

Fingers of Fate, Part II

Part II of V – Read available Parts [here](#)

by [Janet Charlesworth](#) (October 2024)



View of Highgate from Hampstead Heath (John Constable, 1834)

Eight

It was after several days of idyllic solitude, involving minimal contact with others in the world, that Jess decided to try the Red Lion. She had been on her way back from a trip to High Park, a stately home maintained by the National Trust, when she had caught a glimpse from the road of an attractive looking patio and garden overlooking the river around the back of the Red Lion. The Red Lion was some distance from the

village where she was staying, and enough to the west of her preferred area to require a specific trip but, feeling like a drive somewhere a bit different, and remembering the place, she decided on lunch there, hopefully in the enticing garden area by the river, before the summer died completely.

The pub itself was a large stone property located between the river and a busy road that ran the length of the valley. The side of the pub facing the road was actually the back of the property and, up to about three feet from the ground, was covered in dust and dirt generated by the heavy traffic that used the road. The windows were small on the road side of the property, and none too clean, but when one turned off the road into the car park, the pub turned a more inviting face. There were enormous flowering hanging baskets, potted shrubs, a paved terrace hosting comfortable outdoor chairs and tables, a well surfaced, clearly marked area for parking, and gardens stretching away to the river bank. The stone had been cleaned recently, and the windows were large and crystal clean. It was a prosperous looking place, and promised a good sandwich and a decent beer. Jess parked her car and made her way to the side door and into the lounge bar. She was ready for some lunch.

Entering that space was to rid her of her romanticized attachment to the area for good.

It was quiet inside and, the day being cooler, she decided to stay in the Bar to eat her lunch, and then go outside with a coffee and sit on the terrace to enjoy the garden and the river before leaving. She went to the Bar, bought a half beer and ordered a prawn salad sandwich. The Lounge area was furnished with comfortable wing chairs covered in either leather or chintzy patterned material, and a scattering of upholstered side chairs suitably arranged around mahogany tables. There was a large stone built fireplace which had an artificial flower arrangement in the space that would be occupied by a fire in the winter months. The usual brass clutter of a country pub littered the window ledges and the

mantelpiece, and old dark paintings of obscure and barely distinguishable personages and buildings adorned the walls. The overall effect was comfortable, quiet, expensive, and welcoming.

She made her way to one of the wing chairs by the fireplace, and occupied herself in reading the few brochures she had with her of the local attractions. After about ten minutes, and there still being no sign of her sandwich, she wondered whether to continue to wait, or quietly slip away and forget the whole thing. She sat forward in her chair to take a look around; there were no signs of life behind the Bar, and then she saw him. He was sitting with his back to her on the other side of the room, partly obscured by a corner of the Bar that jutted out into the lounge area. He appeared to be eating a plate of salad with sliced hard boiled eggs laid out neatly on top. She almost cried as memories came flooding back of the times she had prepared that meal for him. He was still eating the same kind of food!

She had come to accept that it wasn't his fault that he had been destined, out of his own fateful heritage, and her own, to play such a devastating role in her life. She had accepted that she had to work through the consequences of his actions, and her own, no matter how unconsciously those actions had been done at the time. She always bore in mind an apocryphal saying, attributed to Jesus, that if one knew what one was doing, one was blessed. She assumed the blessing would be in being conscious of the forces in one's psyche seeking to determine behavior, and perhaps out of that knowing, to be able to take steps to not be driven by such forces, but to choose a path guided by ethical and moral principles instead. The Law judges on the assumption that we know what we are doing, or ought to know, and are responsible, conscious, or not, for the consequences of our actions. Ignorance is no defence.

Her heart had started to pound so strongly it felt as if it

was going to burst through her chest wall, or asphyxiate her. She bent forward in her chair to better breathe. Her hands were shaking, and she felt a bit dizzy. It was some minutes before she began to calm down and feel some return of control. She sat back in her chair and waited until her heart steadied and her breathing returned to normal. She knew what she had to do.

Still shaken, but strengthened by her resolve, and somehow by the sight of the familiar meal, she got up, walked over to his table and sat down across from him. She didn't speak, she just looked at him. Now she felt calm, relaxed, and sure of herself. He looked up from his plate, annoyed at her presence, and then went still and stared at her for a moment, then he looked away, and then back, and then away again, and then back, and tilting his head on one side, and with a slight smile, he said:

"It's Jess, isn't it?"

She laughed. "Well done!"

She was amazed that he recognized her. It had been over 20 years since they had last seen each other. But then he hadn't changed, and she had known him from his back, so why should she be surprised that he would know her.

"Hey, it's good to see you!" he said. "How are you?"

She was taken aback by his civil reaction to her sudden presence. She hadn't had time to think it through, but she would not have been surprised if there had been anger, sharp words, and a demand that she remove herself.

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good," she responded.

"You're looking good," he said. His tone was sincere and appreciative.

"How are you?" she asked.

He leaned back in his chair, balancing precariously on its two back legs, and waved his arms to expansively take in the whole Pub, "you can see," he said, "I'm doing just fine."

"This is your Pub?" she exclaimed. "I had no idea. How? When did you decide to go into this kind of business? The last I knew you were teaching!"

"Aaah, teaching's for the birds," he said derisively, resettling his chair back onto its four legs. "I moved into this place almost 20 years ago."

Symes was almost exactly as she remembered him. His appearance, manner, body movements, were so familiar. The sitting back on his chair, balancing precariously on its back legs, holding out his hands, half clenched, his head back, his face creased into the all too familiar mocking smile, had revived many memories. His hair had most of its soft brown colour still. It was still wavy and brushed straight back. He still wore it short so it looked almost like a crewcut. He was still a handsome man. She was certain he was wearing the same frames for his glasses, and, but surely not, the same tan-coloured corduroy pants and cravat! He was about 5 feet 10 inches tall, and of medium build. His eyes were pale grey and as quick as ever, darting around the room as he talked to her, missing nothing.

With their unspeakable history between them like an impenetrable cloud, Symes chatted on politely about business and pubs and the economy generally while he continued to eat his lunch. It felt surreal to Jess. She continued to look at Symes as if from a great distance. Part of her was listening to his words. Part of her was questioning her sanity. Why on earth had she come to talk to him? What had prompted such an initiative? An arrogant assumption of complete recovery perhaps? Or a desire for settling and forgiveness, for saying, see, here I am, I'm OK, you didn't destroy me, I'm well; I forgive you. She didn't know. She had listened to that inner

imperative, and now here she was.

As Symes talked, his mind raced over possible outcomes from her visit. She seemed friendly enough, and she had said that she hadn't known this was his pub, so it seemed it was an accident that they had met at all. But he wasn't sure he could believe her. He wondered if she was here to try and make some claims on him, and he made a mental note to talk to his solicitor as soon as possible and make sure he was protected. He rapidly ran over what he had done for the last while, and could not think of anything that would have generated a visit from her. He hadn't seen her for years. What on earth was she doing here? How long was she staying? What did she want? All the while, he kept his expression as calm and innocent as he could manage and the conversation light and cheerful, and away from the personal.

Jess sensed his underlying unease. She did nothing to alleviate it.

Just prior to Jess appearing, Symes had experienced a strange period of turmoil. His conversations with Jackson had got him thinking about things in a way he hadn't considered before. He was feeling more vulnerable, less cocksure. He was not one to spend time thinking about dreams, but he had been having nightmares of such intensity he had not been able to shake them off. He would wake in a cold sweat with his heart racing, feeling fear and panic. The images of the nightmare would vanish as soon as he tried to remember them, but he would then have vivid recall of his first marriage and its ending and be overwhelmed with feelings of anguish. He had been resorting to a few extra shots of brandy at night to get away from the memories, and promote some sleep.

When Jess had appeared, he had felt afraid, as if unseen forces were drawing him inexorably into some awful unavoidable fate. After the first few words of conversation, he had felt some reassurance when he saw how seemingly harmless and

friendly she was, but he continued to feel shaken and vulnerable. It was as if she'd walked out of his nightmares and into his life. His health generally had been a concern for some time, but lately he had been deteriorating more rapidly. His doctor had warned him about his lifestyle, and had suggested amendments, but Symes had been powerless to change; he was a man of addictions, driven and compulsive.

