Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Unfaithfully Yours

Written by Nigel Williams

Published by Corsair

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Unfaithfully Yours

Nigel Williams



Constable & Robinson Ltd.
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2013

This paperback edition published by Corsair, 2014

Copyright © Nigel Williams, 2013

The right of Nigel Williams to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is entirely coincidental.

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-47210-675-9 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-47210-683-4 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

‘More than kisses, letters mingle souls.’
John Donne

Cast of Principal Characters

In order of appearance

Elizabeth Price, a classics teacher
Orlando (Roland) Gibbons, a private detective
Gerald Price, a successful barrister, married to Elizabeth Price
Mike Larner, a retired BBC producer, late of the Natural History Unit
Mary Dimmock, wife to Sam Dimmock, a dentist
John Goldsmith, a Putney doctor in general practice
Sam Dimmock, a Putney dentist
Barbara Goldsmith, a novelist, married to John Goldsmith
Pamela Larner, career mother, married to Mike Larner, now deceased

The novel is set in SW15. Now.

Dear Mary –

I thought I would put together all the letters that passed between what I still cannot help calling the Puerto Banús Eight. Nine, I suppose, if you included me, but I was never – thank God – conscripted into one of those villa holidays.

I come over as an absolute jerk. I think that is what I was in those days. Maybe that is still a good way of describing me, but at least now I am an absolute jerk who is loved by you.

Don't ask me how I got hold of them. That's my job. I am rather proud of being a snooper – and getting better and better at it with every new marital breakdown in Putney. I am no longer ashamed of who I am – and have even been known to own up to the fact that I went to a minor public school.

These aren't all the letters, of course, and, as well as letters, there were emails and phone calls; but I think the letters say more about us all than any of the more casual traffic. Your prose style tells the world more about you than almost anything else, which is perhaps why now I take more trouble with it.

I have typed them up – so that you don't get John Goldsmith's unusually neat doctor's hand, Barbara G's wild scrawl, Mike Larner's prim italic, Sam's bold cursive or your wonderful way of managing to make the alphabet look as if it was eating itself. The butch, broad strokes of Gerald Price's Parker pen are also absent – as are the hideous, spider-like marks made by my (now abandoned) Mitsubishi Uniball. The only handwritten letter I have left as it was is the last and, I think, rather touching, message from Elizabeth Price to me.

Her handwriting was not as I had imagined it. It was crazy. There were wildly irregular spaces between words, sentences and even, sometimes, different ingredients of the same character. Significant?

Here they are anyway – Elizabeth and Gerald Price, Sam and Mary Dimmock (that's you!), Mike and poor Pamela Larner and the Perfect Couple Who Weren't – John and Barbara Goldsmith. They come over as clear as day, don't they?

That is the beauty of letters. There is nowhere to hide. So here you are. I thought it might amuse you. I've touched them up a little and added a few chapter headings, but – I promise – I have not seriously interfered with what any of us wrote to each other. This is Putney, red in tooth and claw. My version of the Great Putney Novel, the one I often talked about writing back in the day. All You Ever Wanted to Know About Sixtysomethings – a group I have only recently joined.

Enjoy!

XXXX Orlando

PART ONE

Chapter One

Mrs Price Hires a Private Dick

From:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney
12 June

To:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15

Dear Mr Gibbons,
I am writing to you because I think my husband may be having sex. I am not sure with whom he is having it but it is certainly not with me.

He may, for all I know, be involved with more than one

person. I use the word 'person' advisedly. He may be doing the deed of darkness with females, males, or some combination of the two, since, as far as I can gather, at his public school, a boarding establishment, homosexuality was more or less compulsory for the younger boys. I am fairly certain he is not a paedophile, however, which is some comfort. We have two children and, as far as I know, he has never interfered with either of them. Indeed, it has been something of a struggle to get him to even acknowledge their existence.

I have studied various kinds of detective agency but none of them seemed entirely convincing. Indeed, from the general tone of their advertisements, I gained the impression that many of them would have joined, enthusiastically, in whatever it is my husband is doing.

