

THE END OF THE LINE

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 CEBG and National Grid Group. He was Finance Director there at the time of the miners' strike, the Sizewell Inquiry and privatisation, receiving an 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.

Over the last fifteen years, he has published The Unholy Trinity trilogy, a family saga. And now, as an octogenarian, he has written this stand-alone novel, "The End of the Line", a celebration of lives still being lived to the full as the Grim Reaper makes his plans.

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First Published in Great Britain
Published by Lancashire Lines Publishing

Manufacturer/distributor: York Publishing Services Ltd
64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ
Tel: 01904 431213 | Email: enquiries@yps-publishing.co.uk
Website: www.yps-publishing.co.uk

Represented by: Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd.
Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin D02 P593, Ireland
www.arccompliance.com

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ISBN 978-1-0666713-1-1

Design and Typesetting Rachael Carver
Cover painting by Jeanette Sutton

Dedication,
To the Church of England

Prologue

I'd hoped that, when the dreadful moment came, Judith would die in our bed, in our bedroom, in our house, slipping peacefully into the next world as she slept. But that was before dementia and cancer had made the nursing home decision inevitable, her thoughts and functions sent awry by disease. After more than half a century of sharing a bed, we were separated. I visited every day, not that I was able to bring her any relief from the demons in her head plaguing her. They only lessened their hold as her breathing became much heavier. Eventually, without quite saying why, the kindly senior nurse told me that it might be a good idea to spend the night sitting in the armchair by her bedside. I didn't sleep, listening to the mesmeric noise of her breathing.

"I'm still here," I said, as the breathing briefly became quieter. "I won't be that far behind you to the next place. Wait for me there."

She picked up the rhythm again, the steady pace of the funeral march towards death. I looked into her face, seeing only the sixth form schoolgirl I had first courted all those years ago. Was that the body she would take into eternity, I wondered? I did hope so.

The march slowed down a few times, each time with me expecting this to be it. She was in no hurry though, and neither was I. By four in the morning, I was thinking that another day would come. But then there was a brief increase in pace, a rattle and then silence. I waited for a minute and called the nurse.

"I think she's gone," I said.

A couple of quick checks confirmed that to be the case.

"I'll leave you on your own for a few minutes. Cry your tears, Jim. Then you go home and get some sleep. Come back this afternoon. We'll discuss the necessary arrangements then."

After a short while, I drove home. A new day had dawned. The air

still felt cold with the eerie chill of the night. I opened the door to what had been our home, and to the rest of my life.

Chapter 1

I was watching from the front window as the taxi pulled into the drive. This was all going to be humiliating for her, not that I expected her to show it. She was only carrying one suitcase.

“My brother will pay you,” I heard her tell the driver as I opened my front door. I had to go back in for my wallet. I paid the cabbie with my still functioning platinum credit card.

She’d always been five years older than me. She was when I was born as the war ended in 1945 and she still was on this day in the summer of 2023. She’d been my big sister ever since I came into this world, a role that she wouldn’t know how to forgo even at eighty-three and in penury.

I knew precisely where I stood, just as I’d known since the time I’d first learnt to speak. The recent event that had caused her parlous financial situation might suggest that the roles should reverse. Human nature insisted otherwise. Being born first had put her in first place. Absolute primogeniture applied.

The Jaguar she usually drove must have been reclaimed. Really, to save money, my money as I’d just discovered, she should have arrived by train or bus, but perhaps that would have been asking too much. The station was a distance away and the bus timetable didn’t have them come to our village any too often. She’d told me on the phone the previous night that her cards, debit and credit, had only just been restored, with minimal credit, after being cancelled for several weeks. They’d summarily been snipped into two and presented to her on a silver platter, she said, rather like the head of John the Baptist. Salome hadn’t been left to clear up the bloody mess of a bankruptcy though, as Rose had. Sadly, the similarity had been extended to include an actual severed head, that of Ken Grundy, her husband of more

than sixty years. In a vain attempt to rescue his departmental store business and having exhausted ever more expensive credit lines from increasingly unsuitable banks, he'd tried his luck at the local casino, to which, somewhat ironically, Rose the politician had been implacably opposed. That had only finally received planning permission when her Lib Dems lost the local elections to the Tories. Everything lost, Ken had decapitated himself on the railway line just outside their town, a lonely way to die. The trains, unlike the buses, did run every half hour though, so he hadn't had to wait long enough to change his mind. In fact, he'd been doubly unlucky; the following train had been cancelled, but unfortunately not the one for which he'd put his neck on the line. The inquest merely had the balance of his mind disturbed.

Rose had always wanted to spend her last years in a village, and that was what she was about to do. She hadn't planned though for it to be in the property of her younger brother. Nor had said brother, Jim Sutcliffe. That's me, the guy widowed a year earlier in less dramatic circumstances, although caring for someone with both ovarian cancer and incipient dementia does take up more time and effort than scraping a body off a railway track, even with the help, in the latter stages, of a nursing home. And some other poor bugger had been paid to deal with the gore anyway. Understandably, there had been no viewing of Ken's body before the cremation. We had to assume that he went to the fiery pit of the crematorium with his head tucked underneath his arm.