Symes took Jess around the property and showed her the restaurant and some rooms that he had for bed and breakfast. She was impressed. She had never thought of him as being interested in beautiful surroundings, but he had built an extension for his bed and breakfast business which would have satisfied the most demanding of customers. It was stone built, with a separate impressive entrance way. The rooms were spacious, decorated and furnished in exquisite taste, each one mirroring a different period in English tradition. The accommodation was five-star.

She complimented him on his creation as they walked around. He squeezed her arm, and again said how pleased he was to see her. She was surprised at his evident sincerity and, with a smile, she returned the gesture. As she did so, she was shocked to feel just how thin his arm was, and looking more closely at his face, she realised he was seriously ill. She thought she detected a hint of wistfulness in his tone, and for a moment she wondered if he felt some regret and sorrow for what he had done to her. She quickly dispelled the thought, amazed at her own openness to feel any sympathy at all for this man, and was astonished to realize that she felt compassion for him. Not a feeling she had anticipated.

She had, in the years of her own recovery, come to understand that his disdain and contempt for women was likely a product of his defensive strategy against the threat of annihilation he had felt when so frequently faced with the full force of his mother's anger and bitterness in his growing years. His mother had been brutal in her control of her sons. Symes had

often fled the home to stay with friends in an effort to escape being used as the physical recipient of her anger and frustration. She had been very intelligent but, in the working-class culture of her day, intelligence was a handicap for a woman. Only boys were to be educated and groomed for a professional life. Women were to marry and have children. She did marry. She did have children. She had two sons. Her husband had been no match for her intellect. He was a miner. His passion was his garden, and he loved to play cricket. The only thing he read was the local paper. He was a reliable, decent, and loyal husband, but she was the master in the house. Symes was the eldest son, and intelligent. Seething with anger at what she felt was her own crippled life, and envying the opportunities which were strewn in her son's path, she wielded severe discipline. When he eventually went to university, she had not been able to overcome her resentments and was unable to endure his presence. Their relationship became a series of vicious confrontations and arguments, broken by long periods of separation and resounding silences.

Symes brought Jess back to the Lounge area and went behind the Bar. He poured himself a glass of wine, and invited her to take a drink with him as he chatted on about business, the beneficial effects of a good summer, and the problems involved in getting and keeping decent and reliable staff. She felt overloaded already with the effects of their meeting, and declined his invitation to join him for a drink, making an excuse that it was time for her to make a start on her way back. He continued to press her, and she continued to refuse, and as she backed away toward the exit, he picked up a camera from behind the Bar and took a picture of her. She was astonished and confused. Why on earth had he done that?

"Come again if you have time," he called out, as the door quietly closed behind her.

As soon as she was inside her car, she locked all the doors. She felt exhausted. And now, on her own, sitting in her car,

with the doors locked, and the sun streaming in through the windshield, she put her head back on the headrest, and allowed herself to sink into her feelings. She felt as if she had been captured and taken to another world, a different time zone. The last hour or so had shaken her to the roots of her being. What synchronous forces were at work to bring about such a coincidence, such a meeting. It was bizarre. She shook her head. Gradually she pulled herself out of the mire and regained her orientation to the present, and her place in it.

She had worked hard over the years to recover from the ending of her relationship with Symes, and particularly the way of its ending. She had been through the anger and resentments, the self-destructive behaviour, the fight to regain her sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence, and to hold on to her life. And now, at her first, albeit unexpected, meeting with him after all these years she wondered if she had somehow failed her inner core in not keeping up her guard. She had instead felt compassion for him, had been open, receptive, interested, had listened to him, watched him, his body, his expressions, heard the tonations in his voice, and had generally taken in what he was like, what he was doing, what he was saying, what his body language was saying, instead of remaining tight within her own sense of who she was, defending her own boundaries, her own safe limits, against the impact of his presence. Had she betrayed herself? She didn't feel she had, but she did feel that he had somehow invaded her psyche again, and left more work for her to do.

She drove away from his pub until she found a place that afforded room to park her vehicle, and had access to a public footpath. She got out and walked along the path, noticing as she did so that it afforded a view of the Red Lion down in the valley. She kept on walking until she found a spot in a quiet field where she could lay on her back in the tall grass and buttercups. As she allowed the sensation of the warmth of the sun to penetrate her body and relax her senses, the skylarks

came, darting and swirling in the still warm air far above, singing, singing. Slowly she surrendered to the moment, feeling the muscles in her neck ease, and the arch in her back relax and flatten.

She realized that she had not asked any questions about the children, or the woman who had replaced her. She had been stunned to see him, shocked and off balance for sure, but she realized that it was because Symes had dominated their conversation, that the conversation had been all about him. She had fallen into absorbing the moment, letting it happen, rather than directing its flow. Symes had not asked about her. He had not asked where she lived, or where she was staying, if she was with someone, whether she was married or not, if she worked, and if so at what. Nothing. Their entire exchange had been about him and his business.

She knew the English were noted for their reserve, and she had often felt that her friends and remaining family in England showed a marked lack of curiosity about her and her life, to the point of an offending indifference. However, she felt in the history of her association with Symes, that it was particularly odd that he had asked nothing about her. On thinking about that, she started to feel better. He knew nothing about her – she felt that as relief. He had no idea where she lived, or where she was staying, or for how long – again, she felt relief. She had come away from their encounter with a clean exit.

She, on the other hand, knew exactly where he was, and who he was.

Nine

Later in the day, and feeling restored to her usual balance, Jess again thought over her meeting with Symes, and all the memories stirred as a result: memories of failure, breakdown,

abuse, resulting, for her, in utter devaluation and rejection when she had been replaced with another woman, and then prevented from seeing her children.

In those days, not long after the ending of the Second World War, and before the birth control pill, children were legally their father's responsibility. They still were, it seemed to Jess, if current court orders in divorce cases were anything to go by. In any event, in the culture of the day, when Jess had been going through her crisis, it was clear that it was the fathers who had the power and the status, and who earned the money to sustain their families. Women rarely went out of the home to work. If they did, it would generally be to a menial part-time job that paid little, but would fit in with school hours and responsibilities in the home. Even working full-time, a woman in those days could not expect to earn enough to support herself, let alone any children, and she was consequently dependent on her husband or her father still.

There were always exceptions of course, but Jess had not been one of them.

There were no half-way houses for battered wives in her home country in those days. She had tried to get the Police to help her, but they advised they did not interfere in "domestic disputes". In the result, she had no way of getting Symes out of their home. Symes had told her that he was never going leave the family home, that it was his property, and he was going to keep it, and the children. He made it clear to her that she was the one who was going to leave, and he was going to make damn sure that she did.

Jess knew that even if she were able to get custody of the children, and there was nothing certain about that, any court ordered financial support from Symes could not be relied on. Her experience in her marriage with Symes was such that she knew he would not pay financial support willingly, if at all. She could expect to be faced with repeated applications to

court in an effort to get something from him. And who was to pay for those court applications? And how was she to live in the interim?

The children were not yet school age, and had they been with her, it was highly likely that they would have had to go to another woman to be taken care of while Jess went out to work in an effort to supplement whatever money Symes provided, assuming that he provided anything. There were no government funded single mother benefits in those days, or government funded daycare centers, or, for that matter, privately funded daycare centers. Her mother had already made it clear that she would not be a care-giver for her grandchildren; her mother worked in the family business, and that was her priority. If Jess had been able to find someone, she would have had to trust a stranger to take good care of her children, and to treat them lovingly. She had to acknowledge the strength of her mother's argument—that her children were more likely to get good care, and loving care, from the woman who wanted to be Symes' wife, the woman who wanted to take her place, than from a woman who had need to take in a stranger's children to help provide for her own.