I am not, at this stage of the proceedings anyway, interested in photographic recordings of him committing adultery. Nor am I sure, at the moment, what I will do with the information you obtain or, indeed, what it is I expect you to uncover. It may be that he is not having sex with anyone at all. Though, from my observation of him over more than twenty years, I think that highly unlikely. He once told me that he would 'shag the Archbishop of Canterbury if that was the only thing on offer'. A joke – of course - but people reveal themselves through their jokes. Don't you think?

We have – as people do over the years – grown apart and, to be honest with you, he has become, in many respects, a complete mystery to me. I want, in other words, to find out more about him without having to go to the trouble of asking him. It may be simply that he has discovered a new hobby and is not keen to tell me about it. He may have bought a boat. No

fewer than three men married to friends of mine have done precisely that – without telling their wives.

I want information about him, Mr Gibbons, and I want it gathered with complete and utter discretion. I suspect you are well placed to supply that commodity. If only because – during the quite extensive period of time in which I have lain in wait outside your offices – it has become clear that you are about the only person who ever visits them.

There may well come a time, Mr Gibbons, when I will require professional surveillance of his activities even when he is on our premises. We have a five-bedroom house and it is not always possible to keep track of him inside the property; but, for the moment, I am only interested in finding out what he does when I am not there. I see no reason why you and I should ever have to meet.

For reasons of security I do not wish you to reply to the address at which – for the moment – I am forced to reside with him.

Perhaps you would write to me care of the Post Office and let me know your rates and the kind of details you might need to help you begin the complex and probably unrewarding task of tracking the man to whom I am, unfortunately, married.

I look forward to hearing from you,
Yours
Elizabeth Price

PS I think he may be contemplating the prospect of doing away with me. I have seen him giving me some very suspect glances when we are watching television and he thinks I have

not got my eye on him. For some reason this often seems to happen when we are tuned to Channel Four. I am pretty sure, however, that he has not got the kind of nerve it would require to stab, gas or strangle me.

From:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15
14 June

To:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney

Dear Mrs Price,
Thank you very much for your letter.

I was *really* glad to get it. I know I should pretend to be 'cool' and look as if I can only just manage to fit you in – but – yowzas! A job! This was my reaction. The recession has affected our business very badly and small private firms such as mine are seriously at risk from the major conglomerates.

Well done with the 'research' too. I will admit to feeling slightly 'weird' that someone has been doing a 'snoop job' on me (shouldn't it be the other way round????) but, in fact, Mrs Price, I completely understand you wanting to make sure that we would be a 'good fit'. I do not know if you have been following

me home or monitoring my telephone calls and emails but, if you have, I hope you didn't find any real dirt on yours truly!

Your letter does not suggest what it is that has made you feel Mr Price is having an affair, although you seem to imply that, whatever he is up to, it is pretty serious.

Are there stains on his clothing? Has he been making or receiving phone calls that he has attempted to hide from you? Has he been visiting inappropriate websites? I do appreciate your need for privacy but, obviously, in order to make an assessment, a 'face-to-face' meeting would be helpful. Perhaps you would call by the office. You seem to have had no difficulty finding it and I am pretty much free most of the time at the moment.

I'm not a hermit! I do occasionally get out for a light snack at the La Mancha Tapas Bar in Putney High Street. I usually bring a selection of sandwiches (cheese, ham or coarse pâté and pickle) to work or – on special occasions – order a delivery from the Royal China in Chelverton Road. Their Steamed Eel in Black Bean Sauce has brought me more moments of real ecstasy than – for example – my first wife. Although that would not have been difficult!

If you would prefer to telephone – and I often feel that, if a physical meeting might cause embarrassment, a chat over the 'blower' can be more helpful than words on a page – I enclose a leaflet, which, as well as giving our email and telephone details contains our mission statement and a few selected testimonials from satisfied clients.

I remain, yours respectfully,
Roland O. Gibbons (MA [Reading], PIAA registered)

From:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney
17 June

To:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15

Dear Mr Gibbons,
I fear it will not be possible for us to meet face to face. I am not horribly disfigured and am not more noticeably hideous than other late-middle-aged women of my acquaintance. I am, however, trying to keep our relationship as secret as I suspect my husband has been keeping his extra-marital activities. Although you may think you are adept at snooping, Mr Gibbons, you have no idea of the talents of the women of Putney in this area. Very little escapes their notice, and, were you and I to meet, even at a prearranged location many miles from this area, it would not take them long to rumble us.

