admired. He was looking for, and sometimes finding, purpose in life, while

my Dad was always trying to find meaning. I think that the Shackleton end, my end, of the story is now demanding to be told in more detail, revealing the voice of inspired reason that disappeared from my life with Dad's death. Unfortunately, that voice does seem to have gone missing everywhere else in humanity too.

2020 wasn't the best year, and this wasn't a great term, but Covid restrictions were being eased enough for students to get home for Christmas. That was about to happen. I'd had to take a test, which had been negative, before I felt it safe to go back. The last thing I wanted to do was to give the virus to my parents. The first approval for a vaccine, the Pfizer one, had just been given and the roll-out was about to get underway, initially to the old and the vulnerable. We hoped that the Johnson Government had finally got ahead of the game, after having spent nine months contradicting themselves and the scientists advising them, not that those scientists could ever agree on anything much themselves. As a country, we were seemingly quite close to the top of the World Highest Per Capita Dead chart.

Apart from his regular walks and when taking a socially distanced Sunday service, where he trusted on the Almighty to protect him from any residual risk – a brave, perhaps foolhardy decision for a seventy-five-year-old man – Dad had rarely left our home for nine months. He was a lay reader at a Church a few miles from where we lived. Mum's vet surgery was only a couple of miles from our house. She was sixty at this point. She'd been reduced throughout the pandemic to holding her consultations under a temporary gazebo in the car park, moving inside only with the animals. The owners had to wait in the cold. Dad described the whole period as like being under house arrest in a dictatorship, waiting for the next knock on Fate's door. Mum said that the lack of freedom was nearly as bad as her pregnancy with me. That was her own fault for having me so late, I told her, glad as I am that she did.

In shot again, I'm wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a baggy jumper. I can still feel its itchiness today, seventeen years later, but it was a cold day outside and I had to be ready for the off. To this day, I don't like wearing skirts much. I'm not that bad a looker though, either then or even now. I haven't got Mum's beautiful bone structure, but I have a pleasant face and my curves are in all the right places. I prefer to be comfortable and for people to like me or not for who I am. Enough men, and I prefer men, in case I was making you wonder, seem to have liked me the way I am. Yes, you've still got to take me as you find me.

"No, you don't," the past Amy is shouting out to the present one. "We're Shackletons, and we try to please. Haven't you realised that after all these years? You've always battled hard to keep your weight down."

She's right. And, much as she tries to hide the fact, non-Shackleton Helen, the Mum of both the past and present me, has always been a fair-minded person too, while having a sharp edge to her. That's something Dad never managed either to acquire or to reciprocate. As a vet, she's needed to preserve a shield to avoid feeling emotion. But when challenged, she'll shrug and say she was born that way. I think she's probably right. As she is still alive, I won't try to editorialise my relationship with her other

than to say that it's good. She's not an obvious person, revealing less of herself than Dad. We usually get on well, and I always know that the love is there.

Back in pre-history, Dad had studied Theology at Oriel College, where, as well as Rhodes, they have beautiful old buildings and three gorgeous quadrangles in a row, unlike Catz in every respect. My brother James did his doctorate there too, on the history of the Anglo-Saxons, before moving to a teaching post at UCL. As a family, we ooze the privilege I wish we didn't. I've spent parts of my life even trying to disown it, but I can't. It's part of who I am. We don't hide it, we don't flaunt it, but it's impossible for me to ignore it. Maybe Dad, born in Bolton in a terraced house along with the much-prized humble-origin indicator of an outside lavatory, can tell another tale first. I can't. I still would have found it nicer though in these flashbacks to have been overlooking one of those traditional Oxford quads.