And all of this was conjecture in any event, predicated on an expectation that she could even earn enough to pay for a caregiver, and rent, and food, and clothes, and there was absolutely no evidence at all to support such an expectation. She had been unable to earn enough to live independently of her father before she married, and the situation had not changed.

Her father was firm and unrelenting in his refusal to take her in with the children. It was her father's view that it was Symes' responsibility to support his children, and he also knew, from the many times she had asked for his financial help while in the marriage, help that he had given, that it was highly unlikely that she would get any support from Symes once out of the marriage and back home under her father's care. Her

father had, he said, raised his family, and he had no intention of doing the same for the man she had married, someone he abhorred, and wished his daughter had never met.

She eventually had to face the wisdom of her parents' point of view. The best choice for her children, and their future, was for her to leave them with their father and his new woman. The children would stay in place in their home, a decent home that they knew, and in a routine that they knew, and with playmates that they knew, and would have a live-in caregiver invested in their well-being. They would have a father who had good prospects, with a position in academe which afforded respect and status in the community, and could expect to enjoy an increasingly good life style, and opportunities and encouragement for their development down the road as their father progressed in his academic career.

When there was such an alternative on the table for her children, a safer and more secure alternative than she could hope to provide, she eventually had to accept that she would not be a good mother to subject her children to the uncertain outcomes they would have to face if she did not make the sacrifice Symes required of her to give them up into his care.

The church expected a wife to submit to her husband, as unto God. But she could not imagine leaving her children, and so she had stayed in place, enduring, hanging on, hoping for some kind of breakthrough.

It was the inner imperative that eventually forced the outcome.

One morning, she awoke very early. It was still dark. It was a Sunday. She awoke with a strong and very clear conviction that she had to go and see her parents, and plead with them once more to take her and the children in. Sunday was the day that Symes took the children to spend the afternoon with the woman who was to replace her. He would need the car to do that. She

reasoned that she would be back in time. It never occurred to her to take the car in order to prevent Symes from taking her children to spend time with her replacement. The days when such a thought might have occurred to her were long gone. She was beaten up, and beaten down, and lived in constant fear of his anger.

She thought of taking the children with her, but decided against it. They were sound asleep. She knew that if she disturbed them they would make a noise, ask questions, and would surely wake up Symes, and Symes would then prevent her from leaving. She knew she only had a slim chance of being able to escape the house before he woke up. Taking the car keys from his bedside table felt to her as if she had committed a capital crime that would incur such wrath from him that it would result in her death. Nevertheless, driven by the inner imperative that she had felt so strongly on awakening, she had the car backed up the driveway, and turned on the road, before she saw Symes standing at the bedroom window, clearly in a rage, shaking his fists at her.

She drove away.

Her parents lived across the other side of the Pennine Range. She arrived just as they were getting up, a little before 7 a.m. Breakfast was made, and eaten, in a silent and tense atmosphere. Her parents were clearly expecting the worst. When the table was cleared of their breakfast dishes, they sat around it and once again went over her situation and options. Jess again pleaded with them, cried, begged for them to take her and the children in, if only to give her some time to sort something out. They again firmly refused. They again said that she could come back to their home, alone, but they would not take her in with her children.

Jess, realizing it was hopeless, set out on her return journey. As she did so, she was alarmed to see that it had been snowing while she had been engaged in her passionate

pleas with her parents. It had been snowing heavily, and had turned into a blizzard. She had difficulty getting the car up the lane to the crossroads where she would pick up the road that crossed the Pennine Range. At the crossroads, she was stopped by the Police, and turned back. The road was closed. All the roads that crossed the Pennine Range were closed.

She returned to the village where her parents were living, and telephoned Symes from a public telephone box. She feared his rage, but she had to tell him that she could not make it back that day, and would try again in the morning. He was furious. He would be unable to see his new woman without the car.

The roads were closed for three days. During that time, while her parents went about their business, Jess was left in the quiet and tranquility of their home to contemplate the hopelessness of her situation. When the roads were again open, she had made her decision. She did not go back. She faced what she felt was her unrelenting Destiny, and that her path was to leave all that was secure and make her own way in a World that she could expect would be hostile toward her.

Afterwards, there had been much to contend with in the culture at large. Divorce was hardly heard of then, and was shocking. It was customary to blame the woman for the failure of a marriage, even though her divorce was on the grounds of her husband's adultery. That the husband had committed adultery was blamed on his wife – it was assumed to be his wife's fault that he had felt the necessity to go outside the marriage. Wives were exhorted to do what was needed to please their husbands, to do whatever was necessary to hold their marriages together. Women, having no independent status, and no means of achieving independent financial integrity, had to please fathers, husbands or brothers, if they were to have a life at all. They had no realistic option but to be married, and the advice to please their husbands was sound advice in light of that.

Following her divorce, Jess could not find a job that would pay her enough to survive independently of her father. She had returned to live in her parents' home out of necessity, and was grateful that her father had taken her in. The only way out that he could see was for her to "start again", that is, to marry again.

Jess had no interest in that option.

After a little under two years in employment in office work, and when she was feeling stronger, she approached her father to be the guarantor for a loan she would need to buy her first small business. He had been shocked at such an idea, and had refused. The Bank required a male guarantor, notwithstanding that there was security for the loan in the property involved in the purchase. Her father's refusal left her with the task of having to find some other man to guarantee the loan. She had asked the bank manager if any man would do. He had not taken kindly to what he described as her insolence.

Eventually, she had prevailed on her employer. He was a kind man. He knew something of her history, and was sympathetic. At one time, he had hoped for a more personal relationship with her, but she had gently declined. He knew her to be intelligent, capable, reliable, and hard-working, and would be sorry to lose her as an employee. He had no doubt that she would make a success of her venture, and in being her guarantor, he hoped to stay in touch with her.

She assumed her father expected that she would fail, perhaps needed her to fail to justify his treatment of her in her crisis. Her business did have a challenging period at one stage in its development; she had been desperate with worry and had asked him for his advice, but he had maintained his refusal to be of any help to her. She had got through that bad patch on her own, and had been strengthened by the experience. It seemed to her that her father became more and more uncomfortable with her as she proved herself to be a

successful business woman. He had a great deal of difficulty in adjusting to a daughter who was able, independent and self-reliant.

Then Symes had replaced Jess' replacement with another woman. Jess had been filled with anguish at the prospect of her children having to adjust to yet another "mother." She had made her sacrifice on the understanding that Symes and her replacement would stay together, live happily ever after, and the children would be raised in a secure environment, sheltered, well cared for, and protected.

Her business now on a secure footing, she made an application to the court for custody of her children. The court turned her application down. The reasoning was that the children had been with their father for a long enough time by then that to disrupt that arrangement would be detrimental to them. Symes, angry and threatened by her court action, had subsequently denied her any access to her children. After a few futile years of trying, she had come to accept that there was no practical or reasonable hope of her ever seeing her children again. She moved to Canada.

The world changed a lot in the years following her divorce. Younger women, even those who had troubled to read something of the history of the development of the status of women in their culture, had difficulty grasping the reality of how it used to be.

It had taken intensive inner work for her to understand how to live with her wounds as liberators, and to adjust to the necessary consequent amendment of her understanding of God. She would be on Jacob's ladder until she died.

She remembered with warmth and gratitude the long conversations she used to have with Jackson. Jackson was an alpha male in her view, a man of letters, knowledge, wisdom, balance, and understanding, a man who had fulfilled every

expectation of him in the patriarchal culture, and had then moved on from there to a deep respect for the Feminine. He had acknowledged that his experience was that most men were afraid of women, especially strong intelligent women, and a preference for the more submissive and compliant type was not uncommon. They had talked about the hero's journey, which called for a man, or a woman, to break away from his or her safe containment in the mother and find their own path. They had talked about the fear of falling back from that journey, experienced as a fear of the Feminine, and the devaluation and denigration of the Feminine as a man or a woman's defence against that fear. They had talked of the Sea as a symbol for the Feminine, the Wind as another, of Sophia in the Bible, of the Egyptian myths, and that the Eye of God is Feminine.