I do not anticipate you and I ever having to go through a face-to-face encounter. I would prefer to restrict our contact to the form in which it is presently enshrined. I have used email, but it is, on the whole, a barrier to successful communication. People begin sentences in the middle, abandon paragraphs before they have got to the point and are – with some reason – usually so frightened their words will reach people for whom

they are not intended that they do not bother to make the smallest attempt at honesty.

I am afraid I did not find the leaflet you enclosed very informative. The quotations from clients were positively off-putting. Who is 'Mrs L.B.' of Raynes Park and why did she think you were 'utterly smooth and professional'? Why on earth does 'Mr C. Lewis' of Southfields believe that 'your enquiries saved his marriage and restored his faith in humanity'? Are these people real? And, even if they are, is their opinion of any value?

You say your rates are 'between £125 and £150 a day depending on the type of surveillance required'. I am not quite sure what this means. Do you concentrate harder if you are being paid more? I am sure I do. I am sure that keeping my husband under observation is worth at least £150 *per diem*. Although large, he is physically agile and naturally suspicious. He is a lawyer. Need I say more?

Perhaps – if you are willing to undertake this job – you could write back to me and give me some details about yourself and your working methods. I always think it is possible to deduce all one needs to know about a possible employee from studying their prose style and, indeed, their handwriting – should you feel moved to scribble your reply.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours,
Elizabeth Price

PS Inverted commas should only really be put at the beginning and end of directly reported speech.

From:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15
30 June

To:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney

Dear Mrs Price,
I am sorry to be late replying to your letter. I was called away to Norwich on a difficult case involving a missing animal.

If you do not wish to meet – let's not meet! I want what you want, Mrs Price! I am not one of those private investigators who argues with the chap (or lady!) who is paying his bills! I am happy to accept your terms. Indeed, in the interests of 'transparency' you will have noticed that I am writing this reply with a black Uniball 'Eye' pen, made by the Mitsubishi Pencil Company. You are welcome to make what deductions you may from my handwriting!

A graphologist, who did some work for yours truly, once told me that my signature was 'a cry for help'. My wife said she started to lose faith in me when she received my first love letter to her in what she called my 'pathetic, spidery writing'.

Well, Mrs Price, you are in charge, and if the style and formation of my letters lay me open to you, I am happy for it to be that way! You is de Boss Lady!

Your typed letter tells me diddly-squat about you, ma'am! It was written, I would guess, using the Microsoft Word Program and printed with an HP LaserJet 2015 that is nearing the end of its cartridge life, which might suggest that you are a person who writes for a living. Your quite stern attitude to the old 'references' and my habit of being a bit too free with the 'inverted commas' tells me you may be a teacher of some kind (English possibly?) but otherwise, Mrs Price, I am quite happy for you to remain a mystery.

I would warn you, however, that the more I find out about your husband the more I am likely to find out about you. What is it the Spanish say? 'The husband wears the wife on his linen; the wife wears the husband on her face.'

What can I say about myself?

I am fifty-four years old and have a degree in English from Reading University. I was married for twenty years and am now divorced. I was brought up in a working-class household in Putney and was the first person from my family ever to go to university. Hence my 'penchant' perhaps for 'inverted commas'. I have been a private investigator for over thirty years and I take my calling very seriously indeed. I may not seem an appetizing person, Mrs Price – though I hope your sighting of me did not make you feel I was the shabby 'man in a mac' of detective stories – but in my quiet way I am a moralist.

I am very happy to start at the rate of £150 per day, which I usually reckon at eight hours. If I have to observe him after the hour of eleven p.m. there is a surcharge. I will obviously need a current photograph of your husband and some idea of where and when he is to be found. You mentioned that he is a lawyer so I presume he visits an office on a daily basis. Adultery

is, in my experience, often committed with work colleagues – sometimes, I am sorry to say, even in the workplace itself. Perhaps he goes on 'away days' – a modern management notion that has done wonders for marital infidelity.