I had though been strongly advised not to apply to Oriel as any family connections would by then have counted for less than nought (usually pronounced nowt by Dad), and quite rightly. Would I have exploited them if they had been useful? I hope not, but almost certainly yes, if nobody I knew was looking. Whatever, I was persuaded by my school to apply to Catz, because of its strength in History. The place had been built around Alan Bullock, the first Master, who'd remained in that role for several decades. My school syllabus gave me such an overdose of Adolf Hitler that since then I've never wanted to read another word about the Nazis, but back then I'd frequently referred to Bullock's seminal work *A Study in Tyranny*. He'd survived into old age with his reputation intact while his friends and rivals, A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor Roper, had to an extent lost theirs either through revisionism or gullibility. I've always liked Taylor myself, and he's still on my list of good guys. Wasn't he seeking the messy truth rather than falling into convenient stereotypes? He was a Lancastrian, like Dad, so I'm pretty sure he would have been. Whoops, I think that might be stereotyping too! No doubt there are just as many scheming bastards in the County Palatine, if not more. Their apparent openness is probably well cultivated.

And, unlike Oriel, at least we didn't have a statue of Cecil Rhodes on our wall. But my degree at Oxford disappointingly had little colonial history within it, and nothing about Critical Race Theory or Intersectionality, which were dominating the agenda elsewhere. It was as if nothing had happened since 1945, nor was going to do again. A syllabus good enough for the likes of the famous historians I've just mentioned when they were students was not one to be changed in the light of later events. I had to rectify that gap with extra-mural activities. My tutors were fair-minded enough though to take seriously the politics of their students, although one lecturer found it hard not to show his contempt for us. He was named and shamed online, and few continued to attend his lectures. His strength, a ridiculously dogmatic attitude, became his downfall. I thought this to be right and proper.

Yes, this was the time of the Black Lives Matter campaign, which I strongly felt that the whole of Britain should take to heart. It was one of the things I disagreed with Dad on, who saw it as just one initiative among many that had taken place during his life. He would say that co-operation and

integration would always be what was needed, not a blame game or slogans. He hadn't wanted to stay with the radical political programme beyond his youth, as neither did his great hero, Bob Dylan, something he too frequently told me.

"Ah, but I was so much older then. I'm younger than that now," he'd quote to me in what he saw as a defence, and I thought of as a sell-out. It's perhaps as well that I'm writing this so much later, when I've just about reached the same point as he and Dylan had managed quickly, after years of banging my head against a wall, the other side of which I've never managed to reach.

"I prefer to apologise for things that actually are my fault, like the parlous state of the northern towns and for having buggered off south while the going was still good. That slimy bugger Blair started the trend of apologising for other people's faults, but never his own, as in calling a disastrous war under false pretences."

Dad's language was usually temperate but mention of Blair would always touch a raw nerve. I suspect that it was the transfer of the Labour Party's base from the North to Islington that really did it for him more than the illegal war.

In my sixth form days, I'd already formed strongly anti-colonial views. I'd try to tell him then how Britain had got rich as a result of the efforts of people of colour around the world. In reply, he showed me again the detail of his genealogical studies, which nearly everybody of his age tech-savvy enough seemed to have done.

"Our direct ancestors all came from North England all the way back to the 17th century, which as good as means since the seventh century," he said. "They were probably harrowed by the Normans. They've included Victorian coal miners and foundrymen, and they had a bit to do with creating modern Britain too, as did millions like them."

"A false equivalency. Race and class should be treated as separate issues," I replied.

What he was saying certainly wasn't what I was being taught to write, so I didn't mention it in any essays. I doubt I'd have got top grades if I had, even at Oxford. Not only that, it's not where the action was then or is now, either in the UK or world-wide. That England is over; however much James had studied it or Dad mourned it. Maybe it did last a millennium and a half, but it's gone forever.

And most of us my age, or indeed anybody from the south, didn't want to understand the reasons behind the collapse of the red wall in the north either, which we could conveniently file under pig-ignorant populism, just under the entry for Donald Trump. Black Lives Matter along with the inexorable rise of China and the challenge to the whole nation of the Covid pandemic gave us the cover to do just that, even though the virus had hit hard in Northern England, and particularly in Bolton. As far as I was concerned, 'levelling up' was necessary nearly everywhere on Earth, and not just north of the Mersey. Lancashire Lives Matter couldn't work as a slogan because Lancastrians hadn't suffered the horrors of racism. A bum economic deal and a bit of class prejudice weren't in that league. Dad was always a compassionate man, and if he'd known more people who were black, I'm sure he'd have felt it all as

viscerally as I did. He was very friendly with the ones he did know, who seemed to like him. But his circle of friends was nearly all white.