They had talked of the necessity for men, and women, to understand what it means to be "male and female," of Carl Jung's psychology and his concept of a man's inner feminine, and a woman's inner masculine, and the need for both men and women to get to know and develop their inner contra-sexual characteristics, and integrate those into consciousness if they were to ever hope to be whole. They had talked of the need for partnership between male and female, as opposed to male domination. They had talked and talked of many things.

Jess felt the familiar ache in her heart whenever she allowed herself to acknowledge how much she missed Jackson.

Ten

Symes' third wife, Louise, had been working as a teacher when they met. She had been recently divorced, and had two pre-teen children. Her settlement from her marriage had not been generous and she faced a tight life, and a bleak future. She had cultivated a puddle of bitterness from her failed marriage until it was the size of a major reservoir. It fueled her

anger at her experience of the failure of the social contract, and she developed a rebellious anti-establishment attitude which involved the use of lots of alcohol.

She would go into a pub on her own, sit at the Bar, have a beer, and engage the men gathered at the Bar in conversation. Such behaviour was scandalous in those days.

One evening, Symes was in the Bar. Symes was drawn to her because she was so out there, in everyone's face, so to speak, and he couldn't resist the challenge. He was still married to his second wife when he met Louise. Louise had no scruples about him being married, or about him being married for the second time. Symes seemed a likely prospect to her, if his story could be believed. He represented a possible escape from her bleak future, and he was as anti-establishment as she was. He had plans to leave his post in academe, saying it was a load of nonsense what he was expected to teach. He wanted to buy a business. She found him exciting in his arrogance and outrageous contempt of anything and anyone that conformed to the expectations of culture. She felt no condemnation from him in her divorced state.

She started going to the Bar more often in the hope of meeting Symes, and over time they took to arranging to meet on a regular basis. She found out more about him, and he found out that she had some money. She had a small terraced house out of the settlement of her divorce, mortgage free, a paid for car, child support payments from her ex-husband, a teacher's salary, and a teacher's pension plan. Symes could see how such resources could be of benefit to him.

It was not long after the sex started between him and Louise that Symes' second wife was dealt the same treatment as the first.

The second wife, Beth, was dispatched with no financial settlement. Symes had played on the guilt he knew she felt for

her role in displacing his first wife, Jess. He had convinced Beth that she would be a far better mother to his children, and a far better wife to him, than Jess could ever have hoped to be. But, as soon as he had secured her, Symes had proved to be as abusive and unfaithful to her as he had been to Jess. When he told Beth he had found someone else and she was to leave, she was glad to go. She had been miserable for all but a few months of their marriage. She wanted to leave, to start her life again, far away from anything that would remind her of Symes, including his children. The arrival of Louise gave her the out, and she took it gladly. After the divorce, she went to live with an aged and widowed aunt who was glad of her company and support, and who lived as far away from Symes as it was possible to get while still remaining in England.

Louise had been triumphant when she achieved her ambition of being Symes' wife, and subsequently landlady of the pub she and Symes bought and moved into. The proceeds from the sale of her house had gone into buying the business, and she felt she was on a strong footing as a business partner as well as a wife. She had been happy to give up her teaching position in order to play the role of landlady, and enjoyed ordering the staff around and sitting in the Bar, dressed in her finery, entertaining the regulars.

The pub had been run down when they bought it, and needed a lot of work to build it up into a prosperous business. She had some practical sense and had worked hard to turn the business around. She had taken on more of the work herself, hiring less staff, but always in the face of Symes' derision of her efforts, and his using up whatever savings she had managed to make in extending his own profligate lifestyle. She got to the point where she stopped trying. As well, she found she was not the only flower in Symes' field. Though she was in place at the Red Lion, Symes would constantly flirt with the women who ventured into his Bar, with or without escorts, and had affairs as often as he had breakfast. Not that he had

breakfast that often. He was more prone to getting drunk every night, and leaving Louise to deal with the business of breakfast for any overnight guests in the place.

Their marriage had quickly disintegrated into an acrimonious business relationship, punctuated by vicious physical fights. Released from the requirements of sobriety imposed by her job in the teaching profession, she had taken to indulging her enjoyment of Gin at all hours of the day. They had gradually separated their lives to the fullest extent possible while sharing the same living quarters.

Because she had invested money in the business, and because the business was not doing well enough to pay her out, and because there was no purchaser to be had for the business as a whole, she and Symes were locked together in a seemingly irredeemable situation. The misery of their existence became their norm. The years went by. The Bank re-mortgaged the Red Lion as the value of the property rose, providing a boost of capital from time to time to keep the place running. The children grew up and left. Her endless Gin-sodden days went on.

Then, one day, a stranger had walked into the Bar, and Symes had reacted to her in a way that Louise had never seen before. The stranger was a tall, elegantly dressed woman. She had gone over to talk to Symes, and Symes had recognized her. That much Louise had seen from behind the Bar; she had gone into the Bar to refill her drink before retiring upstairs to her private lounge. She had felt jealous at seeing the expression on Symes' face, and on seeing the woman. The woman looked well, fit, happy, confident, together. Louise felt like a wreck when she looked at her. Symes had then taken the woman around the pub, showing her the bedrooms, the restaurant, the two Bars, the terrace, gardens, and the river.

When, later, he had shown her the photograph he had taken of the woman, and told her that she was his first wife, Jess, and

the mother of his children, and told her with pride and pleasure, she had felt confused, and very angry. How dare he be proud of this woman now. It was as if he had completely forgotten what he had done to her. That she had survived her experience of marriage to Symes was remarkable, that she had survived it so well was miraculous. That Symes could now take such pride in his first wife enraged Louise. Was this woman to come back? What was going on? She felt duped. All Symes' tales about his first wife and her shortcomings had clearly been lies.

She had long ago realized that all Symes had been interested in was the bit of money she would have from the sale of her house, and that her contribution had likely secured the purchase of the Red Lion. Symes had big ideas, but no real business sense. It had been her practical nature and money savvy, despite the Gin, that had turned the business around and at least made it viable. She had long ago lost her illusions about Symes being a free thinking, independent, and intelligent man. She had also come to realize that any ideas she had had about her having some security in the place were delusions. She knew now that Symes had used her, that he was no good, that he would kick her out without a moment's thought if he could find some way to get her out, some way that wouldn't cost him, and perhaps this was why that woman had been at the pub, perhaps she had the money. Louise was beginning to see that Symes' clever sardonic persona was a cover for a weak, lazy, arrogant empty shell of what should have been a man.

She decided to confront him. She decided the best time to do that would be at the end of the night, when all the customers had gone, and when he would be alone in the Bar, having his last brandy of the day.

When the pub had gone quiet, and the car park was pretty much empty, she came down the stairs very quietly, and went into the kitchen to pick up a suitable knife. Gingerly she slid

open the huge wide drawer in the central kitchen work table, and picking up the knives, one at a time, she laid them on the table top. She selected one, replaced the others, and made her way back to the kitchen door. She stood in the darkness, and waited. There was still someone in the Bar; she had heard the muted tones of quiet conversation, and an occasional laugh as she came down the stairs. It was a good ten minutes before she heard Symes and his last customer exchange their goodnights. Another one of his women she realized bitterly. As that woman went to go out to her car, using the side door, she walked within inches of where Louise stood on the other side of the kitchen door holding a knife. Louise stood perfectly still, waiting quietly for the sound of the car driving away. She knew that Symes would have several more drinks before he went up to his bed. The car at last drove away, and she slowly made her way to the Bar. She was feeling cold as ice, and utterly calm.

When the time came though, she had no need of the knife. She doubted she would have been able to use it in any event. The knife was in her hand out of a sense of a should, of an entitlement, of a fitting end, of remnants of pain from his woundings, of an eye for an eye. But a great deal of the rest of her was urging her to walk away, walk away, and save herself from killing him, and being imprisoned in what he had done to her for the rest of her life. She fleetingly thought of Symes' first wife. Clearly she had not been imprisoned in self-destructive behavior as a result of Symes' treatment of her. She had somehow broken free. But Louise was exhausted from the long years of stress and humiliations, utterly exhausted.