Does he, for example, have hobbies? You mentioned a boat. I have done several cases in and around Portsmouth where the bunks of seagoing yachts were not always being used for the purposes for which they were intended. Is he a keen sportsman? Leisure centres are a hotbed for this kind of thing. Is he, perhaps, a member of a local dramatic society? You mentioned your fears that he might be a homosexual and, of course, it is in these sorts of places that our 'gay brothers' are often to be found! I am also, at some stage, going to need to know your home address – if only so that I can make sure I go nowhere near it! Believe you me, our motto here at the Gibbons Agency is total and complete discretion at all times.

I say 'our'. It's just me here. I often joke that I am so discreet I usually do not have a clue what I am doing and why I am doing it!

Seriously, though, I take your confidentiality seriously and your address will not be divulged to anyone. I will make sure all my letters are directed to the 'PO Box number' you have given me.

Yours,
Roland O. Gibbons

From:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney
3 July

To:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15

Dear Mr Gibbons,
I am impressed! You got me in one! I have taught classics at a girls' public school in Putney for twenty-five years! I am generally reckoned to be pretty strict but – of course – I have a heart of gold! Don't we all?

Classics, actually – not English. And, yes, I am working on a long book about Propertius, though I am not sure it will ever see the light of day.

I am a terrible snob, I'm afraid. I think people should have heard of Beethoven even if they haven't listened to him. I think there are rules of grammar that should be obeyed, if only because they help to clarify our thoughts. An inverted comma, like a full stop or a semi-colon, is there for a precise reason. Sloppy language leads to sloppy thinking. Well – it *is* sloppy thinking and that is all there is to it. I only found out recently, through my daughter, that Big Brother was not – to most people – a character in a novel by George Orwell but the name of an unusually witless television programme.

I will say, however, that, while I might be rather tough on your homework were you to have the misfortune to be a pupil of mine, I knew from the moment I caught sight of you in the little alley off Putney High Street that you were the man for me. Do not, please, misinterpret that remark. I have no interest in forming another sexual relationship – not that 'sexual relationship' (I am using quotation marks here, Mr Gibbons, because I am quoting myself) is in any way a description of my marriage.

You do not want a private detective to look distinctive, do you? I do not mean this to be offensive, Mr Gibbons, but it took me some moments, on my first inspection of you, to realize that there was a person there at all. You blended into Putney High Street with a skill I don't think I have seen anyone else achieve. You hinted in your last letter that you have to struggle against putting on weight but, like many plump men, you are surprisingly light on your feet. There was a rather unpleasant-looking dog in the doorway to the stairs leading up to your office and I admired the way you flicked it out of your way with the toe of your rather extravagantly pointed shoe.

Most importantly, Mr Gibbons, you exude cunning. Even from behind you seem almost dangerously intelligent. That is the thing that counts – not inverted commas – as I often tell my girls. You have the kind of pale, watchful blue eyes that make me glad you are working for me and not my husband!

À nos moutons!

I am enclosing a picture of my husband and £750 in cash, which should take care of five days of close observation of him. His name is Gerald O'Shaughnessy Price, although there is nothing obviously Irish about him. I think he just added his

middle name to spite me when, in the late seventies during a brief period of feminist activism, I announced my intention of using my maiden name, which is, unfortunately, Smellie. We live in Heathland Avenue, Putney, a small road lined with large houses very close to Putney Heath off the top of Putney Hill. There is little through traffic, a lot of grass and a great many trees. You could easily fool yourself into believing you were in the country, so it is a place where a private detective might prove to be conspicuous. We are, unfortunately, also very close to the Telegraph pub, where my husband is quite often to be seen drinking pints of Guinness and slapping strangers on the back.

It might be a good place to observe him at weekends. He is usually in there from about one p.m. to three p.m. on Saturdays and from seven p.m. to ten p.m. on Sunday nights. He works as a barrister, specializing in medical negligence. His chambers are called Highleybury Parkside and they have a website bearing that name, which carries photos and contact details for all their employees. Take a careful look at Sandra. She has blonde hair and a big nose but that would not necessarily stop him.