I already knew that I wasn't a star pupil, nor indeed always that studious a one, but I was not as bad as my sister, Laura. James is my only really bright sibling. I suppose oldest brother Matthew is too, but I still can't really see civil engineering as either arts or science.

I doubt if I'd have got into Oxford if I'd been state educated, but I'd always been quite good at bullshitting, a gift inherited from Dad, who could lay it on in spadefuls, despite his lowly origins. I'd have probably been happier with a campus university, with the discipline of classes and workshops.

Charlie had gone home to Kent the day before, accepting a bit too readily that we wouldn't see each other for six weeks. I wondered if he had another girl there, or maybe he had one in each of the cinque ports.

"Most demonstrations have done more harm than good," Dad had said to me when I first went on one. "Look at what at what democratic politics during my lifetime has achieved in Britain on education, racial integration and women's rights."

He did always look back on Martin Luther King's *March on Washington* as something special though. That was his time.

"Most of those gains have been reversed since," I said.

He was never to become woke, but then he never actually fell asleep, until that saddest of days when he died. That didn't stop me continuously lecturing him about how the project on the left of politics was a coherent movement.

"That's probably why I'm not keen," he once replied. "I read *The Children's Act* by Ian McEwan a few years back. His character tried to argue a logical case from first principles. But in truth it didn't work for me. I don't think you can do that. There's got to be a visceral component. First principles are always either insufficient or assume the answer in their premiss."

"Law's got to be logical, surely."

"I'm pretty sure it can't be. Why is murder wrong? We'll both agree it is, but in the end, it's just wrong. You're no doubt pro-abortion, and so am I if it means giving the last word to the mother. But if you think the arguments in favour of it are entirely rational, then you'll feel justified in bullying everyone else into submission, turning nasty when nice doesn't work. It's too delicate an issue for that. No, we don't need any more coherent movements right now. Don't follow leaders, and watch the parking meters," he'd said.

"That's your damned Dylan again, isn't it? You're a member of the Church party, if not a political one," I'd replied. "And he didn't stick with his Christian phase for long either, did he?"

"He's not the type to be tied to any one thing for long," he'd answered. "He'd made a deal with his Chief Commander and he's stuck with that, as a poet, and a song and dance man, not a theologian. He did get quite a bit out of his time with that Vineyard group though. He wasn't born a Christian,

unlike you and me, yet his lyrics are still stuffed full of Messianic imagery and always have been. I'm no poet, I'm a pretty prosaic sort of guy. But I like my congregation members to have minds of their own, from the Virgin Birth to the Resurrection, and even beyond that if they wish. And to respect others who have different views. I mistrust anyone who's certain."

That made some sort of sense to me too. I could sometimes then, and usually now, see both sides of every argument, if only on reflection. Mum is still none too good at that even at her present grand age of seventy-seven. And when contradicted, she can still go from ice cold to white hot in nanoseconds, with no intermediate state. Dad would often calm her down. That role has now fallen to me. I sometimes, but not often, wish I was more like her.

When I first had the idea of writing this book, I wanted to paint a world-wide canvas. I've come to realise that I don't have the background for that. Nobody does. But people did and still do get enormous pleasure from more limited backcloths. Well, you won't find one much smaller than in this book! It will make Trollope's Barchester look like a teeming metropolis. Only Stephanie might be seen to be the exception to this mundanity. But I still cannot see a trans woman as out of the ordinary, even though Mum did once accuse me of collecting her deliberately so that I could parade my wokeness. I wonder if any trans reader will take me to task for writing about something of which I know so little. Still. it would no doubt be a lot worse if I were a straight white cis male.