Symes was annoyed and surprised to see her. Supposing she wanted a drink he went behind the Bar and poured her a large brandy before returning to his stool at the Bar.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

She drained the glass of brandy, and got another.

"What was all that about, with that woman today?" Her voice was heavy, low and firm, her eyes wild and angry. She was very drunk. "I mean the one at lunch time that is" she said, laughing hysterically, "not the one who just left."

"You mean my first wife?" he jeered at her, "now there's a lady, now there's someone you could learn a thing or two from, stupid bitch," he sneered.

"I won't stand for it", she yelled at him. "You bastard, enough, enough, I want my money out of this place, I want out, and now."

Symes glared at her with contempt. He was feeling angry, uncomfortable, irritated, and tired. He had been looking forward to enjoying a few minutes of solitude before trying to get some sleep. Sleep didn't come easily these days, and there were always nightmares. The last thing he needed was a row with Louise.

"Oh Gawd, you silly cow. Get over it," was his contemptuous reply. "You are being really boring, boring, boring. I can't stand boring people. I ban boring people from my pub. You're banned. Piss off." He laughed at her. "Go on, piss off. I'm tired."

"Bastard. Don't you dare talk to me like that. I own this place. You have no business talking to me like that. I demand that you show some respect for me, you arrogant bastard. I wonder you've survived this long. Its a wonder no one has killed you by now."

"What the hell are you talking about," Symes yelled back at her. "I do what I like, and it's too bloody late to be talking about anything. Why the hell don't you piss off to bed." He turned on his bar stool to face her, his face white and tense, body taut, and fists clenched.

She raised the knife, but she could not use it, and threw it away from her, shouting out her frustration and outrage, accusing him of ruining her life. He was furious. He grabbed her hair, and hit her repeatedly across the face, calling her a bitch and a whore, a bitch and a whore who couldn't hope to compare with his first wife, the wife he should never have rejected. He threw her to the floor, her head hitting the side of the fireplace as she fell, and then kicked her in the stomach and the side.

She could feel the side of her face swelling, and what she expected was probably blood trickling down her skin. Then she felt the pain in her chest and her back. She felt the pain growing until it seemed to be all she was. The room got darker and darker and she surrendered and disappeared into it; it felt like a welcoming embrace, a safe place. She felt nothing further.

A few minutes later, the sound of the side door into the car park quietly closing might have been heard, had anyone been listening.

Eleven

From a little ways outside the village where Jess was staying, it was possible to see an old church standing on the crest of a neighbouring hill. The day after her traumatic meeting with Symes, Jess decided to explore the place. There was something about its lonely post that drew her to it. She made her way up the fields and as she drew closer, she realised she was expecting something, that she felt the church was a portent of some kind. She laughed at herself and her willingness to meet the mysterious, but she couldn't quite shake off the feeling that each step was drawing her closer to some new challenge.

The church was built from the local granite stone. It was small, and simple, and very old. Up close, it looked

forbidding. There was no stained glass that she could see. It had a general dilapidated appearance. The air in that part of the country had been polluted for many years by the thousands of mill chimneys pouring out their smoke day and night as the industrial revolution had broken over the land. The city nearby, visible in the distance from the top of the hill, had been founded in the fortunes of cotton, and the smoke from its mill chimneys had done a fine job of discolouring most of the stone in the vicinity to a near black. The mills had long since closed, as had the church it seemed. The place generally had a desolate feel about it. Even the few cottages built around the church looked mostly empty. It was a dismal windswept place.

The village was called Cudworth. With a sudden shock of excitement, Jess remembered that Cudworth had been the maiden name of her maternal great grandmother. She felt the hair on the back of her neck tingle and her heart raced. She knew something was coming.

Many years ago, she had met two mediums. One of them, Nelly, had told Jess that she was gifted as a psychic, and that it was a great loss that she had not developed her psychic abilities. Nelly had been considered advanced in the psychic field, and was contributing to government funded research into psychic phenomenon. The Spiritual Research Board it was called. The panel was made up of a believer, a non-believer, and a don't-know. Nelly had been fond of implying that the non-believer would be getting lots of visits at night to ensure his conversion before too long. The other medium was small fry in comparison. She read tea leaves. In any event, Jess, out of curiosity, had gone to a spiritualist church. She knew it was one that her two medium acquaintances had no knowledge of. She had come on it accidentally, though she was beginning to wonder if there was such a thing as an accident. She had silently taken a seat in the congregation and had watched with interest as the meeting got under way. But, after

a few minutes, she had been asked to relax or leave as the other participants had found her presence disturbing. She had made an effort to relax and had been allowed to stay, and then there had followed a message for her from a Chinese gentleman advising that all would be well. Following that, there had been another message for her from "a woman in a rocking chair, who sat in the corner, with her hand over her face to shield the light". She had subsequently found out, from persistent questioning of members of her family, that this figure was her maternal great grandmother's aunt. She had held her hand over her face because she had cancer. She couldn't bear the light on her face and, also, toward the end, it helped to prevent blood from spraying over the room as the vessels broke. She had lived out the end of her life in a cottage at Cubdale, just a couple of valleys away, and over the hill from this village called Cudworth.

Jess wandered through the graveyard looking at the headstones. They were all extremely old, and most were impossible to read. Some had fallen over, some were leaning precariously in ground that was sinking beneath them. She had withdrawn from walking alongside these lots, feeling that she might be dragged down into the depths below. She had no wish to join what remained there. These were the people who had not invested much in a marker for their remains. Perhaps they hadn't had much to invest. What they had spent was enough to satisfy convention, and perhaps give a place for grieving relatives to visit from time to time, knowing full well that those grieving relatives would soon lose interest, and their graves would be unattended after a few years, and would be forgotten. Some stood proud and unmoving, huge arrogant structures it seemed to her when one considered the decayed remains lying beneath them. She could imagine the confident assurance of heaven that generated their purchase, a favoured place in death as in life, a confident belief in a God of contracts maintained to the end – and now just as pathetic and forgotten as the pauper in the corner under the trees.

There were a lot of Cudworths clustered in the favoured position near the church. And there were a lot of the monolithic structures in this patch of ground. It was possible to make out some of their inscriptions still, the writing having been chiselled into marble rather than eroding granite stone. It seemed the family had been in the neighbourhood for at least 600 years. Judging by the quality of the gravestones, they must also have been wealthy for most of that time. Her curiosity was aroused. She noted that most of the relatively recent dead had been of Nether Hall.

She entered the church and found it ugly and empty. There were some stained glass windows visible from the inside, and she realized that they had been covered on the outside by strong plastic protectors. But other windows were broken, and there was no altar. A few old pews were scattered about, and there were some tattered decaying prayer books lying on the floor. She saw the odd loose page lying in corners and under the scattered pews. It looked as if a mighty wind had blown through the place and disarranged everything. It felt cold and damp, and bereft. There was no atmosphere at all. She may as well have entered an old barn. She was disappointed. She had hoped for some signs of continuing life, a parson, a register of births and deaths, a contact, someone who could help her as she now experienced an urgent need to discover as much as possible about the Cudworth family and the fate of that lady in the rocking chair.

Suddenly, there was an incredibly loud and resounding bang that filled the church with its noise, and made her heart race. She turned around and saw that the heavy solid wooden door, which she had left open, was now closed. She ran to it, and struggling frantically with the ancient circular iron handle, and using all her strength, she managed to open the door and escape the building. The weather had abruptly changed. Black clouds were racing across the sky and the wind was howling through the few trees which stood like final

defenders against the encroaching moors at the end of the graveyard. The whole graveyard was alive it seemed, the grass blown flat against the ground, and the very gravestones seeming to stand up, looking at her, hating her and wanting her to leave. The wind pushed against her, driving her out of the churchyard and into the cluster of cottages. She was terrified. It was as if she had woken the dead and they had hurled their anger and rejection after her. She shivered and pulled her coat close around her, turning up the collar. So be it, she thought, turning her back on the building and its gravestones, keep your secrets, keep your resentments, hang on to them, sleep with them, wallow in them, sink into them, die with them, and leave me alone.