He travels to work every day by bicycle, and as he wears a bright yellow jacket, a bright green helmet, luminous socks and there are two large red flags attached to the front and rear of the vehicle, I imagine he will be hard to miss. Next week he is going into chambers on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. He is in Kingston Crown Court the week after that. He leaves Heathland Avenue, on chambers days, at approximately nine a.m. It is quite possible there is an organized gang of adulterous cyclists, somewhere along his route, who use this absurd method of transport as a way of shaking off their legitimate spouses.

It is interesting that you mentioned the possibility of a local dramatic society. He is, as it happens, a member of the Putney Thespians, a group who meet regularly at a church hall in the Lower Richmond Road. He is currently playing Hamlet in a production of the Shakespeare play which bears that name. That might be a possible place to start. Whenever he returns from rehearsals he has a furtive look about him.

I hope this is satisfactory. Send a written report of progress to the above address when you think you have used up five full snooping days!

Yours,
Elizabeth Price

From:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15
4 July

To:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney

Dear Mrs Price,
When I came in this morning, your hand-delivered letter was waiting for me.

I am starting to understand why you prefer letters to emails. I can't imagine daydreaming about the person behind, say, Horace@googlemail.com, but the hand that typed a paragraph on a screen, sent that paragraph to the printer, wrapped it in an envelope herself and then posted it through my humble letterbox – along with £750 in crisp red fifty-pound notes! – that conjures up a woman, who is, well, interesting. It is the unknown in other people that attracts us. You'll turn me into a writer yet, Mrs Price, and, so far, in this letter anyway, I haven't used a single inverted comma.

The photograph of Gerald is very disturbing indeed. He is – and I hope you will not mind my saying this – a sinister-looking man. His face is typical of the kind of adulterer with whom I have had dealings over the years. His lips, I note, are thick and sensual and, although the hat he is wearing makes it difficult to be certain about this, he seems to bear a strong resemblance to a gorilla.

The eyes struck me very forcefully. They are set very closely into his – large – nose. They suggest to me that he may very well have something even worse on his mind than sexual relations with people to whom he is not married. Is he violent, Mrs Price? I would guess so from his expression. Do you have pets? Has he been cruel to them? He looks like the sort of a man who might well kick a dog. You mentioned that he might, at one point, have planned to kill you. From the look of him I would have said he was well up for strangling.

His hands are large and he has wide shoulders, as well as a thick neck.

There is something fairly suspicious about the way he is looking at the two small boys next to him, although this may

have something to do with the fact that they seem to be hitting each other with what look like broadswords. I assume they are plastic. Perhaps they are your children. Or grandchildren! If they are, the way he is looking at them is not natural. What I can see in his face may be dislike rather than sexual desire – in my experience, the two are often very close – but if they are your children, Mrs Price, and your letter made mention of a daughter, I would ask you to try to make sure that he is not alone with them too often.

I will start work tomorrow and report at your earliest convenience.

Yours,
Roland O. Gibbons

PS While I fully understand your reluctance to use telephone or email as a form of communication, I am assuming your husband has no such scruples. It may, therefore, at some point in the future be worth considering my monitoring his mobile and landline phones and, of course, his computer.

PPS Sorry about the inverted commas! You can take the boy 'out of the housing estate' but you can't 'take the housing estate out of the boy'.

PPPS I do not think of myself as a 'snooper' but as someone who is valiant for the truth!

From:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency
12 The Alley
Putney, SW15
12 July

To:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney

Dear Mrs Price,
No! I have not melted in the heat. I have been hard at work on Mr Gerald O'Shaughnessy Price.

On Monday, at 0850, I put on a pair of baggy shorts and a T-shirt and got out my old 'Holdsworth' drop-head racer from the shed at the back of my block of flats. I am using inverted commas because it is a brand name. I have not ridden it for some years and am a little shaky.

I was headed up Putney Hill towards the Green Man when I saw a figure that was, unmistakably, your husband. He has aged considerably since the photograph you sent me (do you have a more recent one, perhaps?) but it was definitely the same man. He was coming down the bus lane at a speed of at least forty miles an hour. The wind whipped through his surprisingly luxuriant hair as he pulled out to overtake a bus, raising the third finger of his right hand and pointing it at the driver, shouting, as he passed him, 'Out of the way, you cunt!'