Dad texted to say he was outside. Back then, as a party ended, I'd give him such a blast if he rang rather than texted to say he'd arrived for the pick-up. I didn't realise until he told me that he was of an age when his vision was better than twenty: twenty at the long end, but that he needed arms longer than he had to see his phone keypad. I now know, as it's starting to happen to me.

He was early. He always was. It could be infuriating, but I was ready for him on this occasion. With the Covid precautions, he wasn't allowed into the Catz bubble. Fortunately, I always travel light, and had managed to fit everything into a suitcase and hold-all. He met me at the college gate, not quite looking his already well-advanced age. He was a tidy enough looking guy right to the end, even when laid out in the coffin a couple of years ago. Hell, why did I think of that? Should I leave it in? I have to. It's like he's just paid me a visit, and not for the only time.

"Hello, love. Let me carry those," was his greeting.

Being a Northerner, a Lancastrian and a Boltonian, he was never a cheek pecker or hugger on each of the three separate counts. Instead, he tried to take the luggage from me. He was an old, old man, I was a fighting-fit 19-year-old and the bags weren't that heavy. I pulled one case away as he stooped to take it from me, accidentally bashing his leg with it.

"I can manage them," I snapped.

I regretted it immediately. You do always hurt the ones you love. He had the unconcerned look on his face that would form when he didn't want to look hurt. But I always knew. He was a sensitive soul.

That memory has just brought tears to my eyes, while the coffin appearance didn't. I would never say sorry for things like that. I'm my Mum's daughter too. I could have ignored his northernness, put

the luggage down and thrown my arms around him there and then. He'd have been shocked but I bet it would have made him happy. I didn't though. He quickly made light of my brusqueness.

"You go ahead and carry them. My old back's playing up a bit after the journey," he said.

I then added insult to injury.

"Would you like me to drive back then if your back's bad?"

I was insured for the family car. It was a new, hybrid model, my parents as usual going for the responsibly middle-of-the-road solution. I'd only driven it a couple of times, so I'd no intention of that actually happening. I only offered because I knew he wouldn't accept.

"My back's not that bad," he answered, the laughing lines of his face opening up to let me know that I hadn't really upset him. He then did a little trot to the car to open the boot to show that his leg had survived my assault intact. I let him put everything into the boot.

He started the car and drove off quickly, saying nothing until we turned into Longwall. Something was bugging him, and I thought I knew what.

"I need to get to the motorway services before I have an unfortunate accident," he said. "I shouldn't have had that cup of tea before I set off from home." He then was able to relax, having confessed to that possibility. He wanted to know all about the Covid situation in the college.

I hadn't thought though that it was bladder pressure that was getting to him.

"There has been quite a bit, but things have kept going. I hope I'm not bringing any back with me," I told him. "I've tested negative and tried to keep myself out of harm's way."

"I don't suppose you are, love. And it's a chance we're happy to take. I've never missed celebrating Christmas with my family and I'm not starting now. You've nowhere else to go for Christmas. James will be home too. The other two are staying in their own places. So, we will be as Covid compliant as we can manage."

Under the rules in place at that time, that was indeed the case. But not for much longer, as we were soon to find out.

The 'other two' were Matthew and Laura. James was my second brother and third oldest. I was far and away the youngest, a delightful mistake, according to Dad, Mum always missing out the adjective in her description. I wasn't going to be 20 until the Summer. My siblings were 33, 29 and 26 respectively. Prosperous civil engineer Matthew was already married with a couple of kids. I'll be introducing Laura very shortly. James, as you have already learnt, was teaching at UCL. He would become extremely cagey around then whenever he discussed his private life. He'd had a very torrid love affair a few years previously when he'd been treated abominably. *No Precedent* contains all the gory details. At first on the rebound and then out of habit, he'd since had far too many lovers, most of them unsuitable and none of them for long. I knew that the reason he was free for Christmas was that his present significant other was a married woman, Victoria Allen, one of the private secretaries at UCL. He'd been maintaining totally inadequate social distancing with her on impromptu visits to his nearby flat in The Brunswick. Indeed, the intensity of his relationship with Victoria meant that

the whole History Department knew of it. I had an old school friend there who'd told me. I didn't let on to Mum and Dad, but I suspect they'd both guessed. They'd seen him at it enough times before. He'd been such a sensitive soul when he was younger too. Love not only hurts, it broadens and coarsens.