She walked away from the church.

"Hello".

Startled into the day, she looked around for the owner of the voice and couldn't see anyone. Then a small head peered over a garden wall, and again said, "Hello."

"Oh, Hi", she responded. "Do you live here?"

"Where you from then?" was the rejoinder.

"Oh, here and there, but I am English", she replied.

"Don't sound it!" was the unaccepting reply.

"Does the wind often suddenly blow like this up here?" she asked.

"Yes, of course", he said, laughing and shaking his head at her as if she was the Village idiot, and then, looking up at her out of deep brown eyes and a dirty face, and seeing her agitated state, said, in a kinder tone, "its cos we're on top of the hill see, and they chopped a lot of the trees down. There's nowt to stop that wind now. It comes and it goes as it will, as the wind does." Then, leaning across the wall, he

gently touched her arm and said, reassuringly, "Its nowt to worry about."

Jess, still caught up in the atmosphere in the church and the graveyard, and remembering the descriptions in biblical texts of the Holy Spirit—a wind that blew wherever it wished—wondered why it had blown her here, to this boy, to this garden, to this cottage. Her thoughts were interrupted by a shout from the cottage door at the head of the path to the long garden in which the boy stood.

"Charlie, you come on in here. How many times hav'a told thee to talk to no strangers!"

"That your Mum?" Jess asked.

"Naw" he said, laughing, as if he was now convinced she was an idiot, "that's me Gran. Me Ma's at work."

"Could I talk to her do you think, your Gran that is?"

The boy shrugged, and walked up the path to the cottage. Jess followed, smiling bravely at the lady who still stood on the front step, arms folded firmly across her waist. The boy's grandmother was a heavy, thick-waisted, middle aged looking woman. She wore an apron, the sort of apron with a halter neck piece that one slid over the head and with ties at the side for fastening behind the back to secure the garment in place. It effectively covered the entire front of the wearer's clothes and was designed for work and not decoration. It was a bit grubby.

The woman looked at her suspiciously. She pulled the boy to her side and put her arm protectively around his shoulders.

"Yes," she said to Jess, "can a'help ye?"

Jess explained that she was interested in the history of the church, why it was no longer used, and about the Cudworth family and Nether Hall. The woman's face drew in tightly, the

lips puckered. She squinted at Jess through half-closed eyes.

"What's it to you?" she demanded. "What business is it of your'n what them folks did. It don't do no good poking around in other folk's business."

Jess explained that she thought she might be related, and was curious about her ancestors. How could she find out about them? Where had the records from the church gone? Was there anyone around who could help her, who may have known them, or worked for them, or with them? And surely Nether Hall still existed, didn't it?

"Oh aye", Nether Hall existed still. "Over the tops aways and nestled in the trees in the dip there. A conference centre now."

That Jess had clearly been polite and shown deference toward her and Charlie, and Jess's obvious sincerity, seemed to mollify and thaw the woman's suspicions. Jess was invited in for tea.

The woman turned out to be a gold mine of information. She had known a bit about the Cudworth family. Her great grandmother on her mother's side had been in service with the family when they still lived at Nether Hall. It had been quite a swanky place she said, with lots of servants, horses, carriages, and the family very active in the community, lending the house and its grounds for various events, gymkhanas, fetes, sports days. The gardens had been lovely. There had been a huge vegetable garden and orchards, and many gifts to the servants for their families of fresh produce in their seasons. The Cudworths had been landowners. Most of the farms in the area were leased from Nether Hall. The Hall also had its own small farm to keep the household supplied with fresh milk, eggs, poultry, and pork and beef. They also grew their own grapes, and hops, and made beer, and various kinds of wine for consumption by the villagers on gala days.

It seemed a happy enough picture. But what had happened. What had become of them? Why wasn't the family still at Nether Hall? Why had it all come to an end?

The woman drew her face in, and looked at Jess through half-closed eyes.

"I'm saying nowt about that," she declared. "You mun ask summun else. It does no good to talk on it. Them's dark deeds and no mistake, and who can account for it. Who would have thought it. By gum, it were nowt but a tragedy. Serve em right. Serve em right. Folks have got no business behavin like that. No business. Now, begone wi ye. I won't darken mi own house wi membering such stuff. Begone wi ye."

Jess was dismayed to realize that she was being thrown out. She got up and made her way to the door, thanking the woman for her hospitality, and thanking her for the information she had provided, and expressing her regrets that she had somehow upset her, which she had not wanted to do, and hoped she could come back one day? The woman was not unfriendly, but encouraged Jess to let bygones be bygones, and quickly closed the cottage door as soon as Jess was on the step.

Jess's curiosity was now on fire. She resolved that the next day she would take the car and find Nether Hall, and see if she could take a look around the place. Also, she would try the local Parish Council Office to see if it was the custodian of the registries of births and deaths for the area.

She was now determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.

She took a detour on her way back from Cudworth to her hotel. It was a longer walk but she felt the need to work through her excitement and think through what she had learned. As she made her way along the tops she noticed that she could see down into the valley where Symes' pub was located, this time from the other side of the Valley. She noted, without too much curiosity, that there were a couple of police cars and an

ambulance in the car park.

Twelve

One's first impression of Chief Detective Inspector Shaw was of someone large and friendly. As he made his entrance into the Red Lion, he filled the doorway, blocking out the light, and all one could see was a dark shape moving toward one which managed somehow to convey that it was benign. He moved in an expansive way with his head up and shoulders back, and his arms partly extended from his sides and a little raised with open hands, as if he was about to embrace one in a gesture of welcome. The expression on his face was usually just a fleeting moment away from a full smile, his eyes twinkling with a hint of friendly amusement. His hair was always disheveled, and his clothing always looked as if it needed brushing, washing, pressing, or buttoning up.

Once in the pub, he removed his overcoat to reveal sports clothing and a powerful, athletic, muscular form. He had been refereeing a local boys' football match nearby when the call came in, and he was the first on the scene. He was tall, about 6 feet 6 inches. It was difficult to tell his age, but one would guess at around the late forties. His hair was almost black with streaks of grey. It was thick and dry looking, cut very short so that it hugged the contours of his head, lying down here and there like a worn out brush. His eyes were also dark, fringed with thick dark lashes, and topped with bushy eyebrows which also had the odd grey hair in them. His face was deeply lined on the forehead, and around the contours of his eyes and mouth. He was a handsome man.

He seemed very friendly, and very relaxed.

Smiling at everyone, he introduced himself and asked if he could have a coffee, and maybe something to eat, while wandering into what he had identified as the kitchen. He sat

himself down at the centre table, gesturing to the following company to join him.

The following company comprised of Symes, Symes' son, and the doctor. It was the doctor who had called the Police.

The kitchen staff had not yet arrived. It was the son who prepared coffee, and found some bagels, cream cheese and an apricot compote. Shaw chatted away about the good quality of the coffee, and how fresh his bagel was, putting the assembled at their ease. Upon the arrival of his Detective Sergeant, Shaw started to ask about the pub and its business. Symes responded, with some pride. The pub had an excellent reputation as a hostelry apparently, having appeared every year for the last 5 in the Good Pub Guide and the Good Food Guide. They also had four rooms for bed and breakfast with a five-star rating. One was currently occupied on a longer stay basis by a visiting Canadian, who was away for a few days touring the north. The other three had all been occupied on the Friday and Saturday nights by weekend stayers.

Symes seemed tense, but not at all emotional.

The son too was unemotional. His expression was determinedly fixed and steady.

Shaw asked the son what had happened. He said he didn't know what had happened, that he had been doing some chores down in the cellar when he heard the cleaner, Mrs. Westerhill, shouting, and he had gone up into the bar to see what she was shouting about. He had then seen Mrs. Symes lying face down on the carpet. He had gone to her to see if he could help, pulling her shoulder back to see her face, and then he had called the doctor.