He then rode through the red traffic lights at the junction of

the hill and the Lower Richmond Road. He kept the middle finger of his right hand pointed up at the sky during this manoeuvre and, as he wove out into the middle of the road to make an illegal right turn into Disraeli Road, which is, as I am sure you know, a one-way street, I think I heard him shout, 'Die, motherfuckers!'

He did not, I have to say, look like a man with adultery on his mind. Suicide seemed a bit more like it.

I am, as you were pleased to remind me, Mrs Price, more than a little overweight, but I do take pride in my physical fitness and I did not find it difficult to keep him in my sights. I followed him, illegally, up Disraeli Road, through to Putney Bridge Road and down towards the Wandsworth one-way system. As we reached the park that lies between the main road and the river he slowed and I thought, for a moment, that he might be easing the pace in order to enjoy the beautiful morning. The sun was sparkling on the river and the trees on the far side of the park were crowned with summer light.

In fact, just ahead of us, a young female cyclist was hoisting her buttocks high off her saddle and your husband was thrusting himself forward in a manner that, if left unrestrained, would undoubtedly have led to his sniffing or, possibly, penetrating her behind with his nose. As we drew up to a set of lights he slowed to pull up next to her and, as I watched, from a safe distance, he struck up a conversation. At first I thought he might know her and, indeed, that she might be the woman with whom he was having a relationship; but it very quickly became clear that the easiness of his manner was just that.

He has charm, Mrs Price, I will admit. Within a few seconds she was laughing at something he had said and, when

they pulled away, they rode together for a few hundred yards until the young woman turned right, down towards Tooting, just before Wandsworth Bridge. He waved a cheery goodbye to her. For a moment I was beginning to think the better of him and then, as I came behind him at the next set of lights, I heard him say to another fellow cyclist, a young man in his twenties, 'Lovely arse on that!'

Not the sort of thing one would usually say to a stranger but, again, it was done with a certain charm. It did not seem as offensive as it ought to have done. His teeth, I noted, were brilliantly white and his eyes – very pale blue – sparkled with the kind of intense life that is very difficult to resist. Oh, Gerald! I thought, as I pedalled on, thirty or forty yards to his athletic rear. 'You devil! You're up to something! I wonder what it is!'

The rest of his journey to work was, I am afraid (or pleased) to report, without incident. I followed him all the way to his chambers and paid particular attention to his demeanour as he entered the building. I will obviously look into his office life further. As I think I said, work is an erogenous zone. But men of Gerald's age and type, when conducting an affair, do not usually risk being seen by their 'fancy bits', wearing bicycle helmets, Lycra and a hairstyle so blown about by the wind it resembles a haystack in a hurricane. He did not look like a man with filth on his mind. I cycled home – a journey for which I have not charged you, Mrs Price – convinced that he is 'playing away' 'close to home'.

On Thursday night I went along to the church hall in the Upper Richmond Road where the Putney Thespians meet.

It is not an inspiring location. There is a draughty, gloomy

entrance hall and, beyond, an even more draughty and gloomy high-ceilinged room in which there are some chairs, a large table and a poster saying, 'ARE YOU A CUSTARD CHRISTIAN? DO YOU GET UPSET OVER TRIFLES?' There were only about five or six people in the room and they were sitting, all well apart from each other, with the air of those who have been waiting for a train that they are starting to suspect will never arrive.

A woman in her late fifties was the only one to rise. She had what I think is called strawberry blonde hair, which looked – I am afraid – as if it were not her natural colour. She had, also, a strawberry blonde complexion and, as she was wearing a pink cardigan, pink slacks and what looked like a pair of pink slippers, my first impression was that she was, for some psychological reason perhaps, too heavily involved with the colour pink.

She had, however, two of the largest breasts I have ever seen on an Englishwoman. In fact, on first sight of her upper half I was convinced there might well be more than two of them. Her lower half, too, spread outward from her waist in a manner that reminded me of the upholstery of an old but very comfortable sofa. As she came towards me, smiling brightly, she wobbled all over in a way that was not, although at first it threatened to be so, unpleasant.

'Hello!' she said, with some eagerness. 'I'm Ophelia! Are you Rosencrantz or Guildenstern?'