I did tend to assume that previous generations were not as sexually active as mine, despite the evidence in birth rate being very much to the contrary. I asked Dad if I'd got it wrong.

"I wouldn't be sure either way. We'd no war to fight and the telly got boring after a while," he replied. "We couldn't do it virtually, so had to put up with doing it for real. But that was once the pill arrived."

Laura was then living in Enfield, only a few miles from Monkey Mead, with her partner. At least that's what I called him. Mum and Dad called him her boyfriend, as she did herself. His name was Colm O'Donovan, and he worked in IT for a London departmental store. She had a job in an advertising agency close by there. Unlike the rest of us, who'd at least occasionally knuckle down to study, she'd partied her way through university, an English degree at Manchester, only to get the dreaded 2:2. She was lucky to be given the job, but she could talk her way into anything, and had proved good at it. She led for the agency on a couple of big accounts.

She's very different from me in not being much concerned about social issues. She reminds me very much of Mum's real mother, who was vivacious, chatty and a bit naïve. Laura has a bit of a wild side to her too, perhaps inherited from Mum's real father. Mum had been adopted as a baby by a lovely old couple, and only met her birth parents, schoolchildren at the time of her conception, in later life. As a child, I had a surfeit of grandparents. Mum's two biological parents both had their own families, indeed several in the case of my grandfather. My grandmother Jill lived in Purley with her husband, close to her other grandchildren. Mum's step-parents are long gone, but the real ones were only three years older than Dad. At this stage, they were still alive and kicking, if not too hard. We usually saw Jill several times a year with visits to or from my grandfather Christopher more erratic. Mum had a love/hate relationship with him, while liking open and honest Jill. As a result of the pandemic, we hadn't seen either of them since the previous Christmas.

We reached the motorway services without any drama. Back in the car and on to the M40, I found out what had really been bugging Dad. Having released one set of pressures, he was in the mood to let go of another. The reason was Laura.

"She spoke on the phone last night to Helen. I bet you already knew she was pregnant."

"I cannot tell a lie, Dad. She told me a couple of weeks ago. They're deliriously happy about it. Aren't you?"

What I didn't mention was that Laura had said that she'd even stopped smoking marijuana, as had Colm. I think she was the only one of us siblings who had ever inhaled. My act of rebellion was a tattoo, but only a small one on my wrist, and then a red rose, so that Lancastrian Dad was happy, if not Mum.

"Of course I am," Dad had replied by the time I was concentrating again. "A new, wanted soul in this world is always a cause for celebration. It's fantastic news they're having a baby."

He didn't usually resort to such tinselly clichés, even from the pulpit. There'd been more to Laura's phone call than that.

"She told Helen to tell me that there will be no wedding or christening, and not just because of lockdown. She said that she and Colm had had their fill of religion. When Helen asked if she wanted to speak to me, she said there was no need and rang off quickly. She must have been worried that I'd try to change her mind."

"She knows you better than that, I'm sure. You've always let all of us make our own mistakes."

"She didn't seem to. I don't think I've ever tried to force her into anything, not with Colm's family trying to ram things down his throat. Anyway, the sacrament these days is less about an inward and spiritual grace than an opportunity for folk spending money they haven't got on over-the-top receptions. The outward and visible sign will be their next and subsequent credit card statements, not that you're allowed much of a party right now. All I hope for is a happy and healthy baby."