"And the night before", inquired Shaw, "anything unusual at all the night before?"

The son had been out the night before. He had taken his

girlfriend to a movie in the nearby city and then taken her home. He had not got back until late, maybe around 2.30 or 3 a.m. By that time, the pub was empty, the staff had gone home, and the usual late bar crowd had also left. He had not gone into the bar, but had gone straight up to bed.

Mrs. Symes usually went up to bed around 10.30 p.m., leaving Symes and the bar staff to deal with the few remaining customers. Symes was usually the one who kept an eye on things later in the evening, while Mrs. Symes would generally be the one to be up and around for breakfasts. They had lots of staff and her role was a supervisory one. Symes could recall nothing unusual. The regular Saturday night crowd were in the bar. There had been over 20 parties for dinner over the course of the evening. Patrons came from a wide area to eat at the pub, and though Symes had recognized most of them, he had not known all the guests that evening. He had gone up to bed when the last customers had gone.

Shaw, having finished his coffee and bagel, asked everyone to wait for a while, and made his way to the lounge Bar where Mrs. Symes' body was still lying on the floor where she had been found.

He sat down just inside the doorway, and quietly examined the space. It was a comfortable looking room, well furnished with classic styled upright chairs, and wing chairs, upholstered in leather and chintzy deep maroons and blues. The tables were dark polished wood and had small lamps on them. The carpet was floral patterned in a predominantly maroon colour. Indeterminate pictures of landscapes and personages from bygone eras, and miscellaneous pieces of brass-bed warmers, horse brasses and the like – hung on the walls. The windows were deep casements with mullioned glass, and were framed with heavy maroon-coloured drapes tied back with tasseled hoops. There was a large fireplace with a natural stone surround hosting a flower arrangement, and a mantel littered with more reproduction brass pieces. The Bar itself was about 20 feet

long. It had a dark leather upholstered rail running along the top on the customer's side, to make for comfortable leaning, and a brass pole foot rest running its length along the bottom. There was a row of bar stools covered in dark brown leather standing up against the Bar. There was still the clutter of dirty glasses, full ashtrays, and the odd plate lying around on the tables and on the Bar. He noticed that the Bar appeared to be very well stocked and, with some surprise, that it had an excellent selection of single malts.

The cash register was open, and he could see that it contained only a small amount of change.

One Bar stool had fallen over and was lying on the carpet on its side, and another, the one that would have been next to it, was leaning back up against its neighbour.

Mrs. Symes was lying against the fireplace.

Shaw crouched down on the carpet and carefully looked around the area where the body was still lying. At first, all he could see was the dust in the corners under the seating that the cleaner had missed, and then, under one chair, partially concealed by the chair's skirt, was what looked like a small piece of wood. Shaw took out his handkerchief and carefully pulled the piece of wood out from under the chair. The piece of wood turned out to be part of a handle to a kitchen knife. The blade was about eight inches long, about 2 inches wide at its widest, and tapered to a fine point. It was heavy, and very sharp, and appeared to be clean.

Shaw called the constable, and having obtained a plastic bag for the knife, asked the constable to bring the doctor into the bar.

The doctor had started to examine Mrs. Symes and, on finding bruising and blood on her face, he had put the body back as he had found it, and called the Police.

While Shaw was talking to the doctor, the forensic crew had arrived and gone to work. However, the bar was such a high traffic area, Shaw had little hope of anything conclusive being found. Shaw gave them the kitchen knife in its plastic bag. The medical officer arrived, and Mrs. Symes' body was then turned over. There was swelling, bruising and blood on her face, and some of her hair had been pulled out. There were also pieces of broken glass under the body. The forensics being completed, and the ambulance having arrived, the body was removed and taken for examination.

Shaw instructed his sergeant in taking statements from the cleaner, Symes and the son, and the putting together of a list of the people who had visited the pub the previous evening, and making arrangements to have those people interviewed along with those who had stayed overnight. As most of them were there for dinner and had made reservations which required the leaving of a telephone number, he did not anticipate that it would be difficult to locate and interview them all. The remainder of the bar customers were what Symes had described as "the usual crowd" and he expected Symes would be able to name them, and they would be able to name each other. He also instructed that the rest of the staff be interviewed, and statements taken before they had a chance to discuss the death with each other or anyone else.

There being nothing further for him to do at the scene at present, he returned to his vehicle and headed back into the village. He parked his car and took a look around, deciding on his route. He had an easy going, empathetic, open persona which, combined with the confidence others felt in his physical stature and strength, resulted in them telling him things of the most intimate and confidential nature in an astonishingly short space of time.

Shaw's first stop was the other pub in the village. It was just on opening time when he arrived, and he was alone in the place when the landlady appeared, looking somewhat disheveled,

to attend to him.

"Late night?" he asked.

"Oh aye," she replied, "Saturday is always busy and late around here, and that husband of mine is still in his bed. What can I get you love. I'm afraid the kitchen isn't open as yet so I hope you aren't looking for something to eat, at least not just yet."

"No, nothing to eat," he responded, "just half of your best bitter for now, thank you."

As she was pulling his drink, Shaw leaned over the bar and gave her his best confidential look,

"Have you heard that the landlord's wife at the Red Lion died last night?"

"What! Oh my." Her look was one of tremulous excitement verging on triumph. There wasn't a flicker of grief, consternation, sympathy or concern.

"How—" she asked eagerly, "how did she die?"

"Not sure yet," responded Shaw. "That's still to be determined."

"I wouldn't wonder if that bastard of a husband of her's did her in. Oh, pardon my language, but that man is not well liked around here."

"And why is that?" asked Shaw.

"Bastard he is," she said, "just an all-round Grade A bastard. Rude, arrogant, cruel, and he fools around with any woman who's stupid enough to go anywhere near him. That's his idea of fun. Well, I suppose the pub will keep running without her, he has enough staff. Can't see it doing me any good, more's the pity."

"So even though Symes is disliked, his pub is still popular?" queried Shaw.

"Yes, it is," she replied, "he has good staff, and a damn good chef, and most of his trade is not from folks who live around here. They're more folks who drive out from the city, or them lot as works in the city but lives out here in the valley, shoving up the price of the property all round, folks who like to think of themselves as a cut above the locals. Well, there's a place for everybody I expect."

"How long has he been the landlord there then?" asked Shaw.

"Oh, must be about 15 or more years now. It's his pub you know, a free house. It isn't a brewery pub. He bought it when it was about ready to close, on its knees, a dump, and, I'll say that for him, he's built it up to what it is now, with her help of course", a pause, and, "its likely worth a bob or two now", said somewhat wistfully, then, with renewed energy, "but he's queered a lot of folks around here, and I haven't a moment's sympathy for him or her."

"What do you mean, he's queered folk?" asked Shaw.

"Oh, he bans folk from his pub on the grounds they are boring, and it's usually one of the locals, arrogant ass. He had one of the local builders do his extension for him a few years back. Its a classy job. You should see it. Doubled the size of the place, and gave him 5 star bed and breakfast rooms, an extension on the kitchen, and a nice restaurant. The builder even put a terrace in for him, overlooking the river. Lovely spot. You can go and sit outside and have your desert and coffee among the shrubs and trees with the river going by. And he never paid for it."

"Oh. How was that then?' asked Shaw.

"Some fancy legal footwork about completion dates in the contract," she said. "Never did understand it myself. But he

ruined the builder. He was a good man that builder. His family had lived here for generations. Not many around these days that can work in stone. He made a right lovely job of that extension, and he didn't get a penny for it. Ruined him. Ruined him."

"What happened to the builder then?" asked Shaw.

"Killed himself. Bankrupt. His family out on the street. Killed himself."

"Oh my," said Shaw, "and when was that then?"

"Oh, must be seven or eight years ago now. His family had to leave the valley. I haven't seen any of them since."

"And his family?"