'I'm afraid,' I said, 'I'm even more unimportant than those two characters. I'm not even a member of the club. I just saw the sign outside and wondered whether you might need a hand backstage.'

'Oh, gosh, how marvellous!' said the pink woman. 'How absolutely marvellous! We need all the help we can get backstage! Perhaps you could play Rosencrantz or Guildenstern as well! Or both of them! We could . . . sort of . . . merge their two characters, couldn't we? They are pretty much the same, don't you think? And we just haven't got enough bods, have we, Rachel?'

A small, grey woman with a squint looked at her with real dislike.

'There are some who maintain,' she said, 'that we haven't got a Hamlet!'

The pink woman became even pinker. 'That's a horrible thing to say, Janet,' she said. 'I think Gerald is going to be one of the great Hamlets of all time!'

The grey-looking woman took out a packet of cigarettes and, without making a move towards the door, got one out and lit it. I thought, these days, that that was a pretty brave thing to do, but she must have been sure of her ground, as none of the other members of the cast made any move to stop her.

'If we can talk him out of the German accent,' she went on, inhaling deeply, 'he might be adequate. With a few more years of rehearsal!'

As she was saying this, your husband came through the doors of the hall. He looked, I have to admit, very like Hamlet. He was dressed entirely in black – black jeans, a black polo-neck sweater and a black jacket. He also had the look – common, I have found, in people who play this part – of a man who was about to contradict the next thing that was said to him. He is, I suppose, Mrs Price, a handsome man. His jaw is too large but built on very secure lines. His nose – as I think I said – is a

possibly over-ambitious structure but those pale blue eyes have a kind of life that is clearly hard to resist.

Janet, the grey woman, became suddenly faintly girlish. Whatever she might say about him behind his back, she looked glad to have him in the room. And my pink friend was trembling like a blancmange that has been set down too violently upon a table.

'"Soft you now!"' he said, holding out his right hand in what looked a little like a Hitler salute. '"The fair Ophelia!"'

I began to suspect he was already 'in character' since – as the grey woman had suggested earlier – there was definitely a Germanic edge to his accent. Perhaps there is a 'Nazi theme' to the production. The effect on the pink woman was striking. She went towards him and, taking his hand, led him towards the centre of the room. I could not quite hear everything she said but I caught the words '"How does your honour for this many a day?"' To which he replied, 'Fucking brilliant, darling!'

It was not, however, what they said, but what they didn't say. Suddenly that shabby church hall was reeking of sex. I had the impression that, at any moment, Mr Price was going to throw her on to the floor, pull down her pink trousers and have her right there in front of the core members of the Putney Thespians.

I am writing this in my living room, Mrs Price, and the man next door seems to be trying to run over his dog with his lawnmower. I will try to give you a more detailed report tomorrow. Suffice it to say that, from what I have seen of these two over a period of only two days, I am convinced that something is 'in the wind' between them. I will need

further proof, quite obviously, and this will involve detailed surveillance of 'Mary Dimmock', which may involve extra expense. Do, please, let me know your thoughts. If you could bear to telephone or email me that would certainly speed things up!

Yours truly,
Roland O. Gibbons

From:
Elizabeth Price
PO Box 132
Putney
14 July

To:
Roland O. Gibbons
Gibbons Detective Agency

Dear Mr Gibbons,
Just received your letter. No, I will not phone or email you. This woman Dimmock was known to me although I have – thank Christ – managed to avoid her for the last fifteen years. There was a nasty moment in 2003 when I sighted her while crossing Hotham Road and had to duck down behind a parked car until I was sure she had passed. Keep your distance and on no account let either her or my husband suspect that you are what you are.

I want to know everything that happens between them. If you have to use a telephoto lens – use it. Tape record whatever

seems necessary. You have my permission to hide under whatever bed they may be using to do what they do – if you think that is advisable.

Yours,
Elizabeth Price

PS When the time comes I will act appropriately. I am relying on you to keep our correspondence completely secret. In fact, I would recommend you to burn all my letters as soon as you receive this. I have to go away for a few weeks. I am enclosing £850 in cash. Do not stint in your endeavours while I am away.