We sat down in the living room. "Let's sit down and have a cup of tea. I'll just carry your case to your room. When's the rest of your stuff coming?"

"In a few days, I hope. I'm gasping for a cup of coffee," she replied. "Best China, too, please, not a mug." She followed me upstairs into her bedroom without passing any further comment. I left her case on the bed. She made no move to open it. She then followed me back down to the kitchen. I started to make two cups cup of instant coffee.

"I'm not drinking that rubbish. Fills you up with gas. Haven't you got some decent coffee?" she asked.

That meant that I had to unjam the pod stuck in the Lavazza machine since Judith's last cup many months before. I'd left it like that as a memorial to her passing, a modern take of the grandfather clock that stopped short never to go again when the old man died. Rose watched with a pitying look on her face. I eventually freed the damn thing, put fresh water in the machine, made the coffees and carefully carried them into the living room along with a plate of Duchy shortbread and ginger biscuits, on a tray, avoiding any spillage and the derision which would follow. OK, I admit it, I do sometimes go to the Waitrose that had opened at the local garden centre. We sat down at opposite ends of the room.

"Have one of our newly enthroned monarch's ginger nuts," I said with a forced grin on my face.

"Still never grown up," she said, but with the shadow of a smile. "Maybe we're wrong and that's the explanation for Harry's hair colour." She took two biscuits while not pausing for breath. "I need to get out more. Let's live dangerously and have a day out tomorrow. For old time's sake. Like one of those days Mum and Dad used to take us on. The Old Hall if it's open."

"You've only just got here. You haven't even opened your case yet."

"I will have done once I've finished this coffee, if it can be called that. It's not much better than instant, is it?"

"That's just what I've always said. We are brother and sister. You need a proper percolator to get the smell but that's too much of a faff. This was bad enough."

"Lazy bugger," she replied. "I bet at Starbuck's you do a latter-day Tony Hancock and ask for a cappuccino without the froth. The rebel without a cause."

"I don't think you can get one."

"You can. It's a flat white. It's only that you were so much younger than me that I didn't bother to disown you then as my brother."

"Oh, that's what a flat white is, is it? Anyway, I drink it black. No need for froth. As I remember it, you often did disown me."

“You were just too sensitive. You still are.”

“Good.”

“The Old Hall it is then. We’ll set off at eleven.”

Apparently, we’d reached a collective decision. The Old Hall was only a few miles away, back towards Northport. And I’d nothing else planned, so I didn’t mind.

“Anyway, how are you getting on with winding up Ken’s estate,” I asked.

She’d been busy unscrambling his horrendously complex financial affairs for many months

“I recently managed to establish a separate bank account in my own name, into which my pension can now be paid. Few other proceeds from the estate are likely to emerge.”

She’d considered their joint finances to be grubby details for Ken alone to bother about. Even so, she still had the nerve to berate me when I tried to discuss where she stood further. My career as an accountant had always been the subject of comment bordering on contempt.

“I’m going to pay you five hundred pounds a month, about a quarter of my pension, for board and lodging. You’ll buy all the food and drink. That’s all you need to know,” she said.

“I don’t want anything until you’re back on your feet.”

“Well, that’s what you’re getting, like it or not. I don’t need charity.”

She did but I couldn’t tell her that. I regretted what I did say next.

“Look, your pension is a fraction of mine. And, like you, I’ve nobody else to spend it on.”

“Ill-gotten gains from the private sector. You earned stupid money doing nothing that was useful. Don’t taint me with it.”

“The shop you and Ken owned wasn’t exactly the Co-op. You were selling top-end stuff to affluent folk.”

“We were losing money hand over fist by the end.”

Despite that, my grocery delivery came from Morrison’s, hers had always come from Booth’s. She was now, for the first time in her adult life, having to learn how to slum it. I was desperate to keep control of

ordering the food and drink. Morrison's have terrific pork pies, sausage rolls and cream cakes, my sort of food. I expected that salmon, scallops and exotic fruit would replace them if I'd lost control of the order, and the wine would turn white.

"It's a deal," I quickly said, at that thought. "Five hundred pounds a month it is." Mean little Sauv Blancs would never become my taste.

It was at the end of this commercial negotiation in reverse that Rose started to cry.

"I should have seen what he was about to do," was all I could hear.

I surprised myself by putting my arm around her. She stopped crying and started laughing.

"I think that's the first time ever that you've done that, Jim. I'll try and make it the last time too. You've always been the softie and that's not changing now. And you're still just about young enough to find someone else to care for you in your dotage. I'm too old for all that," she said. "I'll go and unpack. It won't take long."