Colm's maternal grandparents were dead. His paternal ones were even older than Dad, but then they were a generation ahead. They'd made decent money from the building firm they'd developed and then sold to a national firm. They were also staunch, traditional Catholics. Colm's mother and father were on the boundary between occasional and lapsed and therefore a great disappointment to the older generation. They did at least maintain the old traditions for form's sake. The grandparents had hoped to recover the family honour with Colm.

He'd gone along with it all at first, and it wasn't until meeting Laura that his growing doubts turned to rebellion. By then, he was living in the flat in Enfield, provided at no cost to him by them. So, in 2018 when Laura moved in, they were close to apoplectic. Colm was living with a Proddy Dog woman, the unforgiveable sin. Even worse, she was a woman with a father who preached a liberal, forgiving gospel and didn't seem to believe anyone would actually go to hell.

"You're bringing shame on your family," said grandmother Kathleen. "I have to avoid talking to Father Michael. He always asks what you are up to."

"Get her out of that flat, or find somewhere new yourself," grandfather Joe O'Donovan then told him. "Otherwise, I'll be round myself with the bailiffs."

Dad wasn't your average lay reader, and he wasn't at all anti-Catholic. He did even like a bit of ceremony and ritual. I remember him telling me that the transubstantiation debate was on a par with modern arguments about the relationship between signifier and signified. I'm not aware of any semiotician being burnt at the stake despite the ferocity of arguments they indulge in, but that's maybe because since the sixteenth century we've developed box sets for the entertainment of the masses and no longer need public executions. They'll be available on the dark web for those who can't live without one. Seeing the Shackletons are still here, I assume those ancestors of ours must have been wise enough to keep their heads down during the Reformation, whichever side they were on.

Colm's grandparents didn't share in the current enthusiasm for box sets, and even less in the nuances of semiotics. They favoured real action. They meant what they said.

Colm did love Laura and stuck to his guns. Joe and Kathleen weren't quite ready to disown him. But they insisted that he either bought or gave back the flat. Laura and Colm of course hadn't enough money for the first option. The situation had to be saved by Mum and Dad in more practical mode. Vets didn't earn a fortune, but Dad the investment banker had and still hadn't spent or given away all of his ill-gotten and grotesque gains. His charity was tempered with common sense. Mum and Dad arranged to pay a substantial deposit with the loving couple only needing a small mortgage for the balance. The flat was put into their names. Similar arrangements had already been put in place for my other siblings and were later for me.

Dad's generous actions didn't rescue religion in either Colm's or Laura's minds though. For them, that understandably signified oppression, whether it be catty or doggy. They never wanted to think about the wretched subject again, and a baby was not going to make them change their outlook. But, having met Dad, and seen the colour of his money, Joe and Kathleen at least then tolerated Laura.

We didn't first discuss religious matters on the way home. That honour was reserved for Bolton Wanderers, the family football team for more than a century whose decline in fortune from glory has also been covered in some detail in both *Where's Sailor Jack?* and *No Precedent*. They were down in the fourth tier, much to our joint chagrin. All the siblings honoured Dad in supporting Bolton, with only Laura not that bothered. Back then, I played football for the college team as a bustling centre-forward. I still love the game. I'd heard more than once from Dad's old friends how he'd been a top-class, ball-playing midfielder in his heyday, who could have probably have turned pro if he'd wanted.

"We're improving a bit from that terrible start," I said.

"The one advantage of being down in the depths in the time of virus is I can watch every game on iFollow. They've been looking a bit more like it, but it'll be a miracle if they ever get back to where Bill Ridding's or Big Sam's teams were. O my Lofthouse and my Campo long ago."

For his benefit, I chanted *Ivan Campo* to the Westminster Chimes melody, despite him really being before my time. I hadn't known the good years.

After that we moved on to politics, with the hapless Boris the butt of jokes from both of us. Dad showed him a bit more sympathy than I did, as he knew from his career how difficult it could be to organise a piss up in a brewery even if, unlike Boris, you had a conscience and were halfway competent.