"He had 3 sons and a daughter. They'd all be in their twenties now. Don't know for sure. His wife got herself a job in the city, and they moved into a Council house on one of the estates there. Awful places them there Council estates. Awful. The stories you hear. And all that bastard's fault, and got clean away with it."

"What did they call this builder then?" asked Shaw.

The landlady gave him a hard look. Her excitement at hearing about the death had worn away, and she began to realize that she had been answering a lot of questions.

"You Police then?" she asked. "You ask a lot of damn questions."

"Yes, I'm Police," he said, and showed her his identification.

"Well", she said, "I'm not about to put that builder's family into any more trouble than they've already had, so you can just shove off and get your information from somewhere else. Bastard."

Shaw had the certain feeling that the “Bastard” at this point was directed at him rather than the landlord of the Red Lion. In any event, he thanked her for the excellent bitter, and left the pub.

There wasn't a lot to see in the Village. There was one main street that ran down the hill to a river, and which then crossed the river, at about the centre of the Village, before continuing along on the other side of the river and leaving the Village behind. The street was narrow and very old. The properties that lined the street must have dated back some 400 years or more. It was still, and very quiet in the Village, and hard to imagine that vehicles actually used the street. Horse and carriage would not have been a surprise, but a truck, or an SUV, or even a small saloon car would be an imposition, and would have to pass carefully and slowly. From the stone bridge at the mid-point one could see the backs of the 3- and 4-storey high terraced houses that fronted the road as the road wound around. Those backs were very attractive with steep gardens, tiered and stepped down to the river's side, brimming with flowers, shrubs and vegetable patches. Some had small verandas on the first and second floors of the homes. Had he not known he was in England, he would have fancied himself in some tourist trap in Italy perhaps.

His next stop was a small corner shop which appeared, from the litter of open baskets on the pavement outside, to be endeavouring to sell just about everything. He went inside. Once inside, he was surprised to see the size and depth of the place. It wasn't apparent from the street, but the shop was actually housed in the space of three terraced properties. He sauntered around and noted with approval the wide selection of organic goods available. He selected a newspaper, and made his way to the cash desk.

There was a tall, thin, sallow complexioned and pimply youth at the cash desk. He looked sullen, tired, and extremely unhealthy.

"Mornin," said Shaw.

"Umm," was the reply.

"Busy here on Sunday is it?" Shaw asked.

"No bloody way," said the youth, "waste of time opening the place if you ask me."

"Oh, well, I'm glad you're open this morning at least," said Shaw "how much for the paper?"

Shaw paid for the paper and, as he was tucking it under his arm he said, "of course, they won't have got the latest news in here, they won't know about the death at the Red Lion."

"What's that?" said the youth.

"The landlady, at the Red Lion, she died last night."

"Died?" The youth's mouth fell open. "Jeepers," he said. "I'll be damned. How? How did she die?"

"Not sure yet," said Shaw, pulling out his ID. "What can you tell me about her?"

The youth stepped back at seeing the ID. He pulled his T-shirt up around the back of his neck, flexed his arms, and then stood erect. Shaw smiled at him, and crossing his arms, leaned against the counter as if he had all the time in the world.

The youth took a deep breath, exhaled, and another breath, and then shouted, "she was the queen of bitches that one, and her husband is a fucking bastard, and no mistake, and there won't be anybody around here who will give a flying fuck that she's gone."

He stood trembling, his eyes wild. There was sudden colour in his face, and strength in his body. He was erect. He was defiant.

Shaw saw all this, and wondered at the strength of feeling in the youth's vehement reaction.

"I wonder if that bastard will lose the pub now. If he does, I guess Dad will never get paid."

Shaw was getting a little weary of hearing the word "bastard," He sighed, smiled again, and asked "Oh, he owes your Dad does he?"

"Owes? Owes? He fucking never pays his bills. And my Dad is such a wimp and such an arse crawler, he can't bring himself to ask that bastard to pay his account. Christ, its months overdue, months. He could bankrupt us the amount he owes. Bastard. And my Dad, my Dad, well, he can't stand up to him."

"Goodness, sounds terrible," said Shaw sympathetically. "Is your Dad OK?"

"Dad. My Dad. He's OK. No thanks to that Bastard."

"Well, give me a call if you think of anything that you feel I should know."

Shaw left his card with the youth, and left.

He wandered further up the only main street in the village to the top end, or higher end. The properties here were larger, had more spacious gardens, more air, more room, more sky, more light, and more view. And then the road petered out as it entered the highway that encircled the village, drawing all the through traffic away from that quiet inner meandering street, and the old stone terraced homes and river. And its latest death.

He called his Sergeant on his cell with instructions to check out Symes' financial situation, to find out who Symes owed money to, and to interview them, and to find out whether or not there was life insurance on the wife.

Thirteen

Though Chief Detective Inspector Shaw could come across to those who didn't know him, and particularly to those who were witnesses or potential suspects in cases he was working on, as an easy going, not much to know sort of character, those that were allowed into his inner circle knew him as introverted, extremely intelligent, highly sensitive, deeply compassionate, disciplined, and somewhat melancholy. Shaw did not have many friends, but any one of the friends he did have would stand by him to the death if necessary. He was always willing to leave more junior officers lots of room to take the lead, suggest the course, write the reports, and was quick to give praise where it was due, while keeping an overriding grip on what was really going on. Those that knew him well had learned that he did not suffer fools. He had an extraordinary memory, years of experience, consummate ability, and an unswerving intuitive sense that penetrated seas of facts to identify the main current in no time at all.

He had only recently been transferred to the north of England. For many years he had worked in London, and had been energized and consumed by his involvement in some of the most grisly murders in the history of crime. He had felt then insistently called to the tracking down of criminals, particularly murderers. He had felt strongly that society had to be protected from those who would undermine its stability, from those who had no respect for law and order, or the rights of others to a peaceful and fulfilling life. He had felt then that he was a kind of crusader, fighting in a battle to defend his world and his family against destruction and anarchy. He felt his efforts to find those that trashed the container, a container that he saw as the only protection most folks had against despair, was a worthwhile contribution to social order generally, and to his own sense of security. His sense of the rightness of his path had sustained his own fragile balance,

and his hold on the God of his youth, with its simplicity of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell.

Then his wife, and their only daughter, had been killed in a motor vehicle accident. A tourist from America, driving a hire car vehicle, and confused, had entered a roundabout the wrong way. In an effort to avoid a head-on collision, a huge semi-tractor trailer had opted to go down the off ramp coming up from the motorway. His wife and daughter had been driving up that off-ramp, and were killed outright.

Following that, he had lost his faith in the Father God of his youth, his confidence that right would always prevail, and his sense of the worth of life, particularly his own. He had felt angry and vicious for some time. He had stopped going to church. If there was a God, he was quite sure he was not benevolent and protective. It had been his wife who had kept him involved in the church. It had been her way of trying to protect him, herself, and their child from the horrors that she knew her husband was involved in on a daily basis. For her, the involvement with church and church community was an attempt at stability, and a supported family life in the midst of the unpredictability of his work. She enjoyed the fellowship, though she had not, as far as he knew, any deep faith, or any deep understanding of the doctrines and dogma of the church.

After her death, he had fallen into drinking far more than he was comfortable with, and far more than he knew was good for him. He had begun to fear falling victim to addiction. He had eventually asked for a transfer, and had found himself in the northern part of the country, among fields, moors, trees, cows, sheep, farms, rolling hills, and a place to live from which, on his short strolls in his garden on an evening, he could actually see the stars. The environment was healing. It restored in him some sense of the immortal, the immutable, the ongoing life untouched by his personal tragedy. He had felt blessed, released, and incredibly grateful. There was serious

crime in this area also, but there was also his garden, and the stars. Somehow, the pressures were easier to bear, and the pain of the loss of his wife and daughter had now turned to a kind of comfortable melancholy that he could surrender to those stars, the sheep in the field, and the smell of the evening air.

To Be Continued

[Table of Contents](#)

Janet Charlesworth is a writer from Canada.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)