I did briefly ask Dad how his lay ministry was going. He was downbeat. To all intents and purposes, he ran St John's, a small Church at Petty Green. This was part of what's called a rural benefice, headed by the Monkey Mead parish Church, St Matthew's, close to where we lived. There was one other Church in this grouping, St Mary's at Stonefield, where Barbara Butler was doing a similar job to Dad as the lay reader. Each Church had retained its separate governance through its own Parochial Church Council, always called the PCC. Dad and Barbara had both been in their roles for several years. The nature of his congregation was changing, with the middle of the road old timers slowly dwindling and

being replaced by a very few new arrivals. The newcomers were either middle-class newly marrieds recently moved from London or conservative evangelicals on the march to impose their thinking on the whole Church and frustrated by their lack of success in their own parish. He was happy enough with the first group, but deeply frustrated with the second. They were in danger of taking over at St Matthew's. Attendances there were down less though than at the other two churches. Sadly, a youth club which had thrived at St Matthew's and been used by all three parishes had withered on the vine a couple of years before. It wasn't that much fun to go to by the time I was old enough. These things need a critical mass. As many as thirty children went to the Sunday School when I was that age. When their numbers fell to two, there was no choice but to have the kids in the main service.

"I know the more evangelical would love one of their own in the pulpit at our place too," Dad said. "But I'm not retiring yet. They can have the future. In the meantime, we're sticking with the past. It suits me better."

It was good to see the old house as we turned the corner. It had a name, Hummills, although the varnish was just starting to peel off the wooden nameplate. Mid-afternoon, the light was fading. Unsurprisingly, the trees were bare here too, and Mum wasn't much better at the cheek-pecking greeting than Dad. She also wanted to carry the luggage. I didn't fight her for the honour. She's still a striking looking woman, but the lines on her face had already started to leave her looking sad unless and until she chose to smile. That outward sign matched her inward perspective for the future, understanding as she did the realities of ageing, for Dad first and then for herself.

That's when I realised that home wasn't what it used to be. I was the only child left living there, and then only spasmodically. The others had all been gone a while; our wonderful, friendly border collie, Trotter, who had been with us from before I can remember anything, had died four years before. He was the soul of our home, and life couldn't have stayed the same once he'd gone. We'd all dug in his ashes under an oak tree on the Common. All meant all. All four of us kids came home for the saddest of wakes.

And then Chloe, our ancient cat, had died earlier in the year. Her ashes were on the shelf in the utility room, by the boiler where she loved to sleep. Just sometimes when she was younger, she'd do me the honour of sleeping with me. In their many years together, she and Trotter had been the best of friends. Understandably, Mum and Dad were considering downsizing to an apartment or a town house. And, pre-pandemic, Mum had started the process of selling her vets business. Everything they'd built together was being dismantled. I think what made it sad for them is that they knew that any replacement would be much less meaningful.

As Dad had said to me on the drive home: "Nice as they are, glazed scallops on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean aren't a patch on a long walk and a picnic in the country with all you kids, our Trotter cadging off everyone in turn."

I knew it would soon be goodbye from me to everything I'd known too. You've got to live your life mainly with your own generation. I took my stuff upstairs to my bedroom. When I came down,

there was a cup of camomile tea and a piece of carrot cake on the table for me, exactly what I wanted. I looked at the rogue's gallery, pictures of all four children on the wall. The others were in full degree day outfits, I was just in sub fusc for matriculation, a photo which was to be replaced a couple of years later when I graduated. On the mantelpiece was a photo of Mum and Dad on their wedding day, flanked by ones of their two grandchildren, Lydia and Peter. I had to fight back the tears.

Mum saw and guessed the cause correctly.

"Don't you worry about us," she said. "It's your turn now. You'll all probably make the same stupid mistakes and false starts that we did, and I hope you'll someday get the same happiness. We're looking back in gratitude, even for having you kids."

That was the most vulnerable I'd ever seen Mum look. What she could see in a forward direction down the one-way street of life were departures, including eventually her own. Thankfully, that one's not happened yet. But the other big